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Externalizing and Internalizing Behavior Problems, Peer Affiliations, and Bullying Involvement Across the Transition to Middle School

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Abstract

Continuity and change in children's involvement in bullying was examined across the transition to middle school in relation to externalizing and internalizing behavior problems in fifth grade and peer affiliations in fifth and sixth grades. The sample consisted of 533 students (223 boys, 310 girls) with 72% European American, 25% African American, and 3% Other. Although externalizing and internalizing behavior problems in fifth grade were related to bullying involvement in sixth grade, the prediction of stability and desistance in bullying and victimization status was enhanced by information about students' peer group trajectories. Furthermore, peer group trajectories uniquely explained the emergence of bullying and victimization in middle school.

Keywords

bullying, victimization, internalizing behavior, externalizing behavior, social networks, middle school transition

The transition to middle school is recognized as a time of developmental vulnerability, particularly with regard to students' social relationships and risk for involvement in bullying (Chung, Elias, & Schneider, 1998; Pellegrini & Van Ryzin, 2011). During this transition, many students experience social stressors as they move from the safety of the elementary school classroom with peers that they have known for many years to a much larger social context that merges students from multiple feeder schools who are not familiar with each other (Erath, Flanagan, & Bierman, 2008; Evans & Eder, 1993). As middle school students form a new social system, peer groups and social structures may become reorganized as youth develop new affiliations and social roles (Farmer, Hamm, Leung, Lambert, & Gravelle, 2011; Pellegrini, 2002). In such a context, bullying and victimization may increase as students jockey for social position and status (Merten, 1997; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). On this count, in a recent study of bullying following the transition to middle school, more than half of sixth graders indicated that they were involved in bullying or victimization (Nansel, Haynie, & Simons-Morton, 2007).

Research on the risk for bullying involvement during the transition to middle school is highly relevant for understanding the social intervention needs of students with emotional and behavioral disorders. First, youth with eternalizing and internalizing behavior problems are at increased risk for being perpetrators and victims of bullying (Farmer, Petrin, et al., 2012; Gumpel & Sutherland, 2010; Swearer, Grills, Haye, & Cary, 2004). Second, although the transition to middle school is a time when students are socially vulnerable, the shifting of peer affiliations provides youth who have previously experienced social difficulties an opportunity to establish new social relationships, roles, and identities that foster their adjustment and adaptation (Farmer et al., 2011). Therefore, it is possible that the proximal social context that students experience during the transition to middle school can be a risk and a protective factor depending upon their own characteristics and the characteristics of the peers that they associate with (Berger & Rodkin, 2012). This means the level of bullying involvement of a student's peer group may contribute to continuity or change

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in their bullying involvement across the middle school transition.

Consistent with this view, bullying researchers have suggested that it is necessary to investigate peer victimization from a social contextual framework (Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Rodkin & Hodges, 2003). Such analyses involve an examination of the linkages between the characteristics of individual students and the social networks in which they are embedded (see Rodkin & Hanish, 2007). In particular, there is a need to focus on how individual and peer group factors come together to contribute to bullying at the beginning of the 1st year of middle school (Farmer, Lane, Lee, Hamm, & Lambert, 2012; Swearer & Cary, 2007). With social network procedures, it is possible to examine individual patterns of behavior in relation to peer group membership trajectories (Estell et al., 2007). Research along these lines can help identify ecological factors that contribute to or protect against bullying and can be used to promote the establishment of intervention programs that leverage knowledge about school social dynamics to reduce peer victimization (Pepler, 2006; Swearer et al., 2004). Accordingly, the goal of the current study is to examine patterns of bullying involvement in youth immediately prior to and after the transition to middle school in relation to peer group membership patterns and students' level of externalizing and internalizing behavior problems.

Background

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on patterns of stability and change in bullying involvement across childhood and adolescence. Work along these lines has identified distinct trajectories of stable, desisting, emerging, and noninvolved youth (Hanish & Guerra, 2004; Pepler, Jiang, Craig, & Connolly, 2008; Schäfer, Korn, Brodbeck, Wolke, & Schulz, 2005). Stable bullies tend to have the highest levels of aggressive and externalizing behavior problems and corresponding peer relation difficulties (i.e., being disliked by peers), desisting bullies appear to experience a recovery of positive behavioral adjustment and peer relationships as they transition to middle school, and emerging bullies tend to have increasing levels of behavior problems and peer acceptance problems. Stable victims also demonstrate social difficulties across childhood and adolescence, while desisting victims demonstrate improving social relations in adolescence, and emerging victims experience increased social problems in adolescence.

Why do some children have sustained or emerging patterns of involvement in bullying as they transition to the middle school context while other children desist during early adolescence? Pepler and colleagues posit a developmental contextual framework to explain continuity and change in bullying and victimization (Pepler et al., 2008). From this perspective, children's developmental tasks and activities are influenced by changing social roles and relational dynamics within the social context. Across childhood and adolescence, youth develop distinct patterns of social behavior that are synchronized with the behavior patterns of close peers and associates (Gest, Farmer, Cairns, & Xie, 2003). Thus, continuity in behavior tends to reflect continuity in peer associations (Cairns & Cairns, 1994).

Consistent with a developmental contextual perspective, children's social roles and peer networks become reorganized during the transition to middle school as youth from different schools are funneled together into a new environment (Juvonen, 2007). In the first few months of middle school, children jockey for social position with boys using increased levels of physical aggression and girls using increased levels of social aggression to establish and promote their positions in the emerging social structure (Merten, 1997; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). During this time, all children are socially vulnerable and may experience significant changes in their social roles and peer relations.

In some ways, such changes are natural. As children mature during early adolescence, they develop new interests, abilities, and characteristics that may not be consistent with their past relationships and social roles. On this score, it is reasonable to expect that many children will give up some of their old friendships and develop new ones. Children who have been socially dominant in elementary school may establish peer affiliations with peers who are similar to them and who use bullying strategies to ensure their power within the middle school social structure (Farmer & Xie, 2007). In contrast, children who have been socially marginalized in elementary school may be viewed by peers as social liabilities and may be relegated to affiliations with other peers who have histories of being victimized (Evans & Eder, 1993). Consequently, it is reasonable to expect that stability in bullying and victimization status across the transition to middle school would be associated with stability in corresponding peer affiliations. Likewise, it is equally reasonable to expect that changes in bullying and victimization status would be more likely to be linked to corresponding changes in peer affiliations.

