Rethinking child aggression beyond traditional labels: A 'shared victimhood' approach to child-to-child violence in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Child-to-child violence is a pervasive problem in schools and communities worldwide. Traditional models for understanding this violence often present a clear dichotomy between aggressive children and passive victims. However, this binary approach has proven largely inadequate in recognizing the power dynamics and potential victimization of both parties involved, resulting in interventions that have little to no success in rehabilitation. Alternatively, this paper proposes a "shared victimhood" approach, arguing that violent behavior may result from a cycle of negative experiences in which both the aggressor and the victim are positioned as products of their environment. In essence, the paper explores the limitations of binary labeling and the potential of the shared victimhood framework. It reviews relevant research on the ecological factors influencing child aggression, highlighting the impact of family background, early childhood experiences, and social learning. Drawing on ecological theory, the paper emphasizes the importance of early intervention and prevention strategies that address the root causes of aggression while fostering empathy and resilience in children. It also recommends that states in Nigeria establish LGA-specific child counseling centers and rehabilitation facilities attached to the health care system that cater exclusively to the needs of abused children. Finally, the paper suggests areas for future research to further develop and refine the shared victimhood perspective.

Introduction

Child-to-Child Violence (CCV) encompasses a range of violent behavior among children, including physical aggression (hitting, kicking), verbal aggression (threats, insults), social aggression (exclusion, rumor-spreading), material aggression (damaging belongings) and relational aggression (damaging friendships). Child-to-child violence, according to Hymel and Swearer (2015), and Monks and Smith (2006), is a form of violence in which a prepubescent child or an adolescent is abused by one or more other children, with no direct adult involvement. This implies that child-to-child violence is a form of violence that is purely between children, and in which children are both the perpetrators and the victims. The Safeguarding Network (2020; 2023) believes that such violence can occur in both supervised and unsupervised settings, including at home, in the neighborhood, and in schools where children commonly aggregate. Within a school context, child-on-child abuse can take place in spaces such as restrooms, playgrounds, and corridors, and while children are going home (Safeguarding Network, 2020; 2023). Studies also reveal that child-to-child violence and related dimensions have devastating consequences for both the aggressor and the victim, resulting in physical injuries, mental health disorders, and other societal challenges (World Health Organization, 2022; Hutson & Billie, 2013).

Child-to-child violence is one of the most prevalent forms of peer aggression among adolescents (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017; Juvonen & Graham, 2014; Olweus, 1993). Juvonen and Graham (2014) estimate that 20–25% of kids are directly involved in bullying as offenders, victims, or both. Large-scale research conducted in Western countries by Zych, Ortega and Del Rey (2015) also revealed that 4–9% of adolescents participate in bullying and other aggressive practices regularly, while 9–25% of school-age children experience peer aggression. In addition, in a meta-analysis of aggressive behavior among adolescents, including bullying and cyberbullying, Modecki et al. (2014) estimated a mean prevalence of 35% for traditional bullying (both perpetration and victimization roles) and 15% for cyberbullying involvement in a sample of 335,519 youth (12–18 years). According to a recent Safeguarding Network (2023) report, 69% of girls reported boys making 'toxic' comments about girls and women at school, while a quarter of primary-aged children and about a fifth of secondary-aged children reported being bullied in the last 12 months. In addition, 25% of all children sexual abuse cases involve a perpetrator under the age of 18 (Safeguarding Network, 2023; Ofsted, 2021). In 2021, 8,000 allegations of rape and sexual violence in schools were made, and approximately one-in-five children aged 10 to 15 years in England and Wales (19%) experienced at least one type of online bullying behavior in the year ending March 2020, which equates to 764,000 children (Safeguarding Network, 2023).

