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Why Some Adolescents Feel More Bullied Than Others: A Psychological Mechanism Perspective on Bullying Perception Sensitivity

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Abstract. Bullying is a complex social phenomenon that has a profound impact on the psychological and social functioning of children and adolescents. Previous research has primarily focused on the frequency and intensity of bullying behaviours, emerging evidence suggests that victims' subjective perceptions and interpretive processes exert a more decisive influence on psychological outcomes. This paper integrates theoretical and empirical research from developmental psychology and clinical psychology to propose an integrative psychological mechanism that explains the variability in perceptions of bullying. The framework comprises four core components: (1) Early adversity and attachment, as pre-existing risk factors shaping social cognitive processing; (2) The perception-cognitive appraisal system, integrating the Social Information Processing model, Lazarus' appraisal theory, and Beck's cognitive theory, supported by evidence from social brain regions such as the TPJ and pSTS; (3) Subjective bullying perception, as a mediator between social cognitive processing and emotional outcomes; (4) Emotional regulation, as a regulatory mechanism that buffers or amplifies psychological consequences. By conceptualising bullying as a dynamic interplay between external behaviours and internal meaning-making, this framework explains individual differences in bullying vulnerability and offers intervention implications, such as correcting evaluative biases, improving maladaptive emotional regulation, and addressing early developmental vulnerabilities.

Keywords: Bullying perception, Perceptual-cognitive appraisal system, Early adversity, Emotional regulation

1. Introduction

Bullying has been widely recognised as a serious public health issue among children and adolescents, with profound impacts on health, social functioning, and educational outcomes [1]. It is not merely a simple peer conflict, but a complex social phenomenon shaped by developmental, relational, and situational factors. Bullying is typically defined as repeated, intentional, and power-imbalanced aggression [2], manifesting in physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying [3]. Adolescents may assume roles as perpetrators, victims, bully-victims, or bystanders in bullying

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situations, with each role reflecting distinct psychological mechanisms [4]. Research indicates that bully-victims, due to difficulties in emotional regulation and hostile attribution bias, are more prone to misinterpret ambiguous social cues, thereby intensifying their sense of being bullied [5,6].

Recent theories further illuminate bullying's complexity. Bullying is proposed as an evolutionary social competition strategy, emphasising the importance of subjective harm perception [3]. The Social-Ecological Diathesis-Stress Model suggests that internal traits, such as temperament and cognitive styles, determine how bullying is perceived and psychologically processed [1]. Empirical research indicates that bullying frequency alone does not determine psychological impact; rather, an individual's subjective perception of severity better predicts subsequent distress [7]. For instance, a single instance of humiliating cyberbullying may inflict more enduring trauma than frequent minor bullying. Bullying can even be viewed as a chronic social trauma capable of triggering PTSD-like symptoms such as shame and emotional hypervigilance [8]. However, existing research remains overly reliant on observable behavioural indicators, neglecting the roles of social perception, attribution styles, and emotional regulation in bullying perception [1].

Therefore, this paper focuses on the psychological mechanisms underlying differences in bullying perception. We propose an integrated model with early adversity and attachment serving as antecedent risk factors; social information processing and cognitive appraisal systems, supported neurologically by the TPJ and pSTS; subjective bullying perception as a mediator between cognitive processing and emotional response; and emotion regulation as a moderator of the intensity and direction of psychological outcomes. This model aims to explain individual differences in bullying perception and provide a theoretical basis for potential interventions.

2. What is bullying perception

Bullying perception refers to how individuals interpret interpersonal events as bullying at cognitive and emotional levels. It is not a direct reflection of external behaviour but rather a subjective construct influenced by social perception, meaning-making, and self-related interpretations [1]. Research indicates that the frequency of bullying experiences and subjective severity are independent variables [7]. For instance, some adolescents perceive a single derogatory comment as highly threatening, while others downplay frequent exclusion. This demonstrates that bullying perception relies not only on objective events but also on internal psychological processing. The constructivist perspective emphasises that perception is the result of dynamic interactions between external behaviours and internal systems, capturing not only what happened but also what it meant [3]. Perceived bullying thus serves as a bridge connecting social events to psychological experiences. Even when controlling for bullying frequency, subjective perception independently predicts issues like anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress [8]. Thus, perceived bullying should be understood as a dynamic construction process that highlights individual differences in social meaning processing and provides a critical entry point for explaining the relationship between bullying and mental health. This study will further explore the underlying social information processing and appraisal mechanisms.

