

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Family cohesion and school belongingness: Protective factors for immigrant youth against bias-based bullying

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Abstract

This study explores the protective effects of family cohesion and school belongingness against the negative consequences of bullying. 481 immigrant and nonimmigrant US middle-school students (Mage = 13.28(0.87), 49% female; 36% ethnic minority) self-reported their experiences being bullied, school belongingness, family cohesion, and socioemotional well-being measured as externalizing, internalizing, and prosocial behaviors. First- or second-generation immigrant youth ($n = 72$) came from 30 countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, South America, and the Caribbean. Family cohesion served as a protective factor for both immigrant and nonimmigrant youth, but for different outcomes of bullying experiences. For immigrant youth who experienced more bullying, having a more cohesive family was associated with decreased levels of internalizing problems. Additionally, stronger school belongingness and especially family cohesion related to more prosocial behaviors among more frequently bullied immigrant youth. Nonimmigrant youth who experienced bullying, however, reported fewer externalizing problems when they had stronger family cohesion and especially school belongingness. The findings highlight the importance of considering the interacting systems in which immigrant youth are embedded and suggest that family cohesion as a protective factor may work differently for immigrant

than for nonimmigrant youth experiencing bias-based bullying.

KEYWORDS

bias-based bullying, family cohesion, immigrant youth, internalizing and externalizing problems, prosocial behaviors, protective factors, school belongingness, social-emotional well-being

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First- and second-generation immigrant children made up 26% of the 69.5 million children under the age of 18 in 2018 living in the United States (Batalova, Blizzard, & Bolter, 2020). Research has found that immigrant youth often face migration-specific stressors such as bias based bullying at school due to societal prejudices toward their foreign status, language fluency, accent, religion, which are often targeted in bias-based bullying at school (Mendez, Bauman, & Guillory, 2012; Oppedal, Røysamb, & Sam, 2004; Stevens, Boer, Titzmann, Cosma, & Walsh, 2020). Over the past 5 years in the United States, these daily challenges have been exacerbated further by macro-level anti-immigrant sentiment that has steadily and continuously increased following major historical events including the: (a) 2016 election, (b) COVID-19 pandemic, (c) 2020 election, and (d) 2021 insurrection centered in the US Capitol. These macro-level and historical shifts are reflected in an increase of polarizing rhetoric in the United States about immigrants—rhetoric that also manifests as bias-based bullying in the schoolyard, and the implementation of new discriminatory public policies—policies that can preclude the teaching of ethnic studies, intersectionality, and white privilege (Bouza et al., 2018). This has facilitated anti-immigrant attitudes to become more prevalent amongst youth, and these changing social norms may promote bias-based discrimination, bullying, and violence targeting immigrant youth in the school context (Brenick & Halgunseth, 2017).

Previous research has found that bias-based discrimination is a strong and consistent risk factor for negative social-emotional outcomes, such as depression, anxiety, psychological distress, and problem behaviors (Priest et al., 2013; Weeks & Sullivan, 2019). Given the detrimental effects of bias-based bullying on youth's psychosocial well-being, it is important to consider protective factors for immigrant youth such as family cohesion and school belongingness, which have been found to disrupt the effect of negative stressors in their lives (Gummadam, Pittman, & Ioffe, 2016; Xu, Macrynika, Waseem, & Miranda, 2020). Extant research that specifically examines bias-based bullying among immigrant youth in the United States is limited, and only few studies have considered how family and school environments might independently and interactively mitigate the negative effects of bullying victimization (Merrin, Espelage, & Hong, 2018). As such, the present study draws upon Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST; Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997) as frameworks for understanding the roles family and school contexts may play in the association between immigrant youths' experience of bias-based bullying and their social-emotional well-being.