The Current Study

Building from a developmental contextual framework, the purpose of the current study was to examine the relationship between students' individual behavioral characteristics in fifth grade (i.e., externalizing behavior problems; internalizing behavior problems), their involvement in bullying and victimization from elementary to middle school, and their affiliations with bullies and victims across this transition. To do this, it was necessary to identify individual and peer group trajectories of bullying and victimization from the fifth to sixth grades. For bullying and victimization, four

types of individual trajectories were possible: stable involved (i.e., bully to bully, victim to victim), emerging (i.e., nonbully to bully, nonvictim to victim), desisting (i.e., bully to nonbully, victim to nonvictim), and stable, not involved (nonbully to nonbully, nonvictim to nonvictim). Likewise, for bullying and victimization, four types of peer group trajectories were possible: stable involved (i.e., bully to bully group, victim to victim group), emerging (i.e., nonbully to bully, nonvictim to victim), desisting (i.e., bully to nonbully group, victim to nonvictim group), and stable, not involved (i.e., nonbully group to nonbully group, nonvictim group to nonvictim group).

This study was guided by four research aims. The first aim was to investigate how externalizing and internalizing behaviors in fifth grade are related to individual bullying and victimization trajectories during the transition from elementary to middle school. Are externalizing and internalizing behavior problems linked to patterns of involvement in bullying and victimization across the transition? The second aim was to explore how externalizing and internalizing behaviors in fifth grade are related to group bullying and victimization trajectories across the transition to middle school. Are externalizing and internalizing behaviors in fifth grade linked to patterns of associations with bullies and victims during the transition? The third aim was to examine how continuity and change in individual bullying and victimization status is related to group affiliations. Do patterns of individual involvement in bullying and victimization correspond to continuity and change in peer affiliations? The fourth aim was to clarify the collective roles of externalizing and internalizing behaviors and peer group trajectories in the prediction of individual bullying and victimization trajectories. How do individual behavioral characteristics (i.e., externalizing and internalizing problems) and peer group affiliations come together to contribute to patterns of involvement in bullying and victimization?

Method

A multimethod survey design was used that included teacher- and peer-report measures. Peer reports were used to identify peer groups and to measure peer-assessed externalizing and internalizing behavior, bullying, and victimization. Teacher reports were also used to obtain information about externalizing and internalizing behavior, bullying, and victimization. Peer and teacher reports were used to examine involvement in bullying and victimization and to classify participants' peer associates.

Participants

This study was part of two broader investigations focusing on children's social relation in early adolescence. Participants were recruited from fifth-grade classrooms of 25 elementary rural and suburban schools from three southern states with participation rates of more than 60% per school. From these schools, a sample of 533 students (223 boys, 310 girls) was followed to nine middle schools that had complete data for the fifth and sixth grades. The sample was 72% European American, 25% African American, and 3% Other.

Procedures

Survey data were collected using group administration procedures that have been used in two decades of research on classroom peer relations. Before the administration of the survey, participants were assured their answers would be kept confidential, were asked to protect the confidentiality of their responses, and were told that they could stop participating at any time. During the survey, one administrator read the instructions and questions aloud, while additional administrators provided mobile monitoring and assistance as needed. Teachers also completed rating forms on each participant during the group administration.

Measures

Social cognitive maps (SCM). For this measure, participants were asked, "Are there some kids in your school who hang around together a lot? Who are they?" Participants were instructed to list, from free recall, as many groups as they could think of in their fifth-grade class and in the entire sixth grade the following fall (Cairns & Cairns, 1994).

To identify distinct groups within the social network, the SCM data were analyzed by identifying recall, co-occurrence, and correlational matrices that collectively identify youth who affiliate together in the same peer group (Cairns & Cairns, 1994). SCM procedures have been used extensively in research on school social networks (e.g., Estell et al., 2007; Xie, Cairns, & Cairns, 1999). Three-week test–retest reliability coefficients indicate high short-term stability of children's peer groups (i.e., 90% of groups maintain a majority of their members over this period) and the results of SCM analyses match observed affiliations (Gest et al., 2003).

Peer assessments. Peer interpersonal assessments were used to determine classmates' perceptions of peers' social and behavioral characteristics. Students were asked to nominate, from free recall, up to three peers who best fit descriptors for several items. They were told during the testing procedures that they could nominate the same person for more than one item, they did not need to fill all three blanks if they did not know three people who fit an item, and they could skip an item if they felt that they did not know anyone at all who fit that particular item. A factor analysis of items (with "bully" and "picked on" being excluded and retained

as indicators of bullying and victimization) yielded a four-factor solution, and the following two factors were used in the current study: externalizing behavior (Cronbach's α = .87; consists of "disruptive," "starts fights," "gets in trouble," and "starts rumors") and internalizing (α = .64; consists of "acts shy" and "sad").

Past studies using these measures have indicated 3-week test–retest reliability with individual items ranged from .72 to .93. These items are identical with or similar to peer assessments used by other investigators (e.g., Cantrell & Prinz, 1985; Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982), and have proven reliability and validity in diverse samples. The total number of nominations participants received for each peer assessment item was divided by the total number of possible nominators (i.e., all participants in the class or grade). Because the denominator was the total number of participants in each class or grade, the resulting proportions were small. To make mean differences clearer, these proportions were linearly transformed by multiplying them by 1,000.

