

# A Review of the Correlation between Peer Relationship and School Bullying among Boarding High School Students in Henan Province, China

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**Abstract:** With the continuous reform of China's education system, boarding schools, as an important form of centralized education, are expanding year by year in Henan Province and other populous provinces. However, the isolation of the boarding environment, the high frequency of peer interaction and the superposition of academic pressure make students' mental health and behavior patterns face unique challenges. As a global educational problem, bullying in boarding schools presents special manifestations because of the complexity of peer relationships. Based on Bronfenbrenner's social ecosystem theory and Bandura's social learning theory, this study explores the relationship between peer relationship types and bullying in Henan boarding high school students. The study found that the quality of peer relationship significantly affected the occurrence of bullying behavior, and the frequency of conflict, lack of social support and group polarization effect were the key mediating variables. Based on concrete cases and empirical data, this paper proposes multi-level intervention strategies to provide theoretical basis for mental health education and anti-bullying policy formulation in boarding schools.

**Keywords:** Peer Relationship, School Bullying, Boarding School, Social Ecosystem Theory, Social Learning Theory.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research Background

As a populous province in China, Henan Province has a prominent problem of uneven distribution of educational resources, and boarding schools have become an important means to alleviate the gap between urban and rural education. As of 2023, the proportion of boarding high school students in Henan Province is over 40% (Ministry of Education, China, 2023). The particularity of the boarding environment shows that students are separated from family guardianship for a long time, and peer interaction becomes the social core. Studies have shown that boarding students spend more than 12 hours a day with their peers (Liu & Zhang, 2022), and this high-density social environment may promote cooperation and support, but may also exacerbate conflict and exclusion.

Bullying takes diverse forms in boarding schools. According to Olweus (2006), bullying requires three elements: "intentionality, repetition and power imbalance". The anonymous forum abuse case of a boarding high school in Henan Province in 2021 is an example: a student suffered from long-term group isolation due to appearance humiliation, and eventually withdrew from school due to psychological stress (Liu et al., 2022). Such cases highlight how peer dynamics catalyze bullying.

### 1.2. Problem Statement and Research Significance

Although studies have focused on the association between peer relationships and bullying (Sabramani et al., 2021), empirical analysis of boarding schools in China is still insufficient. The unique circumstances of boarding high schools in Henan Province - such as intense academic competition, lack of family support, and closed peer groups - may reshape the mechanisms of bullying. For example, the

bullying victimization rate of left-behind children in rural boarding schools is 1.8 times higher than that of urban students (Liu & Zhang, 2022), suggesting that the lack of coordination between family and school exacerbates the risk.

Based on social ecosystem theory and social learning theory, this study aims to reveal the main types and unique characteristics of peer relationships among boarding students in Henan Province, so as to provide a clearer perspective for understanding this complex social phenomenon.

In addition, efforts were made to quantify the prevalence of different forms of bullying (including physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying) in boarding high schools in Henan Province in order to provide a more accurate picture of this social problem. Through rigorous surveys and data analysis, the researchers sought to uncover the distribution patterns of these bullying behaviors and their potential influencing factors.

More importantly, this study explores how peer relationships influence bullying behavior through group norms and conflict frequency. The researchers attempted to construct a theoretical framework to explain the dynamic interaction between peer relationships and bullying, and how these factors form a potential normative force in the student population.

Finally, the results of this study are expected to provide a scientific basis for the design of mental health curriculum in boarding schools, provide guidance for collaborative interventions between families and schools, and provide empirical support for the formulation and optimization of relevant policies. Through these efforts, we hope to create a healthier and more harmonious learning environment for students in boarding high schools in Henan Province.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Integration of Theoretical Framework

#### 2.1.1. Social Ecosystem Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

Bronfenbrenner's theory analyzes individual behavior in a nested environment system and is applicable to explain the interaction of multiple factors in boarding schools:

**Microsystem:** Peer group and class environment constitute the direct influence layer. Studies have shown that boarding students who lack family emotional support tend to regard peer recognition as the core of their self-worth (Kilanowski, 2017), thus exacerbating their blind adherence to group norms.

**Middle system:** The breakdown of home-school communication may amplify the concealment of bullying. For example, in the case of bullying in an anonymous forum at a school in Henan Province, the school did not establish an effective reporting mechanism, and parents did not notice the emotional changes of their children (Liu et al., 2022).

**Macro system:** The college competition culture in Henan Province indirectly strengthens the logic of "survival of the fittest" in peer relationships, and encourages students to compete for social dominance through bullying behaviors (Huang et al., 2024).

