

## A Review of Research on School Bullying Among African American Youth: An Ecological Systems Analysis

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**Abstract** School bullying and peer victimization are social problems that affect African American youth across various environmental contexts. Regrettably, many of the empirical research on bullying and peer victimization among African American youth has examined individual and direct level influences in silos rather than a constellation of factors occurring in multiple settings, such as home, school, and neighborhood. As a holistic model, the social–ecological framework provides a context with which to situate and interpret findings and draw implications from a broader psychosocial framework, which can be applicable across various systems. We utilize Bronfenbrenner’s (American Psychologist 32:513–531, 1977) social–ecological framework as a springboard for investigating the accumulation of risk contributors and the presences of protective factors in relation to school bullying and peer victimization of African American youth. More specifically, we examine the risk and protective factors occurring in the micro- (i.e., parents, peers, school, and community), exo- (i.e., parental stress), and macrosystem levels (i.e., hypermasculinity, and gender role beliefs and stereotypes). We then discuss implications for research and school-based practice.

**Keywords** African Americans · Bullying · Peer victimization · School · Youth

School bullying and peer victimization are major concerns for students, parents, teachers, and school officials. Although a number of definitions exist, bullying is commonly identified as physical, verbal, or social forms of aggression perpetrated by an individual or a group of individuals against a particular individual (Espelage and Swearer 2003). American children of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds are increasingly exposed to bullying (Hanish and

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Guerra 2000), although the literature indicates higher rates among African American youth. More specifically, researchers have pointed out that physical fighting tends to be more common among African American (37.9 %) youth than whites (30.5 %; Carlyle and Steinman 2007), whereas African American youth generally report being bullied with less frequency than other racial/ethnic groups (Eisenberg and Aalsma 2005; Nansel et al. 2001).

*Bullying* is defined in terms of specific acts and events of victimization. Acts of bullying include: physical aggression (e.g., hitting or kicking), verbal aggression (e.g., name calling), indirect/relational aggression (e.g., exclusions from a social group), and more recently cyber aggression. At its core, bullying is about a power differential in which a more powerful person or group of people dominates someone perceived to be less powerful (Fitzpatrick et al. 2007). *Peer victimization* is defined as an experience of a child who is a target of the aggressive behavior of other children who are not siblings (Hawker and Boulton 2000). Similar to bullying, peer victimization is characterized as overt (e.g., physical or verbal; Storch et al. 2005) and covert/relational (e.g., Crick and Bigbee 1998). Relational victimization occurs in which a child's social relationships and social standing are harmed (Crick and Bigbee 1998).

Youth who engage in bullying behaviors report higher levels of conduct problems and are more likely to display violent behaviors such as carrying a weapon or physical fighting. Studies consistently point out that children who are involved in bullying are also likely to display antisocial and criminal behaviors during late adolescence and adulthood (Nansel et al. 2001; Olweus 1992, 2004; Sourander et al. 2007). For instance, an earlier study conducted by Olweus (1992), which examined the behaviors of bullied youth, found a significant increase in criminal behavior at age 24. A more recent study by Sourander et al. (2007) also reports from a sample of Finnish youth that bullying-involved adolescents are significantly at risk of engaging in criminal behaviors (e.g., violence, property, drunk driving, and criminal offense).

Prevalence of bullying and peer victimization has been difficult to generate (Espelage and Swearer 2003), and research findings vary when race/ethnicity is considered. For example, Wang et al. (2009) indicate a higher likelihood of African American youth (compared to Latino and white youth) being perpetrators of physical, verbal, and cyber bullying and less likely victims (verbal and relational). Conversely, Nansel et al. (2001) examined a nationally representative sample of youth and found that African Americans reported higher rates of peer victimization (physical and verbal) than their Latino and white peers. These data were supported by the recent work of Koo et al. (2012) who found African American girls to be at a higher risk of physical and verbal victimization by their peers than Asian American girls and Latinas. These findings are confounded by a body of research which consistently points to African American students being viewed as more aggressive than white and Latino youth by both teachers and other youth (e.g., Graham and Juvonen 2002).

Significant advances have been made in research on school bullying and peer victimization over the years. However, little is known about the integration of multiple level risk and protective factors that foster or mitigate bullying and peer victimization among African American youth. Risk factors increase the likelihood that youth will be involved in bullying and peer victimization. However, risk factors are not direct causes of bullying and victimization; rather, they contribute to these behaviors (Mercy et al. 2002). On the contrary, protective factors has been commonly defined as factors that reduce the impact of a risk factor, helps individuals to not engage in potentially harmful behavior, and/or promotes an alternative pathway (Spooner et al. 2001).