Interpersonal Competence Scale–Teacher (ICS-T). For each participant, teachers completed the ICS-T (Cairns, Leung, Gest, & Cairns, 1995). In elementary school, the ICS-T was completed by students' primary classroom teacher. In sixth grade, the ICS-T was completed by students' first period teacher. Typically, this was a teacher who had the student for one or more complete instructional periods in the day and who knew the student well. When a teacher indicated that he or she did not know a student well, an alternative teacher was identified who did know the student and who felt comfortable completing the rating scale. The ICS-T is an 18-item instrument that asks teachers to rate participating students on a variety of characteristics. The items are displayed in Likert-type, 7-point scales. These 18 items load onto six subscales, though for the present study, only the externalizing or aggression factor ("always argues," "gets in trouble," and "always fights"; α = .83) and internalizing factor (composed of "always sad," "always worry," and "very shy"; α = .52) were examined.

Teacher assessments of social adaptation. Teachers rated participants on a number of items relating to social adaptation. These items are displayed in Likert-type 7-point formats. The present study utilized two of these items: "bullied by peers" and "bullies peers." Three-month test–retest reliability for these items range from .60 to .70.

Data Reduction Procedures

Individual bullying/victimization subtypes and trajectories. A combination of peer and teacher assessments were used to determine bullying involvement subtypes. Peer nominations for *bully* and *picked on* and teacher ratings for *bullies peers* and *bullied by peers* were standardized by gender. Teacher ratings were then standardized by class (fifth grade) or grade (sixth grade). Participants who had a *z* score greater than +.50 on either *bully* or *bullies peers* were classified as a bully. Participants who had a *z* score greater than +.50 on either *picked on* or *bullied by peers* were classified as a victim. The .50 cutoff was used to be consistent with other studies that have used this cutoff to identify bullies, victims, and bully–victims (e.g., Estell et al., 2007; Schwartz, 2000). These procedures were repeated to identify bullies and victims in the spring of fifth grade and fall of sixth grade. Individual bullying and victimization trajectories were determined by identifying the following: *stable bully* or *victim, desisting bully* or *victim, emerging bully* or *victim*, and *stable nonbully* or *nonvictim*.

Peer group types and trajectories. Based on procedures that use teacher assessment or peer-nomination data to characterize peer groups (e.g., Farmer, Estell, Bishop, O'Neal, & Cairns, 2003), a combination of SCM, peer-nomination, and teacher assessment data was used to identify peer groups that were composed predominantly of peers who were rated high by others (i.e., teachers or peers) on a specific characteristic of interest (e.g., bully, victim). These procedures involved determining the proportion of group members who were high on the characteristic of interest relative to classmates. Participants were classified as high if their within-gender *z* score was greater than +.50 on the characteristic of interest.

For bullying and victimization, two group types were identified: (a) *few associates*, half or fewer of the group members were high on the characteristic of interest (i.e., bullying or victimization), and (b) *many associates*, the majority of group members were high on the characteristic of interest (i.e., bullying or victimization). Students who were not identified as part of a peer group from the SCM procedure were classified as isolates and were considered to have few bully–victim associates. These procedures were repeated to identify bully and victim peer group types in the spring of fifth grade and fall of sixth grade. Peer group bullying and victimization trajectories were then determined by identifying the following: *bully to bully* or *victim to victim, bully to nonbully* or *victim to nonvictim, nonbully to bully* or *nonvictim to victim*, and *nonbully to nonbully* or *nonvictim to nonvictim* peer group trajectories.

Results

Results are presented in four major sections. The "Individual Trajectories and Externalizing/Internalizing Behaviors in Fifth Grade" section examines differences in externalizing and internalizing behaviors in fifth grade among individual bullying and victimizing trajectories. In the "Peer Group Trajectories and Externalizing/Internalizing Behaviors in Fifth Grade" section, the same comparisons were done on

Table 1. Externalizing and Internalizing Behavior in Fifth Grade by Individual Bullying Trajectories.

Measure	Individual bullying trajectory				*F*
	Stable bully	Desisting bully	Emerging bully	Stable nonbully	
Teacher-rated externalizing	0.93[c] (1.06)	0.71[c] (1.01)	0.25[b] (0.98)	−0.19[a] (0.90)	33.66***
Peer-nominated externalizing	1.31[d] (1.21)	0.86[c] (1.55)	0.17[b] (1.03)	−0.21[a] (0.67)	61.20***
Teacher-rated internalizing	−0.46[a] (0.69)	−0.29[a] (0.85)	−0.09[a,b] (0.94)	0.07[b] (0.97)	6.18***
Peer-nominated internalizing	−0.43[a] (0.24)	−0.28[a] (0.65)	−0.08[a,b] (0.89)	0.10[b] (1.09)	6.37***

Note. Standard deviations are enclosed in parentheses. Means in the same row that do not share superscripts differ significantly in Tukey's post hoc tests. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 2. Externalizing and Internalizing Behavior in Fifth Grade by Individual Victimization Trajectories.

Measure	Individual victimization trajectory				*F*
	Stable victim	Desisting victim	Emerging victim	Stable nonvictim	
Teacher-rated externalizing	−0.33[a] (0.65)	−0.17[a,b] (0.75)	0.04[a,b] (0.97)	0.10[b] (1.08)	3.73*
Peer-nominated externalizing	−0.24[a,b] (0.59)	−0.29[a] (0.48)	0.09[a,b] (0.90)	0.13[b] (1.12)	5.90**
Teacher-rated internalizing	0.42[b] (1.06)	0.28[b] (0.86)	0.08[a,b] (1.02)	−0.15[a] (0.92)	9.14***
Peer-nominated internalizing	0.85[c] (1.44)	0.26[b] (1.31)	−0.07[a,b] (0.79)	−0.12[a] (0.85)	11.37***

Note. Standard deviations are enclosed in parentheses. Means in the same row that do not share superscripts differ significantly in Tukey's post hoc tests. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

peer group bullying and victimizing trajectories. The "Changes and Continuity in Bullying and Victimization Status and Peer Associations" section explores whether changes and continuity in individual bullying and victim status from fifth to sixth grades related to corresponding changes or continuity in the types of peers (i.e., bullies, victims) that youth associate with. The "Predicting Individual Trajectories From Behaviors and Peer Group Trajectories" section examines the prediction of the individual bullying and victimization trajectories from externalizing *and* internalizing behaviors and peer group trajectories.