1.1 | Theories to understand bias-based bullying

As a holistic model, the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) provides a framework for understanding the experiences and effects of bullying victimization (e.g.,

Shams, Garमारoudi, Nedjat, & Yekaninejad, 2018; Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010). Ecological Systems Theory conceptualizes phenomenon or individual experiences as an interactive set of “nested” systems, driven by dynamic and interdependent interactions between systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Huang, Hong, & Espelage, 2013). For example, bias-based bullying experiences are influenced by the multiple systems comprising the full ecological theory: the family and school peer groups at the micro-level; interactions between the school and family at the meso-level; mass/social media that instigates growing anti-immigration sentiment in public at the exo-level; anti-immigrant sentiment and political rhetoric in the United States at the macro-level; and unpredictable or historical events at the chrono-level such as immigrant parents being separated from their children at the US border (Bouza et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2013). Shifts in macro level power/status such as increases in anti-immigrant sentiment threaten many protective factors within the immigrant youth’s microsystems, namely their families and schools. The weakening of these protective factors places immigrant youth at risk for maladjustment. Furthermore, interactions between these two systems may play a role in exacerbating or buffering the effects of bias-based bullying experiences (Brenick & Halgunseth, 2017; Huang et al., 2013). Family cohesion is a documented source of support for immigrant youth (Sirin, Sin, Clingain, & Rogers-Sirin, 2019), and bias-based bullying frequently occurs in schools (Hong et al., 2014; Neblett et al., 2012). Thus, the interaction between family and school contexts is essential for understanding bias-based bullying experiences of immigrant youth.

The role of bias-based discrimination, specifically, in a child’s development has previously been studied through the lens of the PVEST (Spencer et al., 1997). Bias-based bullying—the specific form of discrimination operationalized in the present study—poses mental health risks impacting both immigrant and ethnic-minority youth (Cardoso, Szlyk, Goldbach, Swank, & Zvolensky, 2018). Although immigrant and ethnic minority youth share similar challenges in the United States related to discrimination, immigrant youth experience specific challenges related to their foreigner status (e.g., nativity, citizenship, language fluency, accent) and the underlying negative, exclusionary beliefs that they are “not American,” which may make them vulnerable to bullying and poor social-emotional functioning. Hence, immigrant children may be more likely targets for bullying in that they experience intersectional minority identities (immigrant and ethnic minority; Cross et al., 2020). Furthermore, it is important to note that immigrant children experience other forms of acculturative stress that may make them particularly vulnerable to the negative impact of bullying such as needing to acquire a new language, adapting to changing cultural norms and behaviors, or encountering barriers due to documentation status (Sirin et al., 2019).

In addition, PVEST examines the relation of not just risk factors, but also protective factors associated with the coping strategies and outcomes of minority youth within a larger ecological context (Brenick, Schachner, & Jugert, 2018). An important protective factor for immigrant youth is family cohesion or the degree of emotional support and belongingness within the family (Halgunseth, 2019; Mood, Jonsson, & Låftman, 2017; Neblett et al., 2012). In addition, we are looking at bias-based bullying that takes place in a unique ecological context—the school. Thus, school belongingness—having a strong sense of connection to or affiliation with one’s school (Allen, Vella-Brodrick, & Waters, 2016), may also serve as an additional protective factor, buffering against the negative consequences of bias-based bullying experiences in immigrant youth. Past studies have found strong school belongingness to be associated with lower psychological maladjustment in immigrant youth (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). Therefore, the current study will explore the moderating effects of family cohesion and school belongingness on the association between bias-based bullying and internalizing and externalizing problems and prosocial behaviors for immigrant youth.

1.2 | Family cohesion

Family cohesion is an important protective factor in the mental health adjustment of youth (Courtwright, Makic, & Jones, 2019; Dwairy & Achoui, 2010; McGraw, Moore, Fuller, & Bates, 2008; Ttofi & Farrington, 2012). A trans-disciplinary, international concept analysis of youth well-being (Courtwright et al., 2019), as well as studies from a variety of cultures and ethnicities (Browsky, Ireland, & Resnick, 2001; Dwairy & Achoui, 2010), demonstrate that family cohesion is associated with decreased internalizing and externalizing behaviors as well as increased well-being (Browsky et al., 2001) and resilience of at-risk youth (Courtwright et al., 2019). McGraw et al. (2008) explain that feeling connected to one's family helps youth better regulate stress, depression, and anxiety, and propose that an absence of family cohesion contributes to adolescents' psychological distress (Dwairy & Achoui, 2010).