Although the term *protective factor* has been used in many ways in resilience research, we use the term to focus on resilience and positive outcomes and strengths rather than solely

on the deficits (Luthar et al. 2000), which connotes a commitment to understanding processes underlying the effects of vulnerability (Luthar and Cicchetti 2000). However, we equally recognize the variation in protective factors that espouse a more dynamic process of interactions between risk factors and either interpersonal (personality) or external (family support) factors that buffer the effects of risk. The studies presented in this article represent direct ameliorative effects, whereas protective factors may also undergird a moderating process in which an individual is “stabilized” within the context of increased risk or enhanced as an individual gains new knowledge as a result of increased risk (Luthar and Cicchetti 2000).

Understanding the risk and protective factors within multiple contexts is important, considering that bullies and victims are at heightened risk of poor mental health outcomes, such as depressive symptoms (Fitzpatrick et al. 2010; Gomes et al. 2009). Moreover, various risk and protective factors influence young people’s attitudes and behaviors with regard to bullying and victimization and are also relevant to the efficacy of bullying prevention and intervention programs. A broader assessment of the risk and protective factors is a critical first step for developing and implementing culturally relevant school violence prevention strategies.

The focus of this article is to review research on bullying and peer victimization among African American youth using the social–ecological framework. Examining the factors associated with bullying and peer victimization among African American youth is important for several reasons. Although bullying and peer victimization are serious problems for school-age youth of all racial/ethnic groups, there have been scant number of studies that investigated the correlates of bullying and victimization among African Americans at multiple levels of the social ecology. Much of the existing research on bullying among African American has focused on psychosocial behaviors that increase the likelihood of bullying and victimization, such as internalizing and externalizing behaviors (e.g., McMahon and Watts 2002; Peskin et al. 2007), as well as peer relationships (Estell et al. 2007; Farmer et al. 2003; Storch et al. 2003; Xie et al. 2003) and school environment (Benhorin and McMahon 2008; Felix and You 2011; Hanish and Guerra 2000; Juvonen et al. 2006). Regrettably, there has been a serious dearth of research that examined relevant broader contexts, such as community and culture

This review contributes to the existing literature by moving beyond sole microsystems approach to understanding bullying behavior and victimization and moving towards the integration of broader level factors and how they interact with more microsystem factors. Understanding the broader level factors is particularly important because African Americans are more likely than other racial/ethnic groups to live in a dangerous neighborhood, which may be predictive of bullying and victimization (see Bowen and Bowen 1999). In Chicago for example, high resourced neighborhoods are more like to have lower average rates of problem behaviors as compared to poor neighborhoods (Elliott et al. 2006). Neighborhoods become spaces in which young African Americans develop their identities. To some, that may also mean developing a tough, aggressive demeanor in order to garner street credibility. The ecological systems theory serves as a useful framework for understanding the multiple level contexts that may foster and inhibit bullying and victimization among African Americans. Bullying involvement is frequently explained as emerging from a wide range of risk and protective factors within the social ecology of youth (Espelage and De La Rue 2012).

When the social–ecological framework is applied, bullying and peer victimization may be facilitated and/or inhibited as a result of the interrelations among multiple contexts (Bronfenbrenner 1977). As a holistic model, this framework is conceived as an interactive

set of systems nested within each other, which shape the context in which the individual experiences the phenomenon. Moreover, bullying and victimization are influenced by the reciprocal interactions among the biological and psychological characteristics of the youth, his/her behavior, and the environment (Espelage and De La Rue 2012). Although African American youth do not all belong in a monolithic group, many of the studies cited in this review pertain to low-income African American youth. However, there remains societal stigma and discrimination against African American which presents an additional layer of risk and has the potential to influence protective factors that could mitigate bullying behaviors and peer victimization among this racial group. Moreover, it is also important to examine protective factors, which can facilitate the development of culturally relevant intervention strategies and prevention measures. Considering that research on African American youth has primarily focused more on deficits and problems and less on strengths (Belgrave and Allison 2010), identifying protective factors is essential. Thus, our goal is to investigate risk and protective factors within the social–ecological context, from which we draw implications for research and practice.

