



Perceived Parenting, Altruism and Bullying Involvement among Senior Secondary School Students in Owerri, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

School bullying is common in Nigerian secondary schools, yet little is known about how home and personal factors relate to it in the South-East of the country. This study examined whether perceived parenting and self-reported altruism predict bullying involvement among senior secondary school students in Owerri, Imo State. In a cross-sectional survey, 201 students (128 girls and 73 boys, aged 14 to 17 years, $M = 15.29$, $SD = 1.22$) from three public secondary schools completed a parental attitude index, the Self-Report Altruism Scale and a 14-item adaptation of the Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire. In a multiple regression, the two predictors together explained less than 1% of the variance in bullying involvement, $R^2 = .003$, $F(2, 198) = 0.29$, $p = .749$. Neither perceived parenting ($\beta = -.05$, $p = .512$) nor altruism ($\beta = .02$, $p = .738$) made a significant contribution. The 95% confidence intervals for the standardised effects ($-.20$ to $.10$ for parenting and $-.12$ to $.17$ for altruism) exclude moderate and large associations but not small ones, and a sensitivity analysis showed that the sample could reliably detect only effects of about $R^2 = .05$ or larger. The findings do not support the view that a general measure of parental attitudes or global altruism is a strong, direct correlate of bullying in this population. Future work in Nigerian schools should measure parenting dimensions and bullying roles separately, use larger multi-school samples, and test peer and school factors alongside family ones.

Keywords: Bullying; Perceived Parenting; Altruism; Prosocial Behaviour; Adolescents; Nigeria

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Introduction

Bullying is aggressive behaviour that is intentional, repeated and directed at a peer who finds it hard to defend themselves because of an imbalance of power (Olweus, 2013). It takes physical, verbal and relational forms, and a growing share now happens online. A meta-analysis of 80 studies put the average prevalence of involvement in traditional bullying, as perpetrator or victim, at about 35% of young people (Modecki et al., 2014). The harm is well documented. Victimization in childhood and adolescence is associated with later depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and poorer general health (Armitage, 2021; Moore et al., 2017), and adolescents who bully others are more likely than their peers to show later antisocial behaviour (Olweus, 2013).

Nigerian figures are at least as high as those reported elsewhere. In a survey of 1,192 junior secondary school students, Fenny and Falola (2020) found that 59.9% reported bullying others, and association with delinquent friends and a negative school climate were among the correlates of perpetration. In Edo State, Ighaede-Edwards et al. (2023) found that 51.9% of 621 in-school adolescents had experienced at least one form of bullying and 27.9% described themselves as bullies. Most of the bullying they recorded took place in classrooms when no teacher was present. Studies of this kind establish that the problem is widespread, but they say less about which family and personal characteristics distinguish the students involved, and the South-East of Nigeria is poorly represented among them.

Two candidate explanations have attracted particular attention. The first is parenting. Parents shape how children manage anger, how they treat people with less power, and what they expect from conflict, so it is reasonable to expect that harsh or rejecting parenting would raise the risk of bullying and that warm, consistent parenting would lower it. The second is the adolescent's own prosocial disposition. Altruism, the tendency to help others at some cost to oneself without expecting a reward (Rushton et al., 1981), is in principle hard to reconcile with deliberately harming a weaker peer. Both explanations have empirical support, but most of it comes from Europe, North America and East Asia, and the associations found are often smaller than the confident language of the literature suggests (Grama et al., 2024).

Owerri, the capital of Imo State, offers a useful setting in which to test them. It is a predominantly Igbo city in which strong norms of respect for elders and communal obligation coexist with rapid urban change. Igbo thought places the person within a web of mutual dependence, an idea captured in the philosophy of *Igwebuike*, which holds that people realise themselves through complementary relations with others (Kanu, 2022). If such values are transmitted through the family, one would expect both parenting and altruism to bear on how adolescents treat their peers. Whether they do so in practice has not been examined in this population.

The present study therefore asked whether perceived parenting and self-reported altruism, separately and together, predict bullying involvement among senior secondary school students in public schools in Owerri.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws on social learning theory and on the ecological view of bullying. Social learning theory holds that children acquire aggressive and prosocial behaviour largely by observing others and noting the consequences of what they see (Bandura, 1977). Parents are among the most frequently observed models. A parent who settles disagreements with threats or blows demonstrates that force works, while a parent who explains rules and responds to the child's feelings demonstrates negotiation and concern for others. Recent evidence from South African adolescents is consistent with this account: childhood adversity predicted bullying perpetration, partly through the influence of peers (Ugwu et al., 2024).