Several studies also indicate that the prevalence and types of bullying change among age groups (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim & Sadek, 2010; Monks & Smith, 2006). In a meta-analysis of 153 studies, Cook, et al. (2010) found that the effect size of age was 0.09 on the bully role, 0.01 on the bully/victim role, and -0.01 on the victim role, indicating that victim and bully-victim roles remained stable over time and bullying behavior increased slightly with age. According to Hymel and Swearer (2015), bullying peaks around middle school (ages 12-15) and decreases by the end of high school. In addition, there appears to be a transition from physical bullying to indirect and relational bullying as people become older (Monk & Smith, 2006; Rivers & Smith, 1994). Some studies

have also shown a link between gender and child-to-child violence. For instance, Cook, et al. (2010), Besag (2006), as well as Crick and Grotpeter (1995), claim that boys are more predisposed to engage in peer aggression than girls. In a meta-analysis of 153 studies, Cook, et al. (2010) observed a gender (boys) correlation of .18 with the bully role, .10 with the bully/victim role, and .06 with the victim role, demonstrating that boys had a greater prevalence of all three roles. Similarly, Besag (2006) along with Crick and Grotpeter (1995) have opined that boys are more likely to be involved in physical forms of victimization, while bullying among girls is more likely to be either 'relational' or verbal.

Method

Given the theoretical nature of this paper, a formal empirical methodology is not employed. However, this exploration of child-to-child violence draws upon several key approaches to inform its theoretical development. As such, the methodology employed here is a critical analysis of relevant literature. A comprehensive literature search was conducted using academic databases such as Research Gate, EBSCOhost, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. Keywords used included "child-to-child violence," "bullying," "peer aggression," "child violence," and relevant combinations with terms like "risk factors," "theoretical models," and "developmental aspects." Additionally, reference lists of key articles were reviewed to identify further relevant sources. Articles and books included in the analysis met the following criteria: published in peer-reviewed journals or by reputable academic presses; focused on child-to-child violence (specifically within the age range of 10–17 years), and presented theoretical frameworks, research findings, as well as critical reviews relevant to the paper's topic.

The selected literature was critically analyzed to identify key themes, theoretical models, and research gaps regarding child-to-child violence. The analysis focused on understanding the causes, consequences, and potential interventions for this form of violence. Most importantly, the paper integrates findings from various theoretical perspectives to develop a comprehensive understanding of child-to-child violence and child aggression in Nigeria. The focus was on identifying commonalities and discrepancies within existing theories and highlighting areas where further theoretical development is needed.

Results and Discussion

Research on the dimensions and implications of child-to-child aggression spans more than four decades, with an emphasis on 'bullying' as the major form of 'peer aggression'. Studies based on this hypothesis opine that three factors are critical in classifying aggressive behavior as bullying: repetition, intentionality, and power imbalance (Fung, 2019; Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017; Hymel & Swearer, 2015). For Menesini and Salmivalli (2017), given these qualities, bullying and other forms of peer aggression are regarded as the systematic misuse of power by peers where one or more children feel the need to dominate, subjugate and exploit other children. Similarly, KCSIE (2021) argued that what constitutes aggressive or abusive peer behavior includes a significant power differential between the children involved (such as age, size, ability; and number), repeated attempts to harm one or more other children, and evidence indicating an intention to cause severe harm to the victim or exploit them.

The consequences of child aggression are also worrisome and multi-dimensional. Scholars like Hutson and Billie (2013); Gremmels and Veenstra (2002), and Shaw

(2000), have pointed out that children who were abused or victimized by other minors, including inter-sibling abuse and other forms of peer aggression, show largely the same problems as children victimized by adults, including anxiety disorders, depression, substance abuse, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, sleep disorders, difficulty trusting peers in the context of relationships and suicide ideations. Major factors that influence the severity of symptoms include the use of force or coercion, the frequency of the abuse, and the invasiveness of the act (Safeguarding Network, 2023; Juvonen & Graham, 2014; Cook, et al, 2010).

Scholars have also provided various explanations for child-to-child violence, as well as bullying and other forms of peer aggression. The Social Learning Theory suggests that aggressive behavior is learned behavior, either directly, through observation, or indirectly through social rewards for aggressive behavior. SLT assumes that aggressive children either imitate or emulate violent behavior observed in their social surroundings. It becomes server when such behaviors are condoned or rewarded by society. The Power Imbalance Theory and the Social Dominance Theory both suggest a similar thesis that aggressive behavior stems from a power imbalance between the bully and the victim and the desire for dominance within social groups. For instance, the Social Dominance Theory argues that driven by beliefs in a hierarchical society, bullies always attempt to subjugate their peers (Zych, Ortega & Del Rey, 2015; Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Cook, et al, 2010; Shaw, 2000). The Power Imbalance Theory, on the other hand, proposes that there is a significant power imbalance between the bully and the victim stemming from factors such as physical strength, popularity, or social influence. In poorly regulated societies, such influences make it difficult

for the victim to stand up for themselves or escape the situation.