However, the literature indicates that family cohesion is especially valued by immigrant families in the United States (Lee, 2013). This may be due to the interdependent cultures from which these families come, in which the needs of the collective group are prioritized above the needs of the individual (Ghazarian, Supple, & Plunkett, 2008; Leong, Park, & Kalibatseva, 2013). Past research has found family cohesion to be an important protective factor for immigrant youth outcomes, safeguarding youth from poor life satisfaction and discrimination, for instance (e.g., Borraccino et al., 2019; Burgos, Al-Adeimi, & Brown, 2017). In a sample of Mexican immigrant youth in the United States, those who held a strong sense of family cohesion, also felt a sense of loyalty and responsibility to their families and traditional cultural norms that was associated with less engagement in problem behaviors and conduct disorder (Marsiglia, Parsai, & Kulis, 2009). Also, Roley et al. (2014) found that Japanese immigrant youth in the United States who felt supported by and connected to their families were less at risk for developing depression even when experiencing higher levels of acculturative stress.

In general, family cohesion provides warmth, emotional support, and structure that help victimized youth develop healthy coping mechanisms to deal with bullying victimization (Bowes, Maughan, Caspi, Moffitt, & Arseneault, 2010). However, research that considers the protective role of family cohesion in the context of bias-based bullying of immigrant youth is scarce (Maffini, Wong, & Shin, 2011). One exception is a study by Juang and Alvarez (2010), who found in a sample of immigrant youth from Chinese-American backgrounds that family cohesion moderated the relation between bias-based discrimination and anxiety, but not loneliness. The authors reason that for youth, familial support may not alleviate loneliness due to the greater importance of other microsystems and their interactions (e.g., family and peers) during adolescence. Thus, it is critical that both independent and interactive roles of these salient environments for youth are assessed. It should also be noted that Juang and Alvarez (2010) studied discrimination experiences; and family cohesion as a protective factor has yet to be applied in research on bias-based bullying. In the present study, we expect that family cohesion will serve as a protective factor for immigrant youth's social-emotional well-being against the harmful effects of bias-based bullying, given that immigrant families are often close-knit and prioritize family togetherness (Juang & Alvarez, 2010; Ghazarian et al., 2008).

1.3 | School belongingness

School belongingness is developmentally important as it is associated with better coping strategies and health outcomes both of which are precursors of positive psychosocial

functioning (Allen et al., 2016; Hong, Peguero, Espelage, & Allen-Meares, 2017). School belongingness is situated within the most proximal layer of youth's social-ecology and is a confluence of interindividual interactions (with peers, teachers), school climate, and relevant school-level policies, norms, or media (Gönültaş & Mulvey, 2019; Schachner, Juang, Moffitt, & van de Vijver, 2018). These factors all contribute to the protective quality of school belongingness for youth, in general, and are well documented; students with a greater sense of school belongingness are found to be less depressive, anxious, and lonely, as well as more prosocial and autonomous (Cemalcilar, 2010; Gummadam et al., 2016; McGraw et al., 2008). Additionally, youth who report greater school belongingness also have more positive peer relationships, which are related to higher self-esteem, self-worth, and perceptions of social acceptance (Faircloth & Hamm 2005).