Individual Trajectories and Externalizing/ Internalizing Behaviors in Fifth Grade

The four individual bullying trajectories were compared to see whether there were differences in externalizing and internalizing behaviors in fifth grade. Significant differences were found in teacher and peer measures (see Table 1). Stable and desisting bullies had higher mean *z* scores in teacher-rated externalizing behavior than the other two bullying trajectories. Emerging bullies had higher teacher-rated externalizing behavior than stable nonbullies. Similar results were found in peer nominations of externalizing behavior, except that this time, stable bullies had a significantly higher mean *z* scores than desisting bullies. Stable and desisting bullies were viewed as less internalizing than nonbullies by teachers and peers.

The four individual victimization trajectories were also compared on externalizing and internalizing behaviors in fifth grade. Again, significant differences were found in teacher and peer measures (see Table 2). Stable victims were significantly lower than stable nonvictims in teacher-rated externalizing behavior, while desisting victims were significantly lower than stable nonvictims in peer-nominated externalizing behavior. Stable and desisting victims were more internalizing than stable nonvictims in the view of teachers and peers. Peers also nominated stable victims more for internalizing than desisting victims.

Peer Group Trajectories and Externalizing/ Internalizing Behaviors in Fifth Grade

Relationships between peer group bullying/victimization trajectories and externalizing/internalizing behaviors in fifth grade were examined. Significant differences in externalizing behaviors were found among peer group bullying trajectories (see Table 3). Participants in bully to nonbully groups were seen by teachers and peers as more externalizing than participants in nonbully to nonbully groups. Significant differences in internalizing behaviors were found among peer group victimization trajectories (see Table 4). Participants in victim-to-victim groups were viewed as more internalizing than participants in nonvictim to nonvictim groups by teachers and peers. Participants in victim to nonvictim groups were viewed as less

Table 3. Externalizing and Internalizing Behavior in Fifth Grade by Peer Group Bullying Trajectories.

	Peer group bullying trajectory				
Measure	Bully to bully	Bully to nonbully	Nonbully to bully	Nonbully to nonbully	*F*
Teacher-rated externalizing	$0.59^{a,b}$ (1.41)	0.42^{b} (1.04)	$0.21^{a,b}$ (1.01)	-0.11^{a} (0.95)	9.18***
Peer-nominated externalizing	$0.60^{a,b}$ (1.75)	0.52^{b} (1.45)	$0.19^{a,b}$ (0.86)	-0.05^{a} (1.00)	8.28***
Teacher-rated internalizing	−0.02 (0.89)	−0.01 (0.97)	−0.29 (0.83)	0.03 (0.98)	1.66
Peer-nominated internalizing	−0.11 (0.98)	−0.01 (1.01)	−0.23 (0.54)	0.00 (0.99)	0.92

Note. Standard deviations are enclosed in parentheses. Means in the same row that do not share superscripts differ significantly in Tukey's post hoc tests. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 4. Externalizing and Internalizing Behavior in Fifth Grade by Peer Group Victimization Trajectories.

	Peer group victimization trajectory				
Measure	Victim to victim	Victim to nonvictim	Nonvictim to victim	Nonvictim to nonvictim	*F*
Teacher-rated externalizing	−0.33 (0.55)	0.02 (0.97)	−0.06 (0.95)	0.00 (1.01)	0.91
Peer-nominated externalizing	−0.24 (0.66)	−0.03 (0.93)	−0.10 (0.65)	0.09 (1.15)	1.07
Teacher-rated internalizing	0.67^{b} (0.95)	$0.19^{a,b}$ (1.03)	$-0.02^{a,b}$ (0.90)	-0.04^{a} (0.95)	3.42*
Peer-nominated internalizing	1.26^{c} (2.05)	0.21^{b} (1.11)	$-0.05^{a,b}$ (0.89)	-0.09^{a} (0.87)	11.31***

Note. Standard deviations are enclosed in parentheses. Means in the same row that do not share superscripts differ significantly in Tukey's post hoc tests. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 5. Individual Bullying Trajectory Versus Peer Group Bullying Trajectory.

	Peer group bullying trajectory			
Individual bullying trajectory	Bully to bully	Bully to nonbully	Nonbully to bully	Nonbully to nonbully
Stable bully (*n* = 35)				
n	5+	7+	8+	15
%	14.3	20.0	22.9	42.9
Desisting bully (*n* = 65)				
n	3	31+	2	29−
%	4.6	47.7	5.7	49.8
Emerging bully (*n* = 47)				
n	2	5	20+	20-
%	4.3	10.6	42.6	42.6
Stable nonbully (*n* = 386)				
n	1−	24−	17-	344+
%	0.3	6.2	4.4	89.1
Total *n* (%)	11 (2.1)	67 (12.6)	47 (8.8)	408 (76.5)

Note. The overall relationship was $\chi^2(9, N = 533) = 220.78$, $p < .001$. +/− indicates significantly more/fewer than expected by chance in single-cell contingency analysis ($p < .05$).

internalizing than participants in victim-to-victim groups but more internalizing than participants in nonvictim to nonvictim groups by peers.

Changes and Continuity in Bullying and Victimization Status and Peer Associations

Cross-tabulations and Fisher's exact *t* test were used to examine the relationship between individual and peer group trajectories. As is apparent in Table 5, there was a significant overall relationship between individual bullying trajectory and peer group bullying trajectory. Stable bullies were more often in bully-to-bully and nonbully to bully peer group trajectories and less often in nonbully to nonbully peer group trajectories than expected by chance. Desisting bullies were more often in bully to nonbully and less often in nonbully to nonbully peer group trajectories than expected by chance. Emerging bullies were more often in

Table 6. Individual Victimization Trajectory Versus Peer Group Type Trajectory.