Of these theories, the Cycle of Violence Theory offers a far more intriguing explanation for aggressive behavior in children. According to this theory, violent victimization, particularly physical abuse perpetuated by parents, caregivers, or any significant other, increases the likelihood of subsequent violent behavior among adolescents (Wright & Fagan, 2013; Fagan 2005). Spatz (1989) has clarified that the term 'cycle of violence' captures the repeated acts of violence associated with physical and emotional damages that drive the abused to inflict the same violence on others. The theory suggests that a child who is bullied or witnesses bullying at home or school is more likely to become a bully themselves. The child may start using aggressive behaviors to imitate what they have seen or experienced, which now creates a pattern that can compel the victim of bullying to also become a bully themselves; thus, perpetuating the cycle (Zych, Ortega & Del Rey, 2015; Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Wright & Fagan, 2013). According to this theory, children who are bullied or witness bullying at home or school are more likely to become bullied themselves. The child may begin to display violent behaviors to replicate what they have seen or experienced, much as the victim of bullying may be inspired to become a bully themselves; thus, perpetuating the cycle.

Nigeria faces a significant challenge in protecting its children from violence. The United Nations Children's Fund has noted that the laws and child protection systems are weak in Nigeria, and largely inadequate to protect children against violence. However, studies suggest that a high number of Nigerian children experience multidimensional violence from their peers, at home, in school and communities (Ikusika, 2023; Umejiaku, 2019; UNICEF, 2017). Furthermore, UNICEF reports that six out

of ten Nigerian children experience violence before reaching 18, with a significant portion likely involving other children (UNICEF, 2017). A 2021 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) by UNICEF further highlights the gravity of the situation. It reveals that a shocking 90% of children, aged 1 to 14, have experienced violent discipline by caregivers (Premium Times Nigeria., 2022). Aside from directly experiencing violence, witnessing violence in the home is also common, with 66% of girls and 58% of boys under 18 exposed to domestic violence and partner abuse (Ikusika, 2023). While specific data on child-to-child violence in Nigeria is limited, these figures suggest a worrying reality that child-to-child violence also poses a serious threat in Nigeria. This form of violence, encompassing physical, emotional, and bullying behaviors amongst children, can have lasting negative impacts on their development and well-being (UNICEF, 2023; Umejiaku, 2019). Interestingly, relatively few studies have investigated its dimensions and scope in schools and communities which creates an interesting gap in literature.

Several factors contribute to child-to-child violence (CCV) in Nigeria. According to UNICEF (2017), the drivers of violence against children (VAC) are rooted in social norms, including the use of violent discipline, violence against women and girls, and community beliefs about witchcraft, all of which increase children's vulnerability. Similarly, Ikusika (2023) and Umejiaku (2019) also argue that child-to-child violence is a complex issue in Nigeria, fueled by a combination of social, economic, and cultural factors, such as poverty, cultural beliefs, poor social control systems, substance abuse, lack of education. Piecing together anecdotal and empirical evidence, this paper also enumerates the following as other factors that contribute to child-to-child violence in Nigeria (see Figure 1).

1. **Socioeconomic factors:**
   a) Poverty: Poverty creates stress within families, which can increase tension and lead to violence between siblings and peers. For instance, children may compete for scarce resources or struggle to meet societal expectations, leading to conflict;
   b) Lack of education: Limited access to education can hinder children's social and emotional development. They may lack conflict resolution skills and struggle to manage their emotions healthily;
   c) Child labor: Owing to poverty and the need to supplement the household economy, children forced