### Method of Selection

Empirical research and literature review were identified through electronic bibliographic databases and manual searches. Considering a major dearth of research on bullying and peer victimization among African American youth, a time frame of 1990–2010 was selected. Databases for the literature search included GoogleScholar.com, Medline, ProQuest, PubMed, and PsycINFO. As previously mentioned, subtypes of bullying and peer victimization include physical, verbal, and relational. Key words and phrases for the search included *African Americans*, *blacks*, *racial and ethnic minorities*, *school bullying*, *aggression*, *aggressive behavior*, *peer victimization*, *relational aggression*, and *relational victimization*.

According to the World Health Organization (1977), *adolescence* covers a period of life between 10 and 19 years of age. However, because we focus specifically on bullying and peer victimization occurring from pre-school to high school, our search was limited to studies that include sample whose age range from early childhood to 18 years of age. Research studies on bullying and peer victimization outside of school (e.g., workplace bullying) and those that involve participants over 18 years of age were excluded from this review. The search included all available studies published from 1990 onwards, and titles, authors, and abstracts from all studies were reviewed to determine whether they met the inclusion criteria.

### Findings from the Review

In sum, 23 articles were included in the review. The following section examines African American children and adolescents' experience in school bullying and peer victimization within the context of the microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Although the social–ecological framework also suggests that mesosystem levels can impact youth's involvement in bullying, there is a dearth of research on the relationship between mesosystem and bullying involvement among African American youth. Therefore, mesosystem was excluded from this review.

## Social–Ecological Framework

In the following sections, we enumerate of the microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem factors that influence or inhibit school bullying and peer victimization among African American children and adolescents. Researchers have proposed several different variables to explain the sources of bullying and victimization, such as parenting practices, family characteristics, peer relations, community environment, and gender role socialization. It is not any one of these factors that affect peer relations in particular, but their accumulation in the life of the individual youth. The social–ecological framework facilitates a broader understanding of a social phenomenon and is critical in enhancing our understanding of bullying and peer victimization among African American youth. When this framework is applied, bullying and peer victimization may be facilitated and/or inhibited as a result of the interrelations among multiple contexts (Bronfenbrenner 1977).

Using a social–ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner 1977, 1979), we investigate the complex interplay between immediate and distal influences in bullying and peer victimization among African American youth. A series of concentric structures—micro-, exo-, and macrosystems—directly and indirectly affect the development, with the individual youth situated as the focal point of influence (Bruyere and Garbarino 2009; Garbarino 1992). More specifically, we investigate the risk and protective factors occurring in the *micro-* (i.e., parents, peers, school, and community), *exo-* (i.e., parental stress), and *macrosystem* levels (i.e., hypermasculinity and gender role beliefs, and stereotypes). Only by understanding the complex interplay of influences will the development of effective violence prevention and intervention strategies for African American youth follow.

### *Microsystem*

As Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979) social–ecological framework suggests, microsystem is characterized as a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the individual or a group of individuals in a direct setting (e.g., home, school), in which the individual is embedded. The interactions occurring within the microsystem consistently shape the individual or a group of individuals. Various microsystem level factors/contexts can directly foster or inhibit bullying and peer victimizations among African American youth, such as parents, peers, school, and community.

*Parents* Many of the influences that foster or impede bullying are found within the home, as youth spend a great deal of their time with their family. Research examining the relevance of family system on bullying and peer victimization among African Americans has focused on parents, and more specifically, parenting practices (Curtner-Smith et al. 2006; Griffin et al. 1999), parental support (Benhorin and McMahon 2008), and parental abuse (Fitzpatrick et al. 2007).

Several family characteristics have been found to be positively associated with bullying behavior among African American youth. These characteristics include: low involvement with parents, low parental warmth, low family cohesion, and single-parent family structures. In addition, one study has found that parental abuse (i.e., parents hit and beat routinely) is significant predictor of physical bullying behavior among African American youth (Fitzpatrick et al. 2007). Childhood family experiences also impact bullying behavior. Experiences may include family violence, inconsistent punishment, bullying by siblings, and the father's history of bullying. On the other hand, perceived parental monitoring and support reportedly lowered the risk of bullying among African American youth. Parental

support is found to be associated with positive outcomes in children and adolescents, such as higher likelihood of prosocial behavior (Bean et al. 2003; Carlson et al. 2000) and better school performances (Bean et al. 2003), as well as lower likelihood of psychological distress (Bean et al. 2006; Gray and Steinberg 1999), substance use (Parker and Benson 2004; Willis et al. 2004), and bullying behavior (Grant et al. 2000; Holt and Espelage 2007; Wang et al. 2009).