3. Theoretical entry: social perception and cognition construction of bullying experience

“Seeing is believing” often does not hold in social interactions. The same event may trigger entirely different interpretations and emotional responses in different individuals, highlighting the crucial role of social perception and social cognition in understanding complex social situations [9]. Social perception primarily relies on decoding cues such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and posture.

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This process depends not only on immediate sensory processing but is also influenced by past experiences and cultural schemas. In contrast, social cognition involves higher-order information processing, such as theory of mind and causal attribution. When individuals tend to interpret ambiguous behaviours as hostile, it often triggers defensive emotions and behaviours [10].

In bullying situations, the meaning individuals assign to events is a stronger predictor of psychological consequences than the mere frequency or intensity of the behaviour. For instance, a single isolated attack interpreted as humiliating can inflict equally profound psychological trauma [7]. Bullying is not defined solely by external actions but emerges as a multi-layered construct through the interplay of social perception and cognition. Perpetrators and victims jointly shape interaction outcomes by continuously transmitting and interpreting social cues [11].

Developmental research further illuminates the role of social cognition in bullying risk. Deficits in childhood theory of mind predict adolescent bullying involvement, while “bully-victim” groups often exhibit dual vulnerabilities and aggressiveness, demonstrating bidirectional biases in social information processing [12]. Theoretically, reciprocal determinism emphasises the dynamic interaction between individuals and their environment. Social exclusion or humiliation may be internalised as negative self-schemas, thereby intensifying feelings of shame and helplessness [13]. Neuroscience research further supports this: the superior temporal sulcus (STS), temporoparietal junction (TPJ), and medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) play crucial roles in decoding social cues and inferring mental states. Dysfunction in these regions may amplify perceived threats and disrupt emotional regulation [9,14,15].

In summary, differences in bullying perceptions do not stem from the behaviour itself but result from the interplay of social perception and social cognitive processing, individual experiences, emotional regulation, and developmental factors. Based on this, this chapter will use social perception and social cognition as entry points to understand the underlying mechanisms of bullying perception differences. It will then progressively introduce four key modules: 1) the social information processing model; 2) emotional regulation theory; 3) the shame-aggression mechanism; and 4) cognitive bias and evaluation theory. This will ultimately form a systematic psychological mechanism pathway model, providing theoretical support for the construction of pathway hypotheses and empirical operations in this study.

3.1. Early adversity as a developmental vulnerability context

The developmental period from childhood to early adulthood represents a critical phase for shaping an individual's psychological and social functioning, as well as a sensitive period prone to the emergence of mental health issues [16]. During this stage, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and early adversity are commonly used to describe unfavourable environments. ACEs refer to traumatic or negative events within the family or society, such as abuse, neglect, or family dysfunction. They exhibit extremely high prevalence and are consistently negatively correlated with mental health [5]. The cumulative risk model emphasises a dose-response relationship between the quantity of adversity and negative outcomes. However, the broader concept of early adversity encompasses dimensions such as threat, deprivation, and unpredictability, better revealing the diversity of developmental risks [17,18].

Substantial evidence suggests that early adversity can produce enduring developmental scarring effects. Even after controlling for education and adult environments, it remains associated with cognitive decline and increased psychopathology risk [18]. Mechanistically, adversity can trigger hyperactivation of the HPA axis and abnormal connectivity between the amygdala and prefrontal cortex, thereby amplifying threat sensitivity and impairing emotional regulation [19,20]. These

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neural and cognitive alterations can lead to internalising problems like anxiety and depression, or externalising issues such as aggression and impulsivity [17]. Concurrently, adverse early experiences often reshape peer relationships through social learning pathways, making children more likely to replicate family conflict patterns in school bullying situations [1].