School belongingness serves as a unique protective factor for immigrant youth psychological well-being (e.g., greater self-efficacy and lower depressive symptoms; Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007) and of their social acceptance and sociocultural adaptation (Brenick, Titzmann, Michel, & Silbereisen, 2012; D'hondt, Van Praag, Van Houtte, & Stevens, 2016; Schachner et al., 2018; Stark, Plosky, Horn, & Canavera, 2015). One's school belongingness, shaped by the multicultural norms and practices of the school (e.g., equity, inclusion, intergroup contact), reflect and relate to immigrant youth's sense of acceptance by mainstream society, which occurs through acclimation to and familiarization with mainstream culture (Brenick et al., 2012; Gönültaş & Mulvey, 2019; Jones & Rutland, 2018; Miklikowska, 2017; Schachner et al., 2018). Furthermore, school belongingness—positive peer and teacher relationships—engenders closeness, safety, and confidence in immigrant youth and helps relieve acculturative stress (Juang et al., 2018).

Another distinct function of school belongingness is that it can represent intergroup acceptance on both societal and interpersonal levels. Intergroup personal acceptance shapes immigrant youths' perceptions and experiences of prejudice and discrimination (Brenick et al., 2012; Gönültaş & Mulvey, 2019; Jones & Rutland, 2018). Aligned with inter- and intra-group support, diversity norms of equality and inclusivity in schools, promote school belongingness for all, especially immigrant youth, and correspond to lower rates of perceived discrimination (Juang et al., 2018), reduced stereotype threat, and increased academic success (Baysu, Celeste, Brown, Verschueren, & Phalet, 2016).

Despite its protective value, immigrant youth often face barriers in developing a sense of school belongingness, due to the bias-based bullying they experience in school (Brenick & Halgunseth, 2017; Gönültaş & Mulvey, 2019). School belongingness, established by inclusive and supportive social relationships and structural context (e.g., perceived school climate), mitigates negative outcomes of victimization and bias-based discrimination (Cemalcilar, 2010; Juang et al., 2018). For immigrant youth, school belongingness in the form of supportive classmates and trustworthy confidants, helps to diminish the negative effects of bullying victimization (Walsh et al., 2016), reduce bullying occurrences (Gage, Prykanowski, & Larson, 2014), and serve as a protective factor against bias-based discrimination and bullying (Bell, Smith, & Juvonen, 2021; Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Brenick et al., 2012). When immigrant youth do not feel a strong relational connection to peers and teachers in their schools, they report poor psychological adaptation and academic competence, and more social exclusion, accompanied with higher rates of discrimination (Berry et al., 2006; Oxman et al., 2012). As of yet, there is no research on the role of school belongingness as an independent or interactive (with family cohesion) protective factor for immigrant youth experiencing bias-based bullying. In the present study, we expect that school belongingness will serve as a protective factor of socioemotional well-being for both immigrant and nonimmigrant groups.

1.4 | The current study

This review of the literature has highlighted several gaps that the authors will address in the present study. First, the bulk of the outstanding literature on immigrant youth and bias-based victimization focuses on discrimination rather than bias-based bullying, a distinct form of victimization. Second, the school belongingness literature has, at the same time, focused primarily on the benefits of school belongingness to youth in general (see Gum-madam et al., 2016; McGraw et al., 2008) and scholars have called for studies on how school belongingness functions across cultural backgrounds (Chiu, Chow, McBride, & Mol, 2016). Many studies with immigrant youth from various cultural backgrounds have been conducted in European countries (e.g., Jones & Rutland, 2018; Miklikowska, 2017), yet research in the United States lacks in representing the perspective of immigrant youth specifically in the context of bias-based bullying (see Gönültaş & Mulvey, 2019). Third, researchers have highlighted a lack of research on the family and its relation to the school context in bullying experiences, emphasizing the importance of taking an interactionist approach (Hong et al., 2014), which is particularly warranted for bias-based bullying of immigrant youth. To date, only a handful of studies have examined school and family belongingness together as protective factors (see McGraw et al., 2008), and no study has examined them in the context of immigrant youth bias-based bullying.