The ecological perspective adds that the family is only one of several settings in which bullying is learned and maintained. Bronfenbrenner (1979) placed the developing person within nested systems, from the family and the classroom to the wider culture. Applied to bullying, this view treats the behaviour as the product of interactions among individual characteristics, family relationships, peer groups, school climate and community norms (Hong & Espelage, 2012). It predicts that family influences will be present but modest once adolescents spend most of their day among peers.

Altruism enters the framework as an individual characteristic that should make aggression less rewarding. Adolescents who respond to others' distress with concern, and who see themselves as helpful people, should find it harder to justify hurting a peer (Eisenberg et al., 2015). Taken together, the two perspectives lead to the expectation that negative perceived parenting would be positively associated with bullying involvement, that altruism would be negatively associated with it, and that both associations would be small to moderate rather than large.

Literature Review

Parenting and Bullying

Typologies of parenting begin with Baumrind's (1971) distinction between authoritative, authoritarian and permissive patterns of parental authority. Maccoby and Martin (1983) later recast these patterns along two dimensions, responsiveness and demandingness, which produced a fourth, neglectful pattern. Much of the bullying literature uses these categories, but the more consistent findings concern specific dimensions such as warmth, harshness and monitoring.

Meta-analyses agree on the direction of the associations and differ on their size. Lereya et al. (2013) found that negative parenting, including abuse, neglect and maladaptive parenting, was associated with a

higher risk of becoming a victim or a bully-victim, while positive parenting was protective; most effects were small to moderate. Pinquart (2017), synthesising studies of externalising problems more generally, found that harsh control and psychological control were associated with more problems and that warmth was associated with fewer. Grama et al. (2024), drawing on 158 studies, found that authoritarian parenting, parental aversiveness and inter-parental conflict were associated with more traditional bullying victimisation, and authoritative parenting, warmth and monitoring with less; they also noted that the effect sizes were generally small. A further synthesis by Chu and Chen (2025) examined associations between parenting behaviours and traditional bullying across childhood and adolescence. Longitudinal work suggests that some of the effect runs through peers: in Cyprus, Charalampous et al. (2018) found that parental style was related to bullying and cyberbullying through the quality of adolescents' attachment to their peers.

Culture may change the meaning of particular practices. Pinquart and Kauser (2018) found that associations between parenting styles and behaviour problems were broadly similar across cultural regions but that the size of some associations varied. In Nigeria, the most specific evidence concerns harsh discipline. Ighaede-Edwards et al. (2023) reported that adolescents who were frequently beaten by their parents had about twice the odds of bullying others, a pattern that matches research elsewhere linking power-assertive and punitive discipline to bullying perpetration (Zottis et al., 2014). In Ibadan, Ezeh (2024) found that parenting styles, peer pressure, gender and religious affiliation together accounted for most of the variance in bullying ($R^2 = .69$), with authoritative parenting associated with lower levels. That figure is far higher than the meta-analytic estimates, which makes replication in other Nigerian settings worthwhile.

Altruism and Bullying

Research on prosocial dispositions and bullying has concentrated on empathy and defending rather than on altruism as such. Systematic reviews find that perpetration is associated with lower empathy, particularly affective empathy, and that defending victims is associated with higher empathy, while the evidence for victims is mixed (van Noorden et al., 2015; Zych et al., 2019). Meter and Card (2015) concluded that defending depends not only on individual dispositions such as empathy but also on the defender's relationships with the victim and the bully and on the classroom context. Adolescents who bully also tend to report more moral disengagement, the cognitive manoeuvres that excuse harm (Killer et al., 2019). This suggests that a general readiness to help may not be enough to prevent bullying if an adolescent can redefine a particular victim as deserving.

Recent work points in the same direction. In a study of 917 Chinese adolescents, Wang et al. (2024) found that prosocial strategies did not simply lower bullying but moderated the joint effects of agentic and communal social goals on it. Adolescents who used prosocial strategies showed no rise in bullying when both goals were high, whereas those who rarely used such strategies showed a steady rise. In this account, prosociality changes how social ambitions are pursued rather than acting as a direct brake on aggression. No published study that we could identify has examined altruism and bullying among Nigerian adolescents.