#### 2.1.2. Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 2018)

Bandura emphasized the role of observational learning and surrogate reinforcement in shaping behavior. In a boarding environment, students gain group identity by imitating their peers' behavior. For example, a group of fans of an idol launched abusive attacks on critics in microblog supertalk, with most of the participants being 1418 years old, whose motivation was derived from the alternative reinforcement of "safeguarding collective honor" (Wang & Chen, 2023).

### 2.2. Empirical Correlation between Peer Relationship and Bullying

Existing research reveals that peer relationships influence bullying through the following mechanisms:

(1) **Conflict frequency:** The number of peer arguments is positively correlated with bullying behavior (Sabramani et al., 2021). In rural boarding schools in Henan Province, left-behind students are more likely to have conflicts with their peers due to lack of family emotion (Liu & Zhang, 2022).

(2) **Group polarization:** In a closed environment, the exclusive norms of peer groups may be extreme. For example, in a school's anonymous Posting bar, students spread rumors to consolidate the status of small groups (Liu et al., 2022), which is consistent with the characteristics of "relationship bullying" (Cho & Lee, 2018).

(3) **Social support:** Students with stable friendships are less likely to be victims of bullying. Research shows that peer relationships with high levels of trust can reduce the risk of victimization by 30% (Faris & Ennett, 2012).

## 3. Case Analysis: Multi-dimensional Combination of Theory and Phenomenon

### 3.1. Anonymous Post Bar Bullying Incident: Absence of Home-school Coordination and Supervision Blind Area

Case background and process:

In 2021, students at a boarding high school in Henan province suffered long-term relationship bullying in an

anonymous group on Baidu Tieba. A student was maliciously nicknamed a "fat pig" because of his overweight body, and participants spread false rumors about "cheating" and "stealing" through an anonymous account, leading to the student being isolated from the class. Although the victim repeatedly asked the head teacher for help, the school did not intervene on the grounds of "lack of evidence". Parents have been working outside the home for a long time, only through telephone communication, failed to detect their children's emotional abnormalities. Eventually, the victim was forced to drop out of school due to depressive symptoms (Liu et al., 2022).

Theory and mechanism analysis:

**Social ecosystem Theory (Middle system) :** The breakdown of communication between family and school is the core factor in the worsening of events. A hybrid study by Chen et al. (2024) found that when schools do not share anti-bullying strategies with families (such as anonymous reporting channels), students are 40% less likely to report bullying. In this case, the school did not establish an effective feedback mechanism, and parents did not participate in campus safety training, resulting in the anonymous platform becoming a "regulatory vacuum".

**Social learning theory (group mimicry) :** Perpetrators evade responsibility through anonymity, and their behavior is consistent with the conclusion that individuals with low self-control tend to use technological stealth to carry out attacks (Ang & Goh, 2010). At the same time, the herd mentality in anonymous groups exacerbates the spread of bullying, and participants gain group recognition by imitating the abusive behavior of the "leader" (Wang & Chen, 2023).

Intervention inspiration:

(1) At the school level, a "dual-track" anti-bullying mechanism should be established, including real-name reporting system and anonymous psychological support hotline (Wu et al., 2023). For example, a boarding school in Zhejiang Province introduced an AI content monitoring tool to automatically identify abusive words in post bars, increasing bullying reporting rates by 25% (Zhang et al., 2021).

(2) **Family level:** For families with left-behind children, "emotional communication workshops" should be promoted to help parents identify their children's emotional signals (such as sudden silence and refusal to return to school). Research shows that at least two in-depth conversations per week can reduce bullying victimization rates by 18% (Li et al., 2019).

### 3.2. Group Exclusion Caused by Academic Competition: Cultural Pressure and Normative Alienation

Case background and process:

A key boarding high school in Henan province has implemented "stratified teaching", dividing students into A and B classes according to their grades. Class A students spontaneously formed an "elite alliance" to consolidate their position by monopolizing learning materials and spreading the "intellectual inferiority" of Class B students. A student in Class B was diagnosed with major depression after self-harming in the dormitory due to long-term rejection (Huang et al., 2024).

Theory and mechanism analysis:

Social ecosystem theory (macro system) : The competitive culture of college entrance examination in Henan Province indirectly shaped the peer relationship logic of "achievement first". An empirical study by Huang et al. (2024) shows that students in the top 10% of schools for admission pressure are 35% more likely to maintain their status by belittling others. In this case, "elite alliance" translates academic advantage into social power, which is consistent with the characteristics of "Instrumental Bullying" (Cho & Lee, 2018).

Social learning theory (vicarious reinforcement) : Teacher's public praise of Class A students (e.g., "model class") is imperceptible reinforcement

"Exclusive behavior is reasonable" cognition. Bandura (2018) pointed out that recognition by authority figures can significantly improve the imitation efficiency of group norms.

Intervention inspiration:

(1) Curriculum reform: Embedding anti-bullying education into subject teaching. For example, a middle school in Beijing designed a "cooperative problem solving" section in mathematics class and forced mixed group formation, which reduced cross-class conflicts by 42% (Chen et al., 2024).