The current study addresses these gaps by examining the roles of family cohesion and school belongingness as moderators in the relation between bias-based bullying experiences and negative (internalizing, externalizing) and prosocial behaviors in a sample of immigrant and nonimmigrant youth in the United States. We hypothesized that for the sample as a whole: (1) higher rates of family cohesion and school belongingness would independently buffer the positive association between bullying experiences and internalizing and externalizing problems; (2) higher rates of family cohesion and school belongingness would independently buffer the negative association between bullying experiences and prosocial behaviors; and (3) the interaction between family cohesion and school belongingness would buffer the association between bullying experiences and internalizing and externalizing problems and higher rates of prosocial behaviors. Given family cohesion is more highly valued and prioritized in immigrant families than nonimmigrant families (Leong et al., 2013), we hypothesized that: (4) family cohesion would serve as a stronger protective factor for youth of an immigrant background than for nonimmigrant youth reporting higher rates of bullying experiences.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Participants

Participants were 481 students (49% female; 36% ethnic minority; $M_{age} = 13.28$, $SD = 0.87$) from 6 US public middle schools in the northeast. All schools were working- to middle-class and had a predominantly White student population but were in areas with higher immigrant populations. Given that bullying is most prevalent in middle school (Hicks, Jennings, Jennings, Berry, & Green, 2018), the participants were from grades 6–8 with the exception of 4 participants (2 from 10th grade and 2 from 12th grade enrolled in an 8th grade class). Participants were considered to have an immigrant background if they, or at least one of their parents, were born in a country other than the United States. The 72 immigrant background participants came from 30 countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, South America, and the Caribbean.

2.2 | Procedure

Schools were recruited in areas with high immigrant populations. After schools agreed to participate in the study, passive consent forms were sent home to parents of potential participants (i.e., all students in target grades). Parents were given 3 weeks to review and return the form if they did not want their child to participate in the study. Only four parental forms were returned, opting their child out of the study. On the day of administration, research assistants came into the classroom, explained the survey to the students, read over an information sheet, explained the confidentiality of the study and that even with parental consent, students did not have to take part in the study, and clarified that even if they chose to take part in the survey, they did not have to answer any question they did not want to answer and they could drop-out at any time. Once all questions were answered, students who had parental permission to participate and assented to participate, completed self-report questionnaires that took approximately 45 min. Surveys were administered in social studies classes which were conducted in English; thus, all of the students were able to take the survey in English with no reported difficulty.

2.3 | Measures

Bullying experiences were assessed with an adapted version of the School Climate Bullying Survey - Bullying Experiences Scale (Cornell, 2011), titled the Comprehensive Bullying Experiences Scale. We administered a 40-item (adapted from the original 7-item) instrument that measures the prevalence and nature of (e.g., verbal, social) bullying the participant experienced in the school over the past month. Both the original and adapted instruments define bullying (i.e., repeated use of strength or popularity to injure, threaten, or embarrass another person on purpose), but the original does not specify the reason a child is targeted for bullying. Thus, we adapted items to include specified reasons (e.g., speaking with an accent, immigrant status). A sample item is, "I was verbally bullied because of my nationality (what country I'm from)." Items had Likert-type answer choices corresponding to the frequency of bullying experiences ranging from "1 = Never" to "4 = Several times a week." Responses were summed. Reliability for the adapted scale was strong, $\alpha = 0.91$.

School belongingness was measured with the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM; Goodenow, 1993). The 18-item self-report questionnaire includes items like, "Other students at my school like me that way I am." The responses are in 5-point Likert scale format, ranging from "1 = Not at all true" to "5 = Completely true." The reliability for the scale was strong, $\alpha = 0.91$.