	Peer group victimization trajectory			
Individual victimization trajectory	Victim to victim	Victim to nonvictim	Nonvictim to victim	Nonvictim to nonvictim
Stable victim (*n* = 36)				
n	6+	9+	8+	13−
%	16.7	25.0	22.2	36.1
Desisting victim (*n* = 66)				
n	3	31+	2	30−
%	4.5	47.0	3.0	45.5
Emerging victim (*n* = 65)				
n	2	0−	20+	43−
%	3.1	0.00	30.8	66.2
Stable nonvictim (*n* = 366)				
n	2−	31−	14−	319+
%	0.5	8.5	3.8	87.2
Total *n* (%)	13 (2.4)	71 (13.3)	44 (8.3)	405 (76.0)

Note. The overall relationship was $\chi^2(9, N = 533) = 193.24$, $p < .001$. +/− indicates significantly more/fewer than expected by chance in single-cell contingency analysis ($p < .05$).

nonbully to bully and less often in nonbully to nonbully peer group trajectories than expected by chance. Stable nonbullies were more often in nonbully to nonbully peer group trajectory and less often in all other peer group trajectories than expected by chance.

As shown in Table 6, there was also a significant overall relationship between individual victimization trajectory and peer group victimization trajectory and several cells drove this relationship as well. Stable victims were less often in nonvictim to nonvictim peer group trajectory and more often in all other peer group trajectories than was expected by chance. Desisting victims were more often in victim to nonvictim and less often in nonvictim to nonvictim peer group trajectory than expected by chance. Emerging victims were more often in nonvictim to victim peer trajectory and less often in victim to nonvictim and nonvictim to nonvictim trajectories than expected by chance. Finally, stable nonvictims were more often in nonvictim to nonvictim peer group trajectory and less often in all **other** peer trajectories than expected by chance.

Predicting Individual Trajectories From Behaviors and Peer Group Trajectories

The final set of analyses examined whether individual bullying and victimization trajectories were uniquely predicted by fifth-grade externalizing and internalizing behaviors and peer group bullying or victimization trajectories. Block logistic regression analyses were used. Gender (1 = *male*, 0 = *female*) was entered in the first block, measures of fifth-grade externalizing and internalizing behavior were entered in the second block, and peer group bullying or victimization trajectories were entered in the final block. Semiparametric and other models to estimate developmental trajectories (e.g., latent growth curve modeling, hierarchical linear modeling) could not be used in the current study because these models require data on at least three time points (Andruff, Carraro, Thompson, Gaudreau, & Louvet, 2009; Nagin, 2005). Furthermore, because the current study involves single indicators for most constructs, analyzing the data from a structural equation approach would involve a path analysis. Consequently, the path coefficients would replicate regression coefficients. Thus, logistic regression analyses were used.

For the analyses on the individual bullying trajectories, the dependent variables were dummy-coded variables representing the individual bullying trajectories. Participants identified as being in the particular individual bullying trajectory represented by each variable had a value of 1 on that variable. Only those who were in the stable nonbully trajectory had a value of 0. Thus, the stable nonbully trajectory is the reference group throughout these analyses. For example, the dependent variable "stable bully" is comparing participants in the individual stable bullying trajectory with those in the individual stable nonbully trajectory.

In addition, teacher-rated measures of externalizing and internalizing behavior were used as predictors. The peer group bullying trajectories were also captured by a set of dummy-coded variables in these analyses. Students in the nonbully to nonbully peer group trajectory were the reference group and had a value of 0 across all three of these dummy-coded variables. Analyses were then repeated with the peer-nominated externalizing and internalizing measures entered in the second block rather than the corresponding teacher-rated measures.

Table 7. Goodness-of-Fit Indices in Logistic Regression Model-Building Process for Individual Bullying Trajectories.

	Individual bullying trajectory								
	Stable bully			Desisting bully			Emerging bully		
	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3
Teacher-rated externalizing and internalizing behaviors									
Block $\chi^2(df)$	4.08*(1)	39.98***(2)	30.55***(3)	0.68 (1)	45.39***(2)	58.96***(3)	0.88 (1)	8.69*(2)	52.34***(3)
Model $\chi^2(df)$	4.08*(1)	44.06***(3)	74.61***(6)	0.68 (1)	46.07***(3)	105.03***(6)	0.88 (1)	9.57*(3)	61.91***(6)
Peer-nominated externalizing and internalizing behaviors									
Block $\chi^2(df)$	4.77*(1)	73.15***(2)	12.86**(2)	0.64 (1)	64.13***(2)	66.03***(3)	0.96 (1)	6.07*(2)	60.11***(3)
Model $\chi^2(df)$	4.77*(1)	77.92***(3)	90.78***(5)	0.64 (1)	64.78***(3)	130.81***(6)	0.96 (1)	7.04 (3)	67.15***(6)

Note. Gender was entered in Block 1. Teacher-rated or peer-nominated measures of externalizing and internalizing behavior were entered in Block 2. Dummy variables representing peer group bullying trajectories were entered in Block 3.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

As is shown in Table 7, results consistently indicated that the addition of peer group bullying trajectories in the third block created a better-fitting model. Specifically, significant block chi-square values demonstrated that the addition of the third block significantly improved model fit over the model with the variables included in the first and second blocks. In addition, significant Model chi-square values demonstrated that the model was a better fit than the null model with only the constant. Several noteworthy results are evident in Table 8. First, teacher-rated and peer-nominated externalizing and internalizing behaviors were consistently predictive of the stable and desisting bullying trajectories. However, these were not as predictive of the emerging bully trajectory. Second, and perhaps more important, the peer group trajectories were consistently predictive of individual bullying trajectories, net of externalizing and internalizing behavior. Furthermore, the peer group bullying trajectories were related to the emerging bully trajectory while the measures of externalizing and internalizing behavior were not. These results suggest that changes and stability in peer relations are related to individual bullying trajectories and that peer relations may be particularly pertinent to the emergence of bullying.