Attachment theory offers a crucial perspective for understanding how adversity translates into vulnerability. Secure attachment buffers the negative effects of adversity, enhancing emotional regulation and social functioning, whereas insecure attachment increases vulnerability to threat sensitivity and aggressive responses [21]. The Social-Ecological Diathesis-Stress Model further indicates that individual responses to bullying depend not only on early vulnerability but also on the moderating influence of external support networks [1]. Insecure attachment combined with low-support environments amplifies risk, while positive teacher-student relationships or peer support enhance emotional resilience. In summary, early adversity constitutes a core developmental precursor shaping individual vulnerability. It not only elevates mental health risks but also influences how individuals interpret bullying situations by altering social perception and emotional processing. This mechanistic link provides a crucial theoretical foundation for understanding variations in bullying perception.

3.2. Social information processing theory: cognitive pathways of bullying perception

In bullying situations, an individual's perception and interpretation of ambiguous social cues are key processes influencing the experience of being bullied. The Social Information Processing Model (SIP) provides a phased framework that reveals the cognitive-emotional processing pathway from social cues to behavioural responses [22,23]. This model emphasises the subjective and developmental nature of processing, which is influenced by prior experiences, emotional states, and social schemas [24].

During the cue encoding stage, individuals decide which social signals to focus on and use to infer others' emotions, intentions, and behaviours. Victims of bullying commonly experience difficulties in social cognitive processing, particularly exhibiting biases in recognising and interpreting others' emotions and intentions [25]. Such biases may lead to heightened threat perception, and as bullying persists, it further diminishes an individual's social perceptual sensitivity, potentially creating a vicious cycle.

Neuroimaging evidence further indicates that regions such as the posterior superior temporal sulcus (pSTS) and temporoparietal junction (TPJ) play critical roles in encoding and integrating social cues, with functional abnormalities in these regions potentially exacerbating processing deficits at this stage [9].

During the intent interpretation stage, attribution bias serves as a core mechanism. The SIP model posits that individuals must engage in causal inference regarding social behaviour, yet both victims and perpetrators tend to interpret ambiguous actions as hostile [10]. Research indicates that bully victims exhibit this dual bias particularly prominently: they tend to attribute hostility externally while simultaneously internalising negative events as personal shortcomings [10,25]. This bias not only amplifies subjective threat perception but also perpetuates cycles of defensive or retaliatory responses [26].

During response generation and decision-making phases, individuals rely on social databases to process social information. For victims, this database is often saturated with experiences of humiliation or rejection, making them more likely to activate threat labels in ambiguous situations, leading to avoidance or withdrawal. Perpetrators, conversely, tend to set aggressive goals, generate destructive responses, and reduce negative moral judgments toward their attacks [27]. Thus,

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childhood deficits in social cognition weaken the ability to infer intent, increasing vulnerability to bullying interactions later in life [12].

Furthermore, emotional processing is deeply embedded within the SIP pathway, modulating individuals' interpretation of social cues. Emotional salience not only influences cue recognition and intent attribution but also relates to the adaptiveness of behavioural response [24]. Growing evidence indicates that bullying victims may simultaneously experience emotional recognition deficits and regulation difficulties in ambiguous situations [28].

In summary, the SIP model reveals the dynamic psychological pathways underlying differences in bullying perception, particularly highlighting social cognitive vulnerability in two core processes: intent attribution and emotion regulation. This provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the subjectivity of perceived victimisation and establishes a framework for subsequent investigations into how cognitive biases and evaluation mechanisms amplify threat perception.

3.3. Cognitive distortion and appraisal theory: core biases in threat amplification

Bullying is significantly associated with psychosocial adjustment difficulties, but this relationship is not linear; rather, it is moderated by individual cognitive processing. The Transactional Model of Stress (TMS) provides a crucial framework for this, emphasising that individuals do not passively receive bullying stimuli but instead interpret and respond through cognitive appraisal [29]. This appraisal process functions like a cognitive filter, amplifying or buffering bullying's psychological impact. Primary appraisal determines whether an event is perceived as a threat, challenge, or loss, while secondary appraisal involves individuals' assessments of available resources [30]. Empirical research consistently indicates that threat-centred primary appraisals play a pivotal role in shaping negative outcomes. For instance, adolescents who perceive bullying as a pervasive and intentional threat are more likely to develop anxiety, depression, or aggression [31]. This mechanism manifests as a mediating effect across different bullying types and developmental stages [32].