Social and emotional well-being was measured with the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, Lamping, & Ploubidis, 2010). The SDQ is a 25-item self-report measure assessing difficulties (i.e., internalizing and externalizing problems) and prosocial behavior (revised from the original 5 factor model, Goodman (1997), this model is suggested for use in low-risk populations). Each item is an "I" statement and respondents rate the degree to which the statement is true for them, "1 = Not True," "2 = Somewhat True," or "3 = Certainly True." Sample items include: "I am often unhappy, depressed, or tearful" (internalizing problems), "I get very angry and often lose my temper" (externalizing problems), and "I am helpful if someone is hurt, upset, and feeling ill" (prosocial behavior). Subscales show fair to good reliability ($\alpha = 0.70$ externalizing problems; $\alpha = 0.78$ internalizing problems; $\alpha = 0.79$ prosocial behaviors).

Finally, family cohesion was assessed using the Family Environment Scale (Moos & Moos, 1997). The 9-item family cohesion subscale scale reflects emotional support,

belongingness, and commitment within the family and includes items like: “In our family we spend a lot of time doing things together at home,” and “In our family we really help and support each other.” Items are reported as being “true” or “false” of the respondent’s family. The reliability for the scale was good, $\alpha = 0.83$.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Plan for analyses

All analyses were conducted in SPSS® Version 25 and Mplus version 8.0 (Muthén and Muthén, 1998–2017). Before conducting the primary analyses, descriptive statistics and group differences between immigrant and nonimmigrant youth in background characteristics and study variables were explored and tested using χ^2 tests and MANOVA. The relations between bias-based bullying experiences, family cohesion, school belongingness, and internalizing, externalizing, and prosocial behaviors were analyzed using multigroup structural equation modeling (Kline, 2005). For this analysis missing data were dealt with by using full information maximum likelihood estimation in Mplus (Muthén and Muthén, 1998–2017). Research data are not shared.

3.2 | Descriptive and group differences analyses

Descriptive statistics showed (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics of all study variables by immigrant background) that the bullying experience variable was non-normally distributed with skewness of 1.213 (SE = 0.11) and kurtosis of 5.012 (SE = 0.22). Further exploration revealed that this distribution was caused by one outlier that scored $5.99 \times \text{SD}$ higher than the mean. Although this outlier represents the actual bullying experiences of an adolescent, these data were omitted from further analyses to avoid an outlier effect on findings.

Among the final sample, gender was equally distributed in both groups (51.4% girls among the nonimmigrant students versus 50.7% girls among immigrant students). A MANOVA showed significant group differences between boys and girls, $F_{\text{gender}}(6,459) = 4.859$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .060$, no significant differences between immigrant and nonimmigrant students, $F_{\text{immigrant}}(6,459) = .953$, $p = .457$, $\eta^2 = .012$, and no interaction effect of gender and migration. Univariate tests showed that girls reported higher rates of bullying experiences, internalizing problems, and prosocial behaviors, and lower rates of externalizing problems than did boys (see Table 1 for M s and SDs). As age was not significantly related to any of the study variables, it was excluded from the primary analyses. In further analyses the mean centered variables bullying experience, family cohesion, and school belongingness were used as their plots revealed that centering could be used to avoid multicollinearity (Olvera Astivia & Kroc, 2019).

3.3 | Primary analyses

A multigroup structural equation model (MGM) was built including gender, bullying experience, family cohesion, school belongingness, and the interaction terms bullying experience*family cohesion, bullying experience*school belongingness, family cohesion*school belongingness, and the three-way interaction bullying experience*family cohesion*school belongingness as predictors of prosocial, externalizing, and internalizing behavior. This full