Family-based support sources are especially important for African American children in coping with daily life struggles (Maton et al. 1996). Maton et al.'s (1996) study, which examined parental, peer, partner, and spiritual support among African American and white youth, found that in different contexts, different support sources were higher in level and/or more strongly associated with adjustment for one racial group than the other. Among 15- to 29-year-olds, parental support was significantly higher for African Americans than for whites. Connectedness to family and family support are resources that have traditionally helped African American youth cope with living in a society often perceived as hostile (Maton et al. 1996). Despite the significance of family-based support, we were only able to locate one study that examined the association between family support and bullying involvement among African American youth. One study conducted by Benhorin and McMahon (2008) found from a sample of 127 African American adolescents (ages 10–15) residing in urban areas that perceived parental support was related to lower level of teacher-reported physical and verbal bullying and aggressive behaviors in school. However, the researchers did not find any significant main effects for parental support in relation to self- and peer-reported aggressive behaviors, which implies that these youth may display aggression in certain settings (e.g., home, neighborhood), but not in others (e.g., school). As previously mentioned, parental support is a salient protective factor that is relevant to African American youth. Considering the importance of parental support, additional research that examines the association between parental support and bullying involvement among African American youth is needed.

*Peers* The quality of peer relationship represents another important microsystem, which may influence or inhibit bullying and peer victimization. Given that social skills are learned in the home, it is likely that these behaviors will be displayed to peers and teachers in the school setting (Espelage and Swearer 2003). Peer relationships are an important part of youth's microsystem, which involves youth interacting with, influencing, and socializing with each other (Rodkin and Hodges 2003). Furthermore, a correlative pattern between the quality of peer relations and bullying and peer victimization has been observed among several researchers (see Hong and Espelage 2012, for a review). Researchers investigating the association between quality of peer relationship and bullying and peer victimization among African American adolescents report that the frequency of bullying behavior was high among adolescents under negative peer influence (i.e., pressured by peers to engage in illicit behaviors, such as alcohol and drug use; Farrar 2006; Fitzpatrick et al. 2007; Griffin et al. 1999).

Other researchers also have investigated social relations and peer networks of African American adolescents who were identified as aggressive (Estell et al. 2007; Farmer et al. 2003; Xie et al. 2003). Although peer acceptance, popularity, and social networks are important for most adolescents (Espelage 2002), research findings on social relations of bullying involved youth have been mixed. A study conducted by Farmer et al. (2003), which includes subtypes of rural African American early adolescents (161 boys and 258 girls), found that bullies identified as tough boys and popular girls were rated higher by their peers on social prominence (e.g., cool, popular), compared to troubled boys and girls, although these youth were disliked by their peers. Moreover, youth involved in bullying (as measured



by physical and relational forms) showed higher levels of social network centrality than youth identified as non-aggressive (Xie et al. 2003), although they associated with aggressive and non-aggressive as well as popular and unpopular peer groups (Estell et al. 2007).

Relatively few researchers identified protective factors within peer level contexts, such as peer support (Benhorin and McMahon 2008) and prosocial behavior from peers (Storch et al. 2003). For instance, Storch et al.'s (2003) research investigated the association between peer victimization (overt and relational) and internalizing behaviors (i.e., depressive symptoms, fear of negative evaluation, social avoidance, and loneliness) in a sample of 190 Hispanic/Latino and African American children (5th–7th grades). The researchers found that although overt (i.e., confrontational behavior directed towards another individual or a group of individuals; Griffin and Gross 2004) and relational victimization (i.e., being excluded from a social group, being a target of exclusion, rumors, or humiliation in a social setting; Griffin and Gross 2004) were both correlated with all types of internalizing behaviors, prosocial support from peers buffered the effects of peer victimization on loneliness.

It is evident that risk and protective factors for bullying and peer victimization depend largely on the quality of peer relationships. Current research findings suggest that the likelihood of bullying and peer victimization is strong for youth with negative peer relations (e.g., negative peer influence). However, the findings also support the view that peer affiliation and social network of bullies vary, and some bullies are socially skilled and can have relatively high social status. Nevertheless, a limited number of researchers also found that prosocial behavior from peers and peer support could mitigate bullying behavior and negative outcomes associated with experiences in peer victimization.