Finally, results indicate that there may be multiple levels of associated change and stability. For example, the bully-to-bully peer group trajectory is the most predictive variable of the individual stable bullying trajectory (i.e., stability). Likewise, the bully to nonbully peer group trajectory is strongly related to the corresponding individual desisting bullying trajectory while the nonbully to bully peer group trajectory predicted the corresponding emerging bully individual trajectory. Nonetheless, the bully-to-bully peer group trajectory is also the most predictive variable of the individual desisting bullying trajectory indicating there can be individual level change in the face of peer group stability. In addition, the bully-to-bully peer group trajectory is also most predictive of the emerging bully individual trajectory again suggesting peer relations may be critical to the development of bullying behavior.

Similar analyses and variable coding schemes were used for the analyses on the individual victimization trajectories. Specifically, the dependent variables were dummy-coded variables representing the individual victimization trajectories. Participants identified as being in the particular individual victimization trajectory represented by each variable had a value of 1 on that variable. Those in the stable nonvictim trajectory had a value of 0 across these variables and were the reference group throughout these analyses. The teacher-rated measures of externalizing and internalizing behavior were used as predictors. The peer group victimization trajectories were again captured by a set of dummy-coded variables. Students in a specific victimization trajectory had a value of 1 on the victim-to-victim, victim to nonvictim, or nonvictim to victim peer group trajectory variables if they were in that peer group trajectory. Students in the nonvictim to nonvictim peer group trajectory were the reference group and had a value of 0 across these variables. Analyses were then repeated with the peer-nominated externalizing and internalizing measures entered in the second block.

As shown in Table 9, results indicated that the addition of peer group victimization trajectories in the third block created a better-fitting model. That is, the significant block chi-square values demonstrated that the addition of the third block significantly improved model fit over the model with the variables included in the first and second blocks. The results in Table 10 revealed that externalizing and internalizing behavior are more consistently predictive of stable and desisting victim individual trajectories but not the emerging victim trajectory. The peer group trajectories also predicted individual victimization trajectories beyond externalizing and internalizing behaviors. The victim-to-victim peer group trajectory was often the strongest predictor of the individual victimization trajectories. Results suggest that peer stability is related to individual stability in

Table 8. Final Blockwise Models Predicting Individual Bullying Trajectory.

	Individual bullying trajectory								
	Stable bully			Desisting bully			Emerging bully		
Independent variables	β	*SE*	Exp (*B*)	β	*SE*	Exp (*B*)	β	*SE*	Exp (*B*)
Constant	−2.77**	0.81	0.62	−2.12***	0.60	0.12	−2.74***	0.67	0.07
Gender (male)	0.60	0.46	1.82	−0.38	0.36	0.69	0.18	0.37	1.20
Teacher-rated behavior									
Externalizing	0.55***	0.13	1.73	0.55***	0.11	1.74	0.18	0.12	1.20
Internalizing	−0.71**	0.24	0.49	−0.56**	0.17	0.57	−0.19	0.18	0.83
Peer group trajectory									
Bully to bully	5.51***	1.33	246.08	3.64**	1.40	38.06	3.12*	1.47	22.62
Bully to nonbully	1.46*	0.59	4.32	2.77***	0.39	15.88	1.19*	0.56	3.29
Nonbully to bully	1.61**	0.61	4.98	−0.25	0.84	0.77	2.94***	0.42	18.83
Constant	−4.22***	0.54	0.02	−2.83***	0.30	0.06	−3.09***	0.33	0.05
Gender	0.57	0.49	1.77	−0.51	0.36	0.60	0.13	0.36	1.14
Peer-nominated behavior									
Externalizing	0.02***	0.002	1.02	0.01***	0.002	1.01	0.005*	0.002	1.01
Internalizing	−0.03†	0.02	0.97	−0.01*	0.004	0.99	−0.002	0.003	1.00
Peer group trajectory									
Bully to bully	—	—	—	4.13**	1.51	62.45	3.82**	1.27	45.79
Bully to nonbully	1.79**	0.65	6.00	2.85***	0.38	17.35	1.23*	0.55	3.42
Nonbully to bully	1.78**	0.61	5.95	−0.23	0.85	0.80	3.00***	0.41	20.11

Note. Dependent variables are dummy coded and reference group is stable nonbully individual trajectory. Peer group trajectory variables are dummy coded and reference group is nonbully to nonbully peer group bullying trajectory. Cells with missing values are variables deleted from analyses because of large parameter estimates or standard errors.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 9. Goodness-of-Fit Indices in Logistic Regression Model-Building Process for Individual Victimization Trajectories.

	Individual victimization trajectory								
	Stable victim			Desisting victim			Emerging victim		
	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3
Teacher-rated externalizing and internalizing behaviors									
Block $\chi^2(df)$	9.83**(1)	20.00***(2)	45.79***(3)	0.01 (1)	15.64***(2)	65.80***(3)	3.25 (1)	2.26 (2)	34.40***(2)
Model $\chi^2(df)$	9.83**(1)	29.84***(3)	75.63***(6)	0.01 (1)	15.65**(3)	81.45***(6)	3.25 (1)	5.51 (3)	39.90***(5)
Peer-nominated externalizing and internalizing behaviors									
Block $\chi^2(df)$	8.80**(1)	31.44***(2)	38.01***(3)	0.002 (1)	24.57***(2)	57.26***(3)	4.34*(1)	1.40 (2)	37.58***(2)
Model $\chi^2(df)$	8.80**(1)	40.24***(3)	78.25***(6)	0.002 (1)	24.58***(3)	81.84***(6)	4.34*(1)	5.74 (3)	43.33***(5)

Note. Gender was entered in Block 1. Teacher-rated or peer-nominated measures of externalizing and internalizing behavior were entered in Block 2. Dummy variables representing peer group bullying trajectories were entered in Block 3.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

victimization but that individuals may change despite sustained membership in a stable victim peer group. Specifically, the peer group victim-to-victim trajectory was uniquely related to the desisting victim individual trajectory. Conversely, results also suggest that despite changes in the peer group, some individuals may continue to be victims. This is, for example, apparent in the strong association between the victim to nonvictim peer group trajectory and the stable victim individual trajectory. Results also indicate that peer relations across the middle school transition may be particularly important to the emergence of victimization as the victim to victim and nonvictim to victim peer group trajectories were the only significant predictors of the emerging victim individual trajectory.