Complementing this, cognitive theory further reveals deeper structural mechanisms [33]. This model emphasises that Negative Automatic Thoughts (NATs) rapidly emerge at an unconscious level, driven by core beliefs and cognitive distortions, leading individuals to interpret ambiguous cues through catastrophizing, overgeneralization, or personalisation. This explains why some adolescents perceive intense threat even in low-level bullying. Recent research confirms that cognitive distortions consistently mediate the relationship between violence exposure and perceived bullying, while self-serving distortions and moral disengagement exert negative effects even among victimised groups [34].

Collectively, cognitive appraisal and cognitive distortions form a dual pathway of threat amplification. TMS emphasises dynamic situational evaluation and resource mobilisation, while the cognitive theory explains the enduring impact of automatic thoughts and negative beliefs. When external events are amplified through threatening evaluations and then solidified by internally distorted schemas, individuals are more likely to develop heightened victimisation feelings and become trapped in anxiety, depression, and social avoidance. This cognitive threat amplification mechanism lays the psychological foundation for subsequent emotional responses such as shame, self-blame, and regulation failure.

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3.4. Bridging perception and affective response: shame and self-conscious emotion model & emotion regulation theory

In the psychological mechanism pathway of bullying perception, the shame-attack model and emotion regulation jointly form the critical bridge connecting perception to psychological outcomes. As a core self-related emotion, shame is not merely a reaction to external threats but rather a subjective assessment of diminished self-worth and social standing [35]. The social ranking model posits that when individuals perceive devaluation or exclusion in bullying, they activate shame experiences, transforming external threats into internal self-devaluation and social comparison processes. Repeated bullying internalises shame into the belief "I am unworthy," amplifying the "sense of being bullied" far beyond observable bullying behaviours. Empirical research indicates that individuals with lower perceived social rank are more prone to shame, self-blame, and depression [35].

In this shame-attack process, individuals first interpret social cues as humiliation, then confirm their low status through upward social comparison, and finally direct negative emotions inward, manifesting as self-criticism, internalised aggression, and social withdrawal, thereby intensifying psychological trauma [36]. Prolonged shame activation erodes self-concept and is closely associated with depression and social anxiety.

However, the amplifying effect of shame is not inevitable but regulated by emotional regulation mechanisms. Emotion regulation functions as a cognitive-emotional filter, influencing how individuals perceive social contexts, generate emotions, and select response modes [37]. Research indicates that cognitive reappraisal effectively buffers shame effects and promotes recovery, whereas suppression and rumination prolong shame experiences and exacerbate depression and withdrawal [38]. In bullying contexts, individuals lacking adaptive regulation are more likely to fall into a shame-self-attack-depression cycle, whereas those inclined toward reappraisal or seeking support are better able to transform shame into a manageable experience, reducing psychological trauma [39].

In summary, the interactive mechanisms between shame-attack and emotion regulation reveal a core pathway. The self-attack mechanism of shame amplifies the psychological weight of perceived bullying, while emotion regulation determines whether this weight translates into long-term psychological distress. Together, they form a dynamic bridge connecting perceived bullying to psychological consequences, explaining why identical bullying situations may yield vastly different psychological outcomes.

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4. Integrative psychological framework

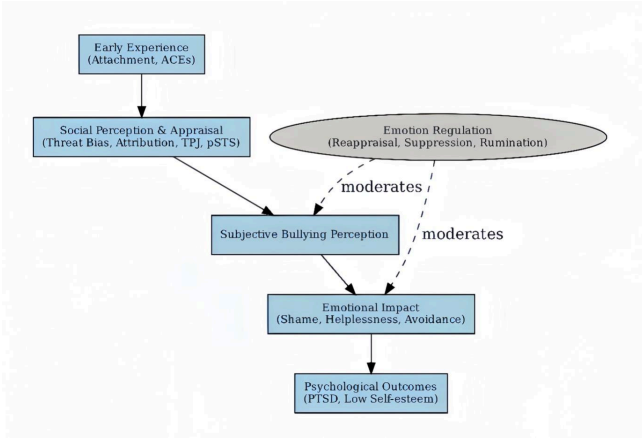

Figure 1. The integrative psychological mechanism for early experience, perceptual-cognitive appraisal system, subjective bullying perception, emotional impact, psychological outcomes, and emotion regulation