*School* Certain aspects of the school condition might facilitate or impede bullying behavior (Baker 1998; Espelage and Swearer 2003). Thus, school environment, in relation to bullying and peer victimization, has received a substantial amount of research attention (Hong and Espelage 2012). Many low-income African American youth are at greater risk of exposure to various types of violence. They also are likely to have few resources that might protect them from bullying and peer victimization; as a consequence, these youth may perceive their school environment as unsafe (see Fitzpatrick et al. 2010), which can heighten the risk of bullying and peer victimization. However, there are a number of protective factors in schools, such as perceived support from teachers (Benhorin and McMahon 2008), diversity in the classrooms (Felix and You 2011; Juvonen et al. 2006), and racially/ethnically integrated school settings (Hanish and Guerra 2000). To illustrate, Hanish and Guerra (2000) found from a sample of 1,956 racially and ethnically diverse children attending racially/ethnically integrated schools that racially/ethnically integrated school attendance was associated with a slightly lower risk of physical and verbal peer victimization for African American children, whereas it was associated with a significantly higher risk of victimization for white children. As theorized by Juvonen et al. (2006), greater diversity can increase racial and ethnic minority students' perceptions of safety and reduce feelings of vulnerability because in diverse settings, students affiliate with one of many racial/ethnic groups that share a balance of power. Findings from Hanish and Guerra's (2000) study also demonstrate that there is a critical need for examining contextual factors, such as racial/ethnic composition of the school as potential contributors to victimization.

*Community* Because schools are embedded in neighborhoods, neighborhoods that are perceived as dangerous are significantly associated with bullying behavior in school (Hong and Espelage 2012). Considering that placement in risky school and classroom environments occur more frequently for African American than for white children due to the

demographic of the neighborhood, it is not surprising that African American youth residing in socioeconomically disadvantaged (Thomas et al. 2006) and dangerous communities (Boxer et al. 2008; Fitzpatrick 1997; Griffin et al. 1999) are more likely than other racial/ethnic groups to be exposed to deviant and delinquent peer interactions, such as bullying. African American youth, particularly those residing in low-resourced neighborhoods, are also more likely than youth of other races/ethnicities to attend schools where exposure to violence is prevalent (see Bowen and Bowen 1999).

Researchers have theorized that exposure to community violence leads to desensitization or disengagement and a cognitive orientation that normalizes violence (Ng-Mak et al. 2002). Children who develop such cognitive orientation believe that aggression is normal and morally acceptable, and believe that it is more beneficial to bully than be victimized (Belgrave 2009). Likewise, children in low-income communities may have learned bullying as a self-protective mechanism against potential harm (Belgrave 2009), which also can result in greater engagement in this behavior (Boxer et al. 2008).

### *Exosystem*

Understanding the multiple influences of bullying and peer victimization requires an examination of the individual as embedded within larger social units. Exosystem comprises linkage between two or more interactions or settings, but only one directly affecting the individual (Bronfenbrenner 1977). There are settings or events that may influence the individual youth's socialization, although the youth has no direct role in them. The exosystem has an indirect effect on the youth because the exosystem usually affects the youth as it "trickles" down through other people (e.g., caregiver) in the youth's life. The quality of youth's relationship with their peers can be influenced by a larger system or social structure that is not directly experienced by the individual youth.

Exosystem level factors are significant in research on African American youth, given the highly stressful environmental context for many African Americans (Bean et al. 2006). One notable exosystem level factor is parental stress. For example, parental stress due to external factors (e.g., lack of financial resources) may not be directly related to individual youth but can affect the microsystem, which the youth are embedded (e.g., parent–youth relationship). In addition, African American parents may experience an added dimension of stress that is direct relation to their racialized experiences within the U.S. context. More specifically, African American parents experiencing stress due to their racialized experiences prepare their children for potential stigma, oppression, and discrimination. As such, these parents must also communicate message that outline behaviors that further develop their sense of identity as an African American in effort to prepare them for a continuum of racism (Fischer and Shaw 1999). Parental stress can compromise caregiving practices and parent–youth attachment at home, which can affect youth's developmental outcomes. More specifically, mothers' stress due to lack of financial resources, dearth of social support, and personal problems has been examined in a number of studies on African American children and adolescents, and has reported to be significantly correlated with youth's psychosocial development (e.g., Brody et al. 1994; Caldwell et al. 2002).