The Present Study

Three gaps motivate the study. First, the evidence on parenting and bullying in Nigeria is thin and uneven, and one prominent local study reports effects much larger than those found in meta-analyses. Second, altruism has rarely been examined as a predictor of bullying, and never, as far as we know, in a Nigerian sample. Third, the South-East is under-represented in Nigerian bullying research. Drawing on social learning theory, the ecological perspective and the studies reviewed above, we tested three hypotheses:

H1: More negative perceived parenting will be positively associated with bullying involvement.

H2: Altruism will be negatively associated with bullying involvement.

H3: Perceived parenting and altruism will jointly account for a significant proportion of the variance in bullying involvement.

Method

Design

The study used a cross-sectional correlational survey design. All measures were completed once, in school, by each participant.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were 201 senior secondary school students from three public secondary schools in Owerri: Development Secondary School ($n = 77$), Imo Girls Secondary School ($n = 56$) and Comprehensive Secondary School ($n = 68$). Students who were present on the day of data collection and willing to take part were included, which makes this a convenience sample. Of the participants, 128 (63.7%) were girls and 73 (36.3%) were boys. Ages ranged from 14 to 17 years ($M = 15.29$, $SD = 1.22$), with the largest group aged 14 (41.8%) and the smallest aged 15 (9.0%). Because one of the schools is a girls' school, gender and school are partly confounded in this sample.

No a priori sample size calculation was made. We therefore report a sensitivity analysis instead. With $N = 201$, two predictors and $\alpha = .05$, the regression had 80% power to detect a joint effect of $R^2 \geq .046$ ($f^2 = .049$) and, for a single predictor, a unique contribution of about $R^2 \geq .038$ ($f^2 = .039$), which corresponds to a correlation of about .19. These values follow the noncentral F procedure implemented in G*Power (Faul et al., 2009).

Measures

Perceived parenting. Students completed a parental attitude index (Hudson, 1982) on which they rated their relationship with their parents. Item responses were summed into a single total score, with higher scores indicating less favourable perceived parental attitudes. Because only the total score was analysed, the variable captures the overall quality of perceived parenting rather than distinct parenting styles. Observed scores ranged from 16 to 57.

Altruism. Altruism was measured with the Self-Report Altruism Scale (Rushton et al., 1981). Its 20 items describe specific helping acts, and respondents indicate how often they have performed each one on a five-point scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*). Scores are summed, giving a possible range of 20 to 100, with higher scores indicating more frequent altruistic behaviour. Rushton et al. (1981) reported good internal consistency and showed that scores correlate with peer ratings of altruism. The scale was developed with adults, and some items describe activities that are less common among adolescents.

Bullying involvement. Bullying was assessed with a 14-item adaptation of the Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (Olweus, 1996). The items cover both being bullied and bullying others in physical, verbal and relational forms. Each item asks how often the experience occurred in the past couple of months, rated from 0 (*it has not happened*) to 4 (*several times a week*). The analysis used the sum of all 14 items (possible range 0 to 56). The outcome is therefore overall involvement in bullying, as a victim, a perpetrator or both, rather than perpetration alone. Item response analyses support the measurement properties of the Olweus scales (Breivik & Olweus, 2015), and Solberg and Olweus (2003) recommend a frequency criterion of two or three times a month or more for classifying students as involved. Internal consistency coefficients were not estimated for any of the three measures in the present sample.

Procedure

The Department of Psychology issued a letter of introduction, which the research team presented to the principal of each school. After the principals gave permission, the team met senior secondary students in their classrooms, explained the purpose of the study, and made clear that participation was voluntary and that students could stop at any time. Questionnaires were completed in class and collected on the spot. Data collection in the three schools took about one month.

Ethical Considerations

Approval for the study was obtained from the institutional Research Ethics Committee, the Imo State Ministry of Education and the management of the three schools before data collection. Because the participants were minors, written consent was obtained from parents or guardians and assent from the students. Questionnaires carried a code number and no names. The data were stored securely and reported only in aggregate. Students who became distressed by questions about bullying or family life could be referred to their school counsellor.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics summarised the sample and the study variables. The hypotheses were tested with a multiple linear regression in which perceived parenting and altruism were entered simultaneously as predictors of bullying involvement. We report unstandardised (B) and standardised (β) coefficients, with 95% confidence intervals for B computed from the coefficients and their standard errors on 198 degrees of freedom. Effect sizes are interpreted against Cohen's (1988) conventions, under which R^2 values of about .02, .13 and .26 are small, medium and large. Significance was set at $\alpha = .05$, two-tailed.