(2) Teacher training: It is necessary to eliminate the "achievement bias" of teachers. Wu et al. (2023) found that teachers who received anti-bias training were 58% more accurate in identifying implicit bullying.

### 3.3. Cross-scenario Diffusion of Cyberbullying: Anonymity and Group Polarization

Case background and process:

In 2022, a boarding school student in Henan province posted a video of dormitory life on the Douyin platform, which caused a large-scale "bullet screen humiliation" in the comment section because a roommate's private items were accidentally seen in the background. Most of the attackers were students at the same school, and they used anonymous accounts to make comments such as "abnormal" and "disgusting", which caused the victims to change schools (Wang et al., 2021).

Theory and mechanism analysis:

Social ecosystem theory (external system) : algorithmic recommendation mechanisms of short video platforms amplify bullying. According to the empirical study of Wang et al. (2021), videos with conflicting keywords (such as "scandal" and "conflict") will be preferentially pushed to local users, which makes school bullying spread from offline to online.

Individual development theory (identity crisis) : Adolescents gain a sense of belonging by participating in group aggression. Erikson (1963) emphasized that the adolescent individual is in a position of "self-identity vs. In the stage of role confusion, it is easy to misjudge network violence as "justice execution". For example, in this case, the attacker claimed to "purify the campus environment", but in fact consolidated his moral superiority by belittling others (Zhou, 2021).

Intervention inspiration:

(1) Technical supervision: The platform needs to optimize its content review algorithm. For example, Tencent's "Guardian Program" uses AI to identify bullying barrage,

reducing the response time to reports to 2 hours (Zhang et al., 2021).

(2) Digital literacy education: Schools should offer "cyber empathy" courses. The experiment of a middle school in Zhejiang Province showed that after 8 weeks of scenario simulation training, the students' network attack behavior was reduced by 33% (Yu et al., 2020).

## 4. Conclusion and Suggestions

Through multi-dimensional analysis of theories and cases, this study reveals the complex relationship between peer relationship and bullying in Henan boarding high school students. The study found that the closed nature of the boarding environment and the intensity of peer interaction shaped the unique mechanisms of bullying: Firstly, the dynamic of peer relationship presents significant instrumental characteristics. Academic competition pressure and lack of family support together lead to an increase in the frequency of conflict, which makes bullying behavior evolve from accidental conflict to systematic exclusion (Sabramani et al., 2021). Secondly, the unique educational culture in Henan Province, such as the resource allocation led by the college entrance examination and the high proportion of left-behind children, makes bullying present a double tendency of "hidden intensification" and "group polarization" (Liu & Zhang, 2022). For example, in the incident of anonymous Posting bar, the perpetrators used technology concealment to avoid responsibility (Ang & Goh, 2010); Finally, the double-edged sword effect of technology empowerment is prominent. Although the algorithm recommendation of short video platforms accelerates the spread of bullying (Wang et al., 2021), AI monitoring tools can also be transformed into efficient intervention means (Zhang et al., 2021).

Based on the above conclusions, it is necessary to construct a three-level linkage system intervention framework of "micro-meso-macro". At the micro level, the positive guidance of peer relationship should be strengthened, such as the implementation of the "peer mediator" system, the selection of students with high empathy to participate in conflict mediation (Faris & Ennett, 2012), and the integration of anti-bullying education into subject teaching -- a middle school in Beijing forced mixed formation through "cooperative problem solving" in math class. Reduced cross-class conflict by 42% (Chen et al., 2024). At the middle level, the home-school coordination barrier needs to be broken down. The pilot project "Hu Miao Tong" of Henan Provincial Department of Education has improved the response efficiency of parents to bullying incidents by 35% through real-time sharing of school safety reports (Chen et al., 2024). In addition, for families with left-behind children in rural areas, Regular "emotional communication workshops" can help parents identify emotional warning signs in their children (e.g. self-deprecation, social withdrawal), and studies have shown that such interventions can reduce victimization rates by 18% (Li et al., 2019). On the one hand, anti-bullying effectiveness should be incorporated into the school assessment system, and teachers' training resources should be given to those who meet the standards (Huang et al., 2024). On the other hand, ethical responsibilities of technology platforms should be strengthened, such as requiring social media to deploy "conflict vocabulary" and AI barrage filtering system. Tencent's "Guardian Program" reduces the response time to 2 hours through such technology (Zhang et al., 2021). This framework not only echoes the multi-level interactive

logic of the social ecosystem theory, but also verifies the feasibility of the closed-loop strategy of "prevention - intervention - support" through empirical data, providing a dual path of theory and practice for solving the dilemma of bullying governance in boarding schools.

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