Figure 1: Factors contributing to CCV in Nigeria (Source: Authors' illustration, 2024)
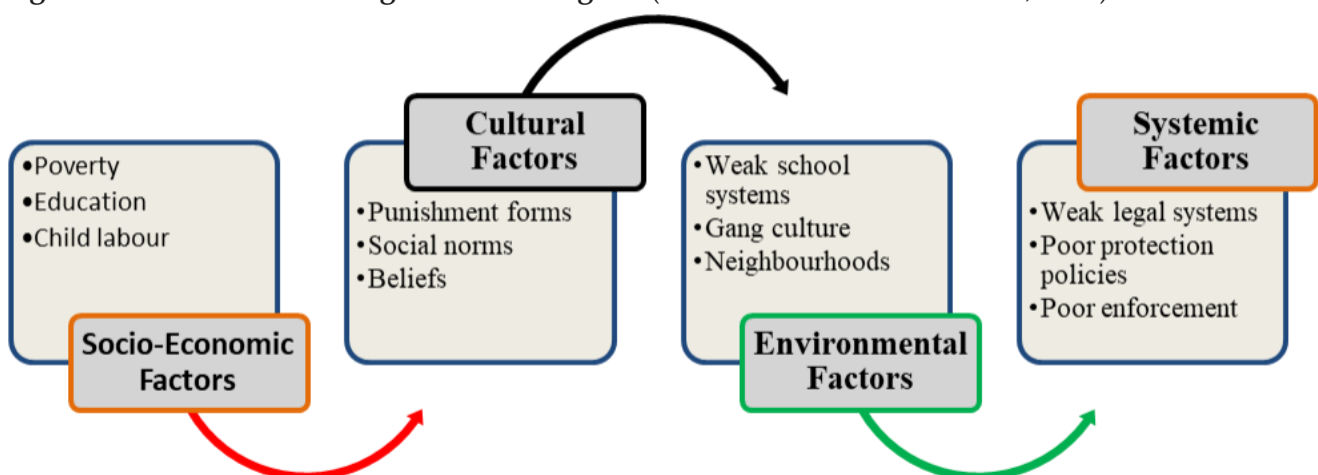
to work long hours may be tired and irritable, increasing the likelihood of conflict with peers.

Studies by Baker, Jensen, Moeyaert and Bordoff (2020) and Fatima and Sheikh (2014) have also established a correlation between socioeconomic status and child aggression. For Baker (2020), socioeconomic status is a salient predictor of aggressive behavior in early childhood and beyond. Poverty and limited resources in the household create stress which affects parenting practices and a child's emotional regulation. Similarly, Fatimah and Sheik (2014) have noted that greater levels of socioeconomic disadvantage are associated with higher levels of child maltreatment which instils violent behavior in children.

2. **Cultural factors:**
    a) Corporal punishment: Physical punishment is a common form of discipline in Nigeria. Children who experience violence at home may be more likely to resort to violence themselves to resolve conflicts;
    b) Social norms: Cultural norms that emphasize competition or aggression can contribute to a climate of violence. Rigid gender roles may also play a part;
    c) Cultural beliefs/practices: Beliefs and harmful practices like accusations of witchcraft against children, or the Almajiri system which sends boys to live with Quranic teachers who may neglect or abuse them, increase a child's vulnerability to violence, isolation, or bullying.

While previous studies have shown that several factors in a child's social surroundings can influence aggressive behavior, Lansford, and Dodge (2008) have noted that most studies commonly ignore the potential

role of culture as a moderator of links between physical discipline and children's adjustment. Lansford and Dodge (2008) argue that corporal punishment arising from the cultural norms of discipline and punishment conversely impacts children's aggressive behavior, and the magnitude expresses itself in child-to-child aggression.

3. **Environmental factors:**
    a) Weak School Systems: Overcrowded classrooms and a lack of trained counsellors can create environments conducive to bullying and violence;
    b) Gang culture: The presence of gangs in some communities can create a climate of fear and violence, where children are pressured to join or become victims;
    c) Also, children who witness violence in their homes or communities, especially those in neighborhoods that lack adequate social control, are more likely to become perpetrators or victims of violence themselves.

Recent studies by Ofsted (2021) and Menesini et al. (2017) have found that environmental factors that contribute to child aggression include poor social control systems in the neighborhood, weak school systems, and insufficient facilities that encourage competition and contest among children. For instance, schools that struggle to provide a positive and structured learning environment can become breeding grounds for frustration and conflict. Also, limited opportunities for healthy competition and constructive play in schools and neighborhoods can lead to children resorting to negative forms of competition and aggression. Similarly, Hymel and Swearer (2015) have stated that children who grow up in poorly supervised environments and are routinely exposed to violence are more prone to display aggressive conduct and

peer hostility. In most cases, witnessing or experiencing violence directly normalizes aggression and increases the likelihood of children using it to resolve conflicts (Hymel & Swearer, 2015).