Results

Sample Characteristics

Table 1 shows the composition of the sample. Girls made up almost two-thirds of the participants, and 14-year-olds were the largest age group.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Variable	Category	<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Male	73	36.3
	Female	128	63.7
Age (years)	14	84	41.8
	15	18	9.0
	16	56	27.9
	17	43	21.4
School	Development Secondary School	77	38.3
	Imo Girls Secondary School	56	27.9
	Comprehensive Secondary School	68	33.8

Note. $N = 201$. Age $M = 15.29$, $SD = 1.22$.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the three study variables. Scores on each variable covered a wide range, so restricted variance is unlikely to explain the regression results. On the scoring described above, the mean bullying score of 34.02 corresponds to an average item rating of about 2.4, which suggests that most students reported at least some involvement in bullying, as victims, perpetrators or both.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Perceived Parenting, Altruism and Bullying Involvement

Variable	Possible range	Observed range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Perceived parenting		16 to 57	30.16	11.50
Altruism	20 to 100	28 to 73	47.38	11.57
Bullying involvement	0 to 56	16 to 54	34.02	9.34

Note. $N = 201$. Higher perceived parenting scores indicate less favourable perceived parental attitudes.

Regression Analysis

Table 3 summarises the regression of bullying involvement on perceived parenting and altruism. The two predictors together did not account for a significant proportion of the variance, $R^2 = .003$, adjusted $R^2 = -.007$, $F(2, 198) = 0.29$, $p = .749$. They explained 0.3% of the variance in bullying involvement, far below Cohen's (1988) threshold for a small effect. H3 was not supported.

Perceived parenting did not predict bullying involvement, $B = -0.04$, 95% CI $[-0.16, 0.08]$, $\beta = -.05$, $t(198) = -0.66$, $p = .512$, so H1 was not supported. The coefficient was slightly negative, the opposite of the predicted direction. Altruism did not predict bullying involvement either, $B = 0.02$, 95% CI $[-0.10, 0.14]$, $\beta = .02$, $t(198) = 0.34$, $p = .738$, and H2 was not supported. This coefficient was also opposite in sign to the prediction, although close to zero.

Table 3. Multiple Regression of Bullying Involvement on Perceived Parenting and Altruism

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI for <i>B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	34.25	3.40	[27.55, 40.95]		10.06	< .001
Perceived parenting	-0.04	0.06	[-0.16, 0.08]	-.05	-0.66	.512
Altruism	0.02	0.06	[-0.10, 0.14]	.02	0.34	.738

Note. $N = 201$. $R = .05$, $R^2 = .003$, adjusted $R^2 = -.007$, $F(2, 198) = 0.29$, $p = .749$. CI = confidence interval.

Converted to the standardised metric, the confidence intervals run from about $-.20$ to $.10$ for perceived parenting and from $-.12$ to $.17$ for altruism. Both intervals include zero, and both exclude standardised effects larger than about $.20$ in either direction.

Discussion

This study tested whether perceived parenting and altruism predict bullying involvement among senior secondary school students in Owerri. Neither did, alone or together, and the confidence intervals place an upper limit on the size of the associations that could plausibly exist in this population. The results should be interpreted with that limit in mind: they rule out the strong associations implied by some previous Nigerian work, but they cannot rule out small ones.

Perceived Parenting and Bullying

The null association between perceived parenting and bullying involvement contrasts with Ezech's (2024) report from Ibadan, in which parenting styles, peer pressure, gender and religious affiliation together explained most of the variance in bullying. It is closer to the meta-analytic picture, in which parental factors show consistent but generally small associations with bullying (Grama et al., 2024; Lereya et al., 2013). With a confidence interval reaching about $\beta = -.20$ at one end and $.10$ at the other, the present data are compatible with a small protective or harmful association of the size those meta-analyses report, but not with the large effect found in Ibadan.