Regrettably, despite the significance of exosystem level factors, there appears to be a major dearth of empirical studies on exosystem level factors associated with African American youth's involvement in bullying and peer victimization. Nevertheless, one study has examined parental stress (e.g., Curtner-Smith et al. 2006) as a risk factor for physical, verbal, and relational bullying among African American children. Curtner-Smith et al.



(2006) findings from a sample of predominantly African American children attending a Head Start Program suggest high level of mothers' stress disrupts parent–child relationship, which can influence children's involvement in overt and relational bullying.

In evaluating the role of exosystem level factors in African American youth's experiences in bullying and peer victimization, it is important to point out that they are the by-products of changes occurring in the larger social milieu, in which the developing youth is not embedded. For instance, mother's stress may be due to external forces, such as poor neighborhood conditions or place of employment. Such forces could compromise her parenting practices and parent–child attachment in the home, and subsequently predispose the youth to negative peer relationships outside the home. Despite the limited number of empirical support, it is evident that understanding the multifaceted nature of the risk and protective factors for bullying and peer victimization of African American youth requires a consideration of external forces that unduly affect immediate settings (e.g., home) and interactions (e.g., parent–child relationship).

### *Macrosystem*

The most distal influences of African American children and adolescents' experiences in bullying and peer victimization are macrosystem level factors, such as society, in which micro- and exosystem factors are embedded. By society, we are referring to cultural norms and beliefs. An examination of the macrosystem level factors, such as hypermasculinity and gender role beliefs, can shed more light on the complex web of causal factors that may play a role in understanding bullying behaviors among African American youth.

*Hypermasculinity* Most evident are culturally prescribed gender role socialization, such as hypermasculinity and relational aggression (i.e., engaging in gossip, rumors, threatening to sabotage friendships), which may perpetuate normative beliefs about aggression among boys and girls. According to Cassidy and Stevenson's (2005) study, the pervasive notion of physical and verbal aggression among African American male adolescents may facilitate acceptance by peers in their adolescent years. Some individuals may put on a façade of aggression, although in actuality, they feel vulnerable. Among African American males in urban communities, aggressive behavior can be presented as hypermasculinity. Displays of hypermasculinity are associated with vulnerability and developmental sequelae to include depression, sensitivity to peer rejection, and fear of safety. As such, growing up in a volatile environment often requires urban African American males to be fearless and tough (Anderson 1999), thus making it difficult for African American boys to take on the persona of a more child-like demeanor (Patton and Garbarino 2013). This hypermasculine behavior may in fact hide the need of African American boys to receive social support from caring adults.

*Gender Role Beliefs and Stereotypes* Hypermasculinity as it relates to African American males as a cultural construct has been developed by researchers to investigate how gender role beliefs reinforce male dominance (Mosher 1991; Murnen and Byrne 1991). It has been characterized as perceiving dangerous events as exciting, and as believing that aggression and violence are the norms for males (Kreiger and Dumka 2006). Hypermasculinity also has been linked to aggressive expression of anger and frustration, suppression of weak emotion (e.g., fear), domination of others, and acceptance of sexual aggression (Gold et al. 1992; Hamburger et al. 1996). Hypermasculinity has been identified as a correlate of bullying

behavior of African American male adolescents. Farrar (2006) examined verbal bullying (i.e., upsetting others, teasing) within the sociological construct of race/ethnicity, gender, and the role of perceived gender stereotypes. Consistent with previous research findings, African American and males reported higher frequencies of initiating bullying, as compared with whites and other racial/ethnic groups and females. The author also found that stereotype perceptions increase bullying behavior. Interestingly, the author theorized that within the hegemonic paradigm, being a male gives a sense of gendered power among African American male adolescents. Therefore, acting in the stereotypical role of the hypermasculine male, which encompasses bullying behaviors, allows African American males to gain back some form of self-respect within the hegemonic paradigm.

With regard to stereotypes, Ferguson (2000) reported that African American boys, when perceived by their teachers as being troublemakers and failures, resorted to exemplifying the popular media images of the hypermasculine male in an attempt to gain respect and self-esteem when they had self-determined that they would be unsuccessful in the classroom setting. The author found that fear, disrespect, anger, anxiety, student identity, and negative peer networks were significantly correlated with bullying behavior. In examining African American youth's interactions with their peers, the author found that African American male students may draw upon stereotypical expectations in order to gain acceptance and popularity—which may lead to engaging in bullying behavior. It is clear that African American students were aware of broadly held stereotypes of African Americans as menacing and aggressive, and that those stereotypes influenced their interactions with peers.