4. **Weak legal framework:**
   a) Inadequate laws or enforcement mechanisms to protect children can make them more vulnerable to violence;
   b) Inadequate enforcement of child protection laws and limited access to justice for victims create an environment where perpetrators face few consequences;
   c) Nigeria has legal frameworks in place to protect children, such as the Child Rights Act of 2003; however, enforcement remains a challenge. Additionally, these frameworks do not adequately address the specificities of child-to-child violence.

Another worrisome factor is the general perception that child-to-child violence is a mere part of growing up in children. This perception dismisses child aggression with downplaying responses that suggest it is 'mere banter' or 'children just being children'; thus, creating a culture that normalizes abuse and discourages reporting and early treatment (Keeping Children Safe in Education, 2021).

Traditional framing of child-to-child violence commonly focuses on identifying two groups, one regarded as the 'bullies' or perpetrators and vulnerable victims. This binary view creates a false dichotomy that can be limiting for an adequate understanding of the dimensions of child-to-child violence, especially as the perspective overlooks the potential for shared experiences that might contribute to both the aggressive behavior and the victimization of the target child. Drawing from the above,

this paper proposes a "shared victimhood" perspective which suggests that aggressive behavior can, in many cases, be a response to underlying experiences of adversity or victimization, which the conventional 'bully-victim' framework unintentionally ignores. The concept of shared victimhood emerged from studies that identified a significant overlap between 'bullies' and 'victims' as the major players in child-to-child aggression. The shared victimhood perspective emphasizes the potential link between a child's aggressive behavior and their own experiences of victimization, as well as the possible dynamics of roles in different contexts. For instance, children who engage in aggression may themselves have been bullied or exposed to violence in their homes or communities. Moreover, exposure to violence in the home or community can equally result in feelings of anger, fear, and a sense of powerlessness, which can manifest as aggression towards others.

As suggested by WHO (2022); Fung (2019); Guy, Lee and Wolke (2019); Hymel and Swearer (2015), and Shaw (2000), both the "bully" and the "victim" may also be subject to social pressures, lack of support systems, and negative coping mechanisms, which makes them vulnerable to victimization within the larger social context. Additionally, Hutson and Billie (2013) noted that power dynamics and roles can shift over time, with a victim finding opportunities to exert power in the dynamic and be involved in both bullying and being bullied at different times. It is important to note here that this perspective does not excuse aggressive behavior, rather it encourages a deeper understanding of its root causes. The shared victimhood approach opens a new spectrum for understanding child aggression and child-to-child to include new categories of bullies and victims such as 'bully-victims', Victim bullies, 'victimized bullies', 'victimized bully-victims', aside from the traditional 'pure bullies' and 'pure

Figure 2: Spectrum of child-to-child violence (Source: Author's illustration, 2024)
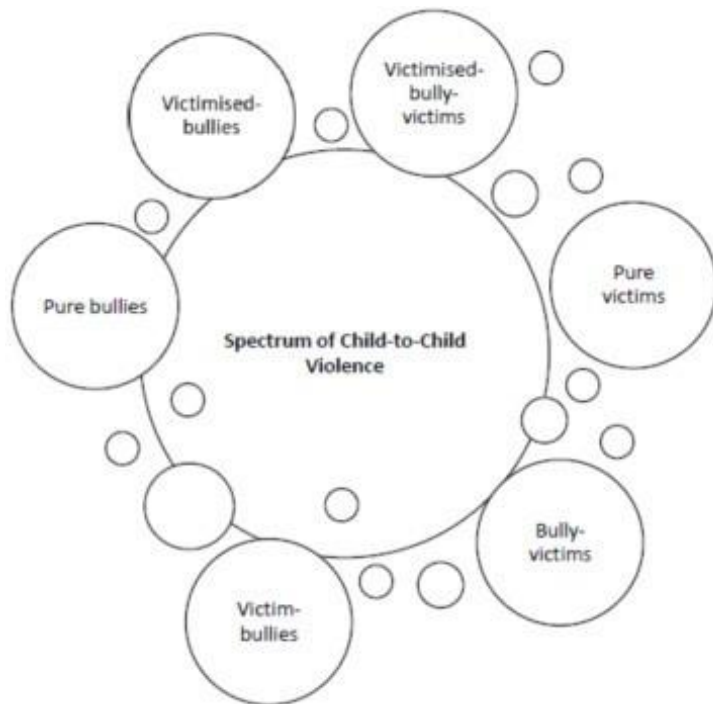
victims' who in themselves are all victims of poor parenting, dysfunctional socialization systems and poor protection systems (see Figure 2).