Discussion

The current findings support and extend other research by demonstrating that continuity and change in bullying and victimization reflect individual behavioral characteristics

Table 10. Final Blockwise Models Predicting Individual Victimization Trajectory.

	Individual victimization trajectory								
	Stable victim			Desisting victim			Emerging victim		
Independent variables	β	*SE*	Exp (*B*)	β	*SE*	Exp (*B*)	β	*SE*	Exp (*B*)
Constant	−5.36***	0.98	0.005	−3.52***	0.66	0.30	−2.69***	0.55	0.07
Gender (male)	1.73**	0.51	5.63	0.43	0.35	1.54	0.45	0.31	1.57
Teacher-rated behavior									
Externalizing	−0.45*	0.18	0.64	−0.28*	0.12	0.76	−0.04	0.09	0.96
Internalizing	0.63**	0.22	1.87	0.48**	0.16	1.61	0.20	0.14	1.22
Peer group trajectory									
Victim to victim	5.23***	1.30	186.05	3.29**	1.23	26.88	2.60*	1.25	13.45
Victim to nonvictim	2.33***	0.58	10.32	2.68***	0.35	14.59	—	—	—
Nonvictim to victim	2.76***	0.63	15.77	0.50	0.80	1.65	2.26***	0.40	9.62
Constant	−4.21***	0.48	0.02	−2.37***	0.27	0.09	−2.34***	0.25	0.10
Gender	1.64**	0.47	5.14	0.39	0.33	1.48	0.52	0.30	1.68
Peer-nominated behavior									
Externalizing	−0.006	0.004	0.99	−0.009**	0.003	0.99	<.001	.001	1.00
Internalizing	0.01***	0.003	1.01	0.005*	0.002	1.01	.003	.002	1.00
Peer group trajectory									
Victim to victim	3.89***	0.99	49.09	2.32*	1.01	10.12	1.98	1.03	7.22
Victim to nonvictim	2.03***	0.52	7.59	2.47***	0.34	11.81	—	—	—
Nonvictim to victim	2.42***	0.57	11.26	0.34	0.79	1.41	2.32***	0.39	10.21

Note. Dependent variables are dummy coded and reference group is stable nonvictim individual trajectory. Peer group trajectory variables are dummy coded and reference group is nonvictim to nonvictim peer group victimization trajectory. Cells with missing values are variables deleted from analyses because of large parameter estimates or standard errors.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

and peer affiliation processes. Consistent with investigations showing that stable bullies tend to have high levels of externalizing behavior problems and stable victims tend to have high levels of internalizing problems (e.g., Hanish & Guerra, 2004; Pepler et al., 2008; Schäfer et al., 2005; Swearer et al., 2004), the results of this study indicate that children who bully across the transition to middle school have high levels of peer and teacher-assessed externalizing behavior in fifth grade while children who are victimized across the transition have higher levels of peer- and teacher-assessed internalizing problems. Furthermore, the present study suggests that stability in bullying involvement is related to stability in peer group membership characteristics. Bullies who affiliated primarily with bullies across the transition to middle school were likely to remain as bullies. Likewise, children who were victimized in fifth grade and affiliated primarily with other victims across the transition were likely to maintain their status as victims.

The importance of peer group membership across the transition to middle school is perhaps most strongly demonstrated by examining the affiliation patterns of children who have desisting or emerging trajectories of bullying involvement. Youth who desisted from affiliating primarily with other bullies as they transitioned to middle school were also likely to desist in bullying involvement in the sixth grade, while youth who moved from a predominantly nonbully to bully peer group in sixth grade were likely to be identified as emerging bullies. In fact, peer group bullying trajectories predicted emerging bullying status in sixth grade while externalizing and internalizing behavior problems did not.

Continuity and change in victimization status across the transition to middle school was also related to peer group membership. Youth who moved from victim to nonvictim peer groups were likely to be in desisting or nonvictimization trajectories while youth who moved from nonvictim to victim peer groups were likely to be in emerging or stable victimization trajectories. Furthermore, the emergence of victimization status after the transition to middle school appeared to be most strongly affected by peer associations. The victim to victim and nonvictim to victim peer group trajectories were the only significant predictors of the emerging victim trajectory.

While the results of this study indicate that peer associations contribute to continuity and change in bullying involvement, it must be noted that many youth who were identified as bullies did not affiliate primarily with other bullies and many youth who were victims did not affiliate primarily with other victims. Fifty-seven percent of bullies were not members of bullying peer groups, and 65% of victims were in nonvictim peer groups in sixth grade. These findings point to an important issue that is often overlooked in the bullying research literature. Although there is strong

support for the view that youth tend to affiliate with peers who are similar to them in terms of aggression and bullying involvement (e.g., Card & Hodges, 2006; Olthof & Goossens, 2008; Xie et al., 1999), there is also evidence that some aggressive youth who are involved in bullying tend to affiliate with peers who are similar to them on characteristics other than aggression and bullying (Farmer et al., 2003). It is possible that similarity with noninvolved peers on other important social characteristics may provide avenues for new affiliations that help some youth escape from bullying or victimization.

With regard to continuity and change in bullying involvement during the transition to middle school, 21% of youth had a change in their bullying status from the fifth to sixth grades and 25% had a change in their victimization status. On a positive note, only 7% of youth were stable bullies, 9% were emerging bullies, and 12% were desisting bullies. Results were similar for victimization as 7% of youth were stable victims, 12% were emerging victims, and 12% were desisting victims. Consistent with other research on bullying involvement during the transition to middle school (i.e., Evans & Eder, 1993; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000), it is possible that there is an increase in victimization during the first few months as youth establish a new social structure.

Further work is needed to clarify patterns of bullying involvement from elementary to middle school and across the middle school years. In particular, while the focus here is on the role of peer affiliations and group membership, it is important to acknowledge that youth tend to select themselves into groups that reflect their characteristics, values, and beliefs. Therefore, although the current study suggests that changes in affiliation across the transition are related to changes in bullying involvement, the mechanisms of such change require additional exploration. It is likely that selection and socialization processes contribute to the social dynamics of bullying and victimization. There is a need for additional research that examines microsocial processes of the peer system before, during, and after the transition to middle school. Such work will require the combination of observational and survey measures to assess the social functions of specific students' bullying involvement behavior in relation to their placement in the peer social system (see Farmer, Lane, et al., 2012; Rose & Espelage, 2012).