This integrative framework (see Figure 1) conceptualises perceived bullying as a multilevel psychological processing pathway. Originating from early adversity, it influences subjective bullying perceptions through the perception-cognitive appraisal system, ultimately shaping emotional and psychological outcomes. The model comprises four core components: (1) Early adversity and attachment, shaping the neurocognitive foundation of social information processing; (2) The Perception–Cognitive Appraisal System, integrating SIP, appraisal theory, and cognitive bias theory, relying on the TPJ and pSTS; (3) Subjective Bullying Perception, serving as an intermediary between cognition and emotion; (4) Emotional Regulation, functioning as an amplifying or buffering variable.

Empirical research indicates that early adversity heightens threat sensitivity and hostile attribution, increasing vulnerability to victimisation and psychological distress [18]. Within this vulnerability context, the perceptual-cognitive system functions to decode social cues and evaluate threat significance. The SIP model emphasises sequential processing from cue encoding to attribution, wherein the pSTS integrates dynamic signals like facial expressions, intonation, and gestures, providing input for higher-order mental state inference in the TPJ [14]. Together, they form the pSTS–TPJ pathway. The former integrates social signals, while the latter infers intentions, continuously refining perceptual processing through interaction [15]. When this pathway is affected by adversity, individuals are more prone to make hostile attributions in ambiguous situations, thereby amplifying perceived threat [25].

Building on this, the appraisal theory posits that primary appraisal determines whether bullying is perceived as a threat, while secondary appraisal involves judgments of controllability and resources [29]. When events are categorised as high-threat and low-controllability, they are more likely to induce helplessness and distress [31]. Simultaneously, the cognitive theory emphasises that negative schemas and automatic thoughts drive catastrophizing and hostile bias, forming the internal structure amplifying threats [33]. Together, they create a cognitive filter. External social cues are first processed through the pSTS–TPJ, then amplified by evaluation and cognitive distortions, establishing the psychological foundation for subjective perceptions of bullying.

Subjective perceptions of bullying are not direct reflections of external events but rather the interplay of perception, attribution, and cognitive biases. Individuals interpret jokes or ambiguous

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interactions differently based on their biases. Some perceive them as unintentional offences, while others experience them as deliberate harm. This discrepancy directly determines the triggering of emotions such as shame, helplessness, and social withdrawal [12,35]. Emotional regulation plays a pivotal role here. Cognitive reappraisal can mitigate threat and shame, promoting recovery; whereas inhibition and rumination sustain or even intensify negative cycles [38,40].

Overall, this framework reveals a dynamic pathway from early adversity to perception-evaluation, culminating in subjective feelings of bullying and emotional outcomes. Within this process, the pSTS–TPJ pathway provides neural support for social perception, while evaluative theories and cognitive biases act as amplifiers, determining whether external events are transformed into heightened perceived bullying and ultimately shaping differences in psychological adaptation.

5. Conclusion

Bullying is not merely observable aggressive behaviour but also a subjective experience shaped by developmental vulnerability, perceptual biases, and emotional regulation capacity. Individual differences can not be explained solely by the frequency or severity of incidents. The integrated psychological mechanism framework proposed herein begins with early adversity and attachment patterns, generates subjective perceptions of bullying through the perception-cognitive appraisal system, and influences psychological outcomes under the influence of emotional regulation. By integrating social information processing, cognitive appraisal and bias models, and self-conscious perspectives, this framework highlights the dynamic construct of bullying perception, emphasising the interaction between external cues and internal psychological filters.

This perspective reframes bullying as a subjective construct rather than a singular behavioural category, explaining individual differences in vulnerability. It suggests interventions should focus on modifying threat assessments and cognitive biases, cultivating positive reappraisal of emotions, and providing compensatory support for early adversity. Concurrently, educators and clinicians must attend not only to observable behaviours but also to how victims interpret and internalise these experiences.

However, this framework retains limitations. As a conceptual model, its causal effects on neural mechanisms require further validation. Its research focus on victims overlooks perpetrators, bystanders, and cultural contexts, limiting its universality. Future research should further examine and expand this framework through cross-cultural, multi-level, and mixed-method approaches, exploring its value in theoretical deepening and practical application.

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