i) Bully-Victims: Bully-victims are children who display characteristics of both bullies and victims. This seemingly contradictory behavior can be attributed to various factors. Low self-esteem can lead them to seek power by bullying others, while simultaneously experiencing victimization themselves. Social anxiety might make them vulnerable to being targeted, while frustration might manifest as aggressive behavior towards others. Understanding the underlying reasons for their actions is crucial to address the cycle;

ii) Victim-Bullies: Retaliation and Escalation: Victim-bullies are primarily victims of bullying, but they also retaliate against their tormentors. This retaliation can be seen as a coping mechanism, an attempt to regain control in a situation where they feel powerless. However, retaliation can

escalate the conflict, leading to further incidents of bullying. Intervention strategies for victim-bullies should focus on healthy coping mechanisms and assertive communication skills to counter the bullying they experience;

iii) Victimized Bully-Victims: Victimized bully victims are a particularly vulnerable group. They are repeatedly bullied by others and, in a desperate attempt to escape the powerlessness they feel, they target even weaker individuals. This cyclical behavior can have severe consequences for their mental health. They might experience increased anxiety, depression, and difficulty forming healthy relationships. Breaking this cycle requires addressing the root causes of their victimization and providing them with tools to develop positive social interactions;

iv) Victimized Bullies: Victimized bullies experience bullying from others but may also bully others themselves, not necessarily targeting their primary tormentors. Understanding the motivations behind their bullying behavior is crucial. They might be mimicking the behavior they experience, attempting to fit in with a dominant group, or struggling with unresolved issues that lead them to lash out. Addressing the reasons behind their bullying is vital to prevent them from perpetuating the cycle;

v) Pure Bullies: Pure bullies are individuals who repeatedly and intentionally exhibit aggressive behavior towards others. Their motivations can stem from a desire for power, enjoyment of inflicting pain, or past experiences of bullying. They often lack empathy and may have difficulty forming positive

social connections. Addressing the root causes of their behavior and fostering empathy is essential to prevent them from continuing their bullying patterns;

vi) Pure Victims: Pure victims are individuals who are repeatedly targeted by bullies. They might be shy, withdrawn, or lack the social skills to defend themselves. While they do not exhibit bullying behavior, constant victimization can lead to low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression. Supporting pure victims involves providing them with coping mechanisms, social skills training, and a safe environment where they feel empowered.

The social-ecological framework provides a valuable lens for understanding this expanded dimension of child aggression and child-to-child violence. Socio-ecological theories generally acknowledge that human development and environmental issues play out across various levels. For instance, individual behaviors, social norms, cultural values, and institutional policies all influence outcomes. The assumption here is that child aggression and child-to-child violence are

not caused by a single factor. Instead, it is influenced by a composite interplay of factors at different levels of a child's environment, ranging from individual characteristics to broader societal influences. As proposed by Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994), individual, family, peer group, school, and community are key factors that contribute to the problem of child aggression and child-to-child aggression. Individual factors, such as impulsivity, emotional regulation difficulties, and a history of victimization can increase the likelihood of engaging in or being targeted by bullying. In the same way, family dynamics, including harsh parenting styles or witnessing violence in the home, can also play a role. Similarly, peer group dynamics, such as social pressures and a lack of positive social connections, can create an environment conducive to bullying. School factors (such as a lack of supervision and unclear anti-bullying policies) and community factors (such as poverty, violence exposure, and limited access to support services) further increase the risk of child-to-child violence.

Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) categorized these factors into three, namely individual factors, relationship factors and community factors, all of which determine the tendency, severity, and frequency of child aggression and child-to-child aggression. For Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994), individual factors include a child's personality traits, emotional regulation skills, and social competencies. The concern here is that children with low self-esteem or difficulty managing anger are more likely to be involved in aggressive behavior. Relationship factors, on the other hand, include family dynamics, peer relationships, and interactions with teachers and other adults that contribute to a child's sense of security and