Among African American girls, relational aggression has been found to precede physical aggression in school (Talbot et al. 2002). One plausible explanation is that African American girls who were identified as relationally aggressive were more popular than girls who did not engage in relational aggression (Leff et al. 2009). In evaluating a program to specifically address the cultural and gender-related needs of African American girls within the school context, Belgrave et al. (2004) found that interventions which develop positive interpersonal relationships among African American girls and introduce ideas that raise youth's awareness of issues relating to gender, ethnicity, and oppression significantly decreased relational aggression. These findings add to the growing body of literature on resilience among African American girls and how taking into account race and gender in multiple contexts can make a difference in decreasing relational aggression.

## Discussion

Findings from research reveal that African American children and adolescents' experiences in school bullying and peer victimization are multifaceted. Despite this, much of the research has focused on microsystem level influences that occur within the home and school. Consequently, relatively few have examined broader level influences within the exosystem and macrosystem levels, which are relevant to African American youth. With regard to the microsystems, parenting practices that are characterized as harsh and abusive are significantly associated with bullying involvement among African American youth (Fitzpatrick et al. 2007). Findings from Fitzpatrick et al. (2007) are consistent with studies that found that negative childhood family experiences can trigger bullying behavior among youth of other races/ethnicities (Hong et al. 2012). However, our review also suggests that family-based social support has been found to reduce bullying behaviors among African American youth (Benhorin and McMahon 2008). This is not surprising, considering that family social

support has traditionally been a critical resource for African American children who are confronted with daily struggles (Maton et al. 1996). Thus, additional research on family-based social support as a protective factor for bullying and peer victimization among African Americans needs to be conducted.

With regard to peer and social relationships, negative peer influence and social networks were found to be significantly associated with bullying behavior among African American youth (Farrar 2006; Fitzpatrick et al. 2007; Griffin et al. 1999). However, a limited number of researchers have also identified protective factors, such as peer support and prosocial peer behaviors, which can reduce bullying behaviors (Benhorin and McMahon 2008). Identifying these protective factors is critical, which can inform effective bullying prevention and intervention strategies for African American youth.

As indicated in this review, unsafe school climate as unsafe can increase the risk of bullying and victimization among African American youth (Fitzpatrick et al. 2010), while perceived teacher support (Benhorin and McMahon 2008), diversity in the classrooms (Felix and You 2011; Juvonen et al. 2006), and racially/ethnically integrated school (Hanish and Guerra 2000) can mitigate bullying involvement. This is not surprising, considering that students within the same schools share similar experiences with regard to their perceptions of their school climate and the need to use aggression in response to frustrations (Bradshaw et al. 2007). It is imperative that researchers investigate occurrences in the school settings, which can trigger bullying behavior and the role teachers and school administrators can play in fostering or inhibiting bullying behavior. Teachers, administrators, and staff members can influence the social climate of the school, and teachers' ability to identify incidents of bullying can be influenced by a number of factors (Espelage and De La Rue 2012).

In terms of broader level factors such as community environment, and factors occurring in the exosystem, and macrosystem, empirical research is seriously limited compared to the immediate level factors in the home and school environments (e.g., peer relationships). African American youth are more likely than youth of other races/ethnicities to reside in an impoverished and low resourced community where their parents experience greater levels of stress, which can undermine parent–child attachment and relationship (Curtner-Smith et al. 2006). Moreover, culturally prescribed gender role socialization (e.g., hypermasculinity; Cassidy and Stevenson 2005) and gender role beliefs supportive of male dominance (Kreiger and Dumka 2006) can reinforce normative beliefs about aggression among boys and girls (Cassidy and Stevenson 2005). Additional research investigating the broader level factors associated with bullying and victimization among African American youth is essential, considering that they have a significant influence in youth behavior and their relations with their peers.

Nevertheless, this review of research highlights several potential areas for future scholarly theorizing and research and identifies areas to buttress practice and policy. Bronfenbrenner's social–ecological framework serves as a useful heuristic tool for identifying factors across multiple contexts that trigger or impede bullying involvement among African American youth. Parenting behavior is an area researchers have identified as important for shaping peer relationships. Parental monitoring is associated with prosocial behavior, while negative parenting practices significantly predicted aggressive behavior among African American youth. Within the family context, researchers need to attend not only to the relationship between parenting practices and support (microsystem) and children's peer relationships in school but also external factors that induce parental stress (exosystem), which could undermine parenting practices. Primary caregivers, particularly mothers, typically reside in the same community as their

children. Thus, parental stress from navigating various forms of violence and poverty may impact how mothers discipline, monitor, and interact with their children.