Implications for Intervention

The findings of this study have several implications for the development of interventions to reduce bullying in the early adolescent years. First, there is a need to focus on risk for bullying involvement of youth with behavior problems. As the current results show, youth who have high levels of externalizing behavior are at high risk of being bullies and youth with high levels of internalizing behavior are at high risk of being victims. Interventions aimed at addressing the function of youths' problem behavior should take into consideration their bullying involvement status. It is likely that many problem behaviors of early adolescents are supported or maintained by their involvement in bullying (see also Gumpel & Sutherland, 2010; Hodges, Malone, & Perry, 1997; Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2003).

A second implication for intervention is that there is a need to focus on peer affiliations of youth being involved in bullying either as bullies or as victims. The present findings demonstrate that peer affiliations not only support stability in bullying involvement but also play an important role in desistance or emergence of bullying and victimization status. Therefore, the peer affiliations of early adolescents who have internalizing and externalizing problems but who are not involved in bullying should be carefully monitored and care should be taken to prevent their membership in peer groups that are composed predominantly of bullies or victims. For youth who are identified as bullies or victims, efforts should be made to help them develop associations with peers who do not support bullying or victimization. Strategies to do this include careful management of classroom seating arrangements and instructional grouping practices, supported involvement in extracurricular activities, group-level contingencies that foster collaborative engagement, and informal adult-mentoring strategies. In addition, general classroom behavior management strategies should take into consideration social dynamics and peer interactional patterns that support bullying and victimization (see Farmer et al., 2006). Classwide contingencies should be established that promote productive social roles and inhibit social aggression and physically dominant behavior patterns. Likewise, students who are involved in bullying should be taught alternative behaviors and efforts should be made to support new behaviors with positive social consequences and corresponding roles and affiliations (Farmer, Petrin, et al., 2012).

A third implication of this study is that the transition to middle school should be viewed as a time of developmental vulnerability and opportunity for youth with behavior problems (Eccles, 1999). Correspondingly, this is a critical intervention period in which strategies should be developed to prevent the emergence of bullying involvement in at-risk youth and to promote desistance in youth who were involved in bullying in elementary school (see also Espelage & Swearer, 2004). While several social interventions have been established to prevent chronic social and behavioral difficulties during the elementary school years, the transition to middle school is equally important to youths' adjustment and educational outcomes. The stresses of a changing social context along with the demands of puberty place all children at risk for emotional and behavioral difficulties during early adolescence (Eccles, 1999). Furthermore, the jockeying for social position that occurs during the transition to middle school (e.g., Evans & Eder, 1993; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000) may place youth with externalizing and internalizing problems at high risk for bullying involvement. There is a

need to develop bullying prevention programs that are specifically focused on supporting youth with a history of behavior problems as they transition to middle school. Such efforts should include a focus on bullying involvement and peer affiliation patterns.

A fourth implication of this study is that intervention programs need to be developed that focus specifically on social dynamics at the beginning of the transition to middle school. The findings of this short-term longitudinal study suggest that the first few months of middle school may be a critical period that affects the peer affiliation choices and opportunities of youth. In turn, continuity or change in children's involvement in bullying may be influenced by their peer group membership. In the elementary school context, classroom teachers tend to be with students throughout the day and are in a position to monitor children's peer affiliations and to help them negotiate peer relationships in ways that may reduce problematic peer affiliations. In middle school, teachers typically have contact with students for a relatively short period and have less opportunity to monitor peer group dynamics. Interventions should be developed to help promote teachers' awareness of youth's peer affiliations, particularly for students who have behavior problems or histories of involvement in bullying. By carefully monitoring and supporting the productive peer engagement of youth, teachers may be able to promote the behavioral and social adjustment of students who are at highest risk for involvement in bullying (see Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Pepler, 2006; Rodkin & Hodges, 2003).

Limitations and Future Research Needs

Although this study provides new perspectives on bullying involvement across the transition to middle school, two limitations must be considered. First, the current research involves only two time points. There is a need to focus on a broader time frame of bullying involvement with multiple data points across multiple grade levels in elementary and middle school. With the current design, it is not possible to distinguish between youth who are chronically involved in bullying from one year to the next from those who are involved at one time point in elementary school and middle school. While the current findings demonstrate that stability and desistance in bullying are related to peer affiliations during the transition to middle school, a more extensive analysis should help to clarify fluidity in bullying involvement within grade levels, changes across yearly transitions, and differences in the social dynamics that contribute to bullying involvement in elementary school compared with middle school.

A second limitation involves the exclusive focus on survey data to examine social dynamics. Although this research is strengthened by having peer- and teacher reports data of youths' involvement in bullying and their corresponding social and behavioral characteristics, it could be further strengthened by including observations of students' interactional patterns. Future research should include structured observations of bullying and victimization behaviors of focal youth (i.e., students identified by teachers and peers as bullies, victims, and noninvolved) and examine whom they interact with, the content of their behavior, and the response of other youth involved in the interaction. Such information could be analyzed in relation to social dynamics data (i.e., peer group membership, social roles) to further clarify the social processes that contribute to continuity and change in bullying involvement.

Conclusion

The current study highlights the need to focus on the bullying involvement of youth with behavior problems during the transition to middle school. As others have shown, youth with high levels of externalizing and internalizing problems in elementary school are at increased risk of being involved as bullies or as victims in middle school. However, whether youth desist or emerge as victims during this transition appears to be strongly dependent on whether they affiliate primarily with peers who are also involved in bullying. There is a need for the development of interventions that are aimed at addressing the bullying involvement of youth with behavior problems, and there is also a need for research that further examines the social dynamics that contribute to continuity and change in bullying involvement during the middle school years.

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