Figure 3: Ecological model of child violence
(Source: Bronfenbrenner & Ceci's, 1994)
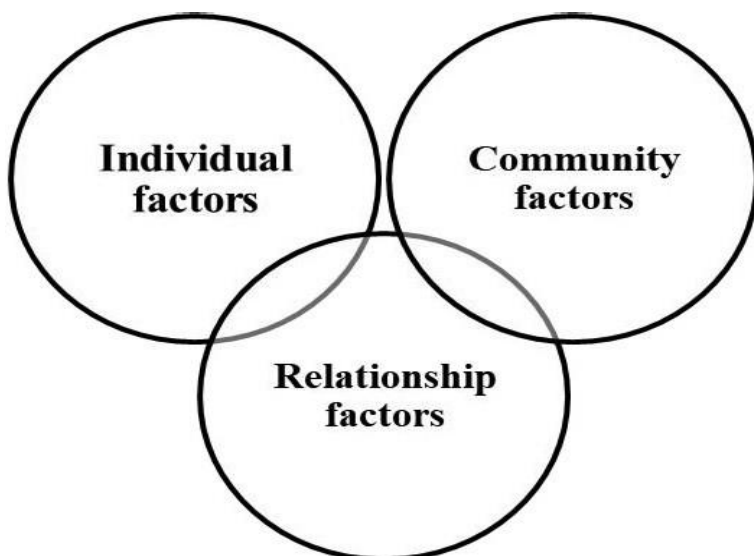
belongingness, while community factors include socioeconomic disadvantage, exposure to violence in the community, or school climates that tolerate aggression all create fertile ground for bullying behavior.

Bronfenbrenner and Ceci's (1994) model emphasize the interconnectedness of these factors. For example, a child experiencing difficulties at home might struggle to manage their emotions at school, leading them to target more vulnerable peers. Understanding these multifaceted interactions is critical for tackling the fundamental causes of child-to-child violence.

Conclusion

Understanding child-to-child violence goes beyond the simplistic bully-victim binary. It requires recognizing the complex interplay of power dynamics and victimization. By examining these dynamics through a victimization lens, we gain a more elaborate picture of the problem and develop effective solutions. This research has critically examined the concept of child-to-child aggression in Nigeria, venturing beyond traditional labelling approaches. By adopting a 'shared victimhood' perspective, the paper has shed light on the intricate interplay of social, environmental, and individual factors that contribute to aggressive behavior in children.

The research also highlights the cyclical nature of violence, where children who experience aggression are more likely to exhibit aggressive tendencies and can be considered victims themselves. This cyclical nature emphasizes the importance of addressing the root causes of violence in children's lives, rather than solely focusing on punitive measures for child-to-child violence. This is because child aggression in its various forms is not a simple equation of 'perpetrators' and 'victims'. The six categories of bullies and victims as explored in this paper highlight the complexities of bullying dynamics. Most importantly, the 'shared victimhood' perspective offers a valuable framework for intervention strategies. By recognizing the potential for all children involved in aggressive encounters to be victims in some way, schools and communities can develop more holistic methods for managing child aggression. These methods could focus on building social-emotional learning skills, fostering positive peer relationships, and addressing underlying traumas that may be contributing to children's aggressive behavior.

Protective systems such as strong social support networks, positive relationships with adults, and resilience/coping skills development can also empower children to navigate difficult situations that prompt aggressive behavior. Other key recommendations for child-to-child violence in the context of the shared victimhood approach include: School-based intervention programs that promote positive bystander behavior, social-emotional learning, and conflict-resolution skills can effectively reduce bullying incidents; Creating a culture of support within schools, where students feel safe to report bullying and receive help, is essential; Community-based programs that address poverty, and violence exposure, and provide families with parenting skills can indirectly contribute to a reduction in child-to-child violence; and Collaboration between schools, families, and community organizations is vital for comprehensive and sustainable interventions.

Future research in this area could also explore the 'shared victimhood' perspective in greater depth, examining its applicability across diverse cultural contexts. Additionally, longitudinal studies could track the long-term impacts of interventions informed by this perspective. In conclusion, what flows generally from this study is that by moving beyond labels and embracing the

complications of child-to-child aggression, it becomes easier for concerned government institutions, private organizations, agencies as well as stakeholders to create safer and more supportive environments for all children.

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Declaration of Ownership

This article is our original work.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare in this article.

Ethical Clearance

This study adhered strictly to all ethical considerations as recommended by Nigeria's National Code of Health Research (NCHR) and the Helsinki Declaration of 1964, which governs human-related research.

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