In addition, exposure to violence is a particularly relevant antecedent to bullying and peer victimization among African American youth in low-resourced communities. We also should point out that other community level factors such as parental unemployment or underemployment, high rates of teacher burnout or stress, and lack of school services provisions can also have a negative impact on children's development and their peer relationships (Astor and Pitner 1996). Surprisingly, there are relatively few studies on community level factors associated with bullying. Researchers and practitioners need to assess community level factors, which can lead to more effective prevention and intervention strategies or to the enhancement of current socio-ecological intervention frameworks such as multisystemic therapy or response to intervention that is currently used in school districts nationally.

Additional research is needed to fully understand how peer relationships influence or mitigate bullying involvement. Researchers suggest that the frequency of bullying is highest among individuals with negative peer influences (Farrar 2006; Fitzpatrick et al. 2007; Griffin et al. 1999). Peer relationships, particularly within the context of risk and stress are complex, and more specifically for urban African American youth, and negative peer influence can increase bullying behavior in one context (school), but might provide necessary protection against violence exposure or potential victimization in another context (community). Peer socialization among aggressive youth needs to be closely examined both within and outside the school, as these youth are likely influenced by peers in unmonitored settings, such as communities (e.g., gangs; Astor and Pitner 1996). It is imperative that school practitioners explore youth friendships as a mechanism that impacts individual behavior in various contexts, which can result in the development of intervention programs that meet the needs of African American youth.

School climate has the potential to facilitate or impede the development of bullying behavior (Espelage and Swearer 2003). Schools that are perceived as unsafe can increase the risk of bullying and victimization. However, when schools embody a positive school climate and offer strong teacher support, the risk of bullying is lowered. Moreover, bullying and other forms of violence can occur in spaces within and outside the classrooms (Astor et al. 1999), and it is important that researchers examine peer dynamics and peer conflicts within various locations, such as hallways and cafeterias, where adults are typically not present. School practitioners (e.g., educational psychologists, counseling psychologists, social workers) may also think critically about working with school officials in developing school climate policies that attend to and integrate issues of school and community safety. For example, practitioners in urban schools may consider the extent to which adults in the school building (e.g., teachers, support staff, school administrators, and security guards) provide a level of safety among students. Understanding the relationships between adults and students not only influences how adults relate to students but can also result in broader policy conversations regarding adult/student interactions and the implications for overall well-being and academic achievement. Further, more research is needed to explicate how African American youth make meaning of school conditions and how they might be involved in bullying and peer victimization.

We also explored the ways in which bullying and peer victimization are gendered. As previously mentioned, African American males and females to some extent experience the social world differently based on their racialized and gendered experiences. Whereas negative stereotypes within and outside school influence how African American males behave in school, interpersonal relationships in school can reinforce bullying among females

(Leff et al. 2009). As evident in the research finding, additional studies are needed to further explore macrosystem factors that might reinforce bullying behavior among African American males and females.

Lastly, there are few qualitative studies which consider the voices of African American youth with regard to their lived experiences across the social–ecological systems. Understanding how these youth make meaning of and navigate community, school, family, and peers can help detect unknown factors that might contribute to bullying behaviors and why they are gendered. It is equally important to discussing bullying behavior within the context of limitation inherent in the social–ecological model. As stated earlier, fundamental to bullying is oppression. Currently, the social–ecological model lacks an analytical frame for which to examine oppression as a mechanism that influences and infiltrates the multiple systems individuals navigate on a daily basis (Mullaly 2007). Future research may consider a more in-depth understanding of oppression and its impact on bullying behavior within the context of individual youth navigating multiple social systems.

In summary, this review has generated more unanswered questions than a definitive understanding of the etiology. What is clear, however, is that the application of the social–ecological framework is useful for clustering immediate and distal influences that interact within and among multiple system levels. The framework illustrates the complexity of the interactions. Also, implicit in this review is that some of these youth are living a self-fulfilling prophecy, while others are protecting themselves from institutional racism and deprivation of opportunities, and/or some perhaps are masking mental health problems, such as aggressive behavior. Indeed, more research is needed to fully deconstruct these complex interactions.

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