Three features of the present design may explain why no association appeared. First, the predictor was a single total score of perceived parental attitudes. The clearest Nigerian evidence links bullying to specific harsh practices, such as frequent beating (Ighaede-Edwards et al., 2023), and studies elsewhere find that power-assertive discipline in particular, rather than parenting in general, is associated with perpetration (Zottis et al., 2014). A global score may dilute such specific effects. Second, the outcome combined victimisation and perpetration. Negative parenting is associated with both (Lereya et al., 2013), but not necessarily to the same degree in every sample, and combining the two roles in one score can blur associations that would be visible for each role separately. Third, family influences on bullying appear to operate partly through peers (Charalampous et al., 2018; Ugwu et al., 2024). In a sample of mid-adolescents, peer relationships and school conditions may outweigh the direct contribution of the home, which is consistent with the ecological view that bullying is maintained across several settings (Hong & Espelage, 2012). Fenny and Falola (2020) found that delinquent friends and a negative school climate were among the

main correlates of perpetration in Nigerian schools. Neither was measured here, so this explanation remains a hypothesis for future work rather than a finding of the present study.

Altruism and Bullying

Altruism was also unrelated to bullying involvement, and the small positive coefficient ran against the prediction. This result is less surprising than it first appears. The evidence that links prosocial dispositions to less bullying concerns empathy and defending far more than generalised helping (van Noorden et al., 2015; Zych et al., 2019), and it concerns perpetration more consistently than victimisation. Because the outcome here included being bullied, any negative association between altruism and perpetration could have been offset by a null or positive association with victimisation. The findings of Wang et al. (2024) suggest a further reason. In their sample, prosocial strategies did not lower bullying directly but changed the way social goals were related to it. If prosociality works mainly as a moderator, a test of its main effect will understate its role. Moral disengagement offers a third explanation: an adolescent who helps others in general may still bully a particular peer if the harm can be justified (Killer et al., 2019).

The measurement of altruism also deserves comment. The Self-Report Altruism Scale was developed with adults, and several of its items describe acts that adolescents rarely have the chance to perform. Scores in this sample were well below the scale midpoint (mean 47.38 on a range of 20 to 100), which may reflect limited opportunity to help as much as low altruism. A measure of prosocial behaviour designed for adolescents, or a measure of defending in bullying situations, would test the hypothesis more directly.

Limitations

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. The sample was drawn by convenience from three public schools in one city, and the clustering of students within schools was not modelled. One school was a girls' school, so gender and school effects cannot be separated. The design was cross-sectional, so even a significant association would not have shown direction or cause. All measures were self-reports collected in a single session, which raises the possibility of shared method variance and socially desirable responding, particularly for questions about family life. Internal consistency was not estimated in this sample for any measure, and unreliable scores would weaken any associations that exist. The parenting score was a single total rather than separate parenting dimensions, and the bullying score combined victimisation and perpetration, so the study cannot speak to specific parenting practices or to bullying roles. Finally, the sample could detect only effects of about $R^2 = .05$ or larger, which is above the size of many associations reported in the meta-analyses reviewed.

Implications for Research and Practice

The main implication is for research design. Studies of bullying in Nigerian schools should measure parenting dimensions such as warmth, harsh discipline and monitoring separately, score victimisation and perpetration separately, estimate reliability in each sample, and recruit enough schools to model clustering and to detect small effects. Peer affiliation, school climate and moral disengagement should be measured alongside family factors, since the evidence reviewed here suggests that they may carry much of the influence on adolescent bullying.

For practice, the findings caution against school programmes that assume bullying in Owerri stems mainly from poor parenting or from a lack of altruism among students. The present data offer no support for either assumption. School-wide programmes that address the whole school setting have reduced both perpetration and victimisation in controlled evaluations (Gaffney et al., 2021), and they do not depend on resolving which family or personal factors matter most. Given that most students in this sample reported some involvement in bullying, such programmes, together with supervision of classrooms when teachers are absent, would be a reasonable first step for schools in the area.

Conclusion

In this sample of 201 senior secondary school students in Owerri, neither perceived parenting nor self-reported altruism predicted bullying involvement, and the two together explained less than 1% of its var-

iance. The confidence intervals rule out moderate and large associations but leave room for small ones. A well-reported null result of this kind is informative: it suggests that the strong associations reported in some Nigerian studies may not hold across settings, and that global measures of parenting and altruism are blunt instruments for studying a behaviour that depends on specific practices, specific roles and the peer and school context. Larger studies that measure these elements separately are needed before family-centred or character-centred interventions can be recommended for bullying in schools in South-East Nigeria.

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