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations for study variables

Variable	M	SD	Range	1	2	3	4	5
Whole sample	56.43	15.08	22.32–123.72	1				
Bullying Experience								
Family Cohesion	1.80	0.25	1.00–2.09	–.15*	1			
School Belongingness	3.52	0.74	1.08–5.00	–.29*	.47*	1		
Prosocial Behavior	12.05	2.03	5.00–15.00	.01	.25*	.38*	1	
Internalizing Problems	1.22	0.37	0.60–2.40	.31*	–.25*	–.60*	–.04	1
Externalizing Problems	1.09	0.37	0.40–2.10	.25*	–.26*	–.52*	–.20*	.447*
Immigrant group	55.94	14.80	22.32–123.72	1				
Bullying Experience								
Family Cohesion	1.80	0.24	1.00–2.09	–.10	1			
School Belongingness	3.52	0.74	1.08–5.00	–.38*	.47*	1		
Prosocial Behavior	12.06	2.00	5.00–15.00	.04	.42*	.41*	1	
Internalizing Problems	1.23	0.37	0.60–2.40	.41*	–.21	–.51*	–.08	1
Externalizing Problems	1.10	0.36	0.40–2.10	.17	–.15	–.45*	–.19	.43*
Nonimmigrant group	59.21	16.44	26.52–117.44	1				
Bullying Experience								
Family Cohesion	1.78	0.28	1.00–2.07	–.16*	1			
School Belongingness	3.54	0.71	1.33–5.00	–.28*	.47*	1		
Prosocial Behavior	11.98	2.23	5.00–15.00	.01	.21*	.38*	1	
Internalizing Problems	1.17	0.37	0.60–2.20	.30*	–.26*	–.61*	–.06	1
Externalizing Problems	1.04	0.39	0.40–2.10	.27*	–.29*	–.53*	–.21*	.45*

Note. * $p < .01$. Whole sample: $N = 480$; Immigrant group: $n = 72$; Nonimmigrant group: $n = 408$.

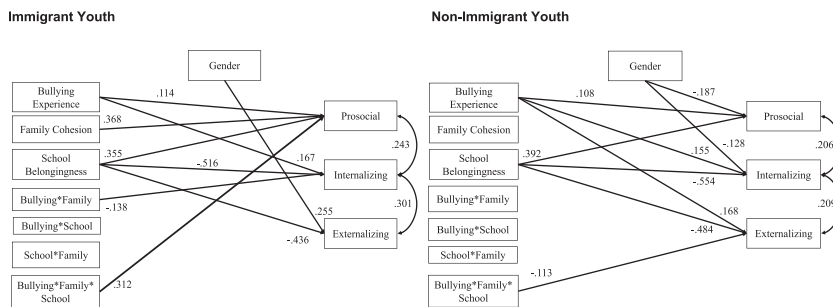


FIGURE 1 The trimmed multiple group interaction model relating bullying experience, family cohesion, and school belongingness and its interaction terms to prosocial, internalizing, and externalizing behavior for immigrant and nonimmigrant students in the United States. Figure presents standardized coefficients for all significant predictive paths in the final model. Chi-square = 21.202, $df = 36$, $p = .976$; CFI = 1.000; RMSEA < .001, SRMR = .031, CFI: Comparative Fit Index, RMSEA: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation. The explained variance varied from medium to large for the nonimmigrant group, $R^2_{\text{prosocial_nonimm}} = .180$, $p < .01$, $R^2_{\text{internalising_nonimm}} = .404$, $p < .01$, $R^2_{\text{externalising_nonimm}} = .305$, $p < .01$, as well as for the immigrant group, $R^2_{\text{prosocial_imm}} = .325$, $p < .01$, $R^2_{\text{internalising_imm}} = .402$, $p < .01$, $R^2_{\text{externalising_imm}} = .253$, $p < .01$

model included all parameter estimates and therefore showed a saturated model fit, $\chi^2 (0) = 0.000$, $p = .000$; CFI = 1.000; RMSEA = .000. Model trimming was conducted stepwise by constraining nonsignificant paths (with $|\beta| < .20$ and $p > .20$) to zero and constraining remaining paths to be equal across the two groups as long as the model fit did not worsen significantly. To obtain the most parsimonious model, 36 paths were constrained, leading to the final model, as depicted in Figure 1, which fitted the data very well, $\chi^2 (36) = 21.202$, $p = .976$; CFI = 1.000; RMSEA < .001, SRMR = .031. In this final model, the relations between bullying experience and prosocial behaviors and internalizing problems as well as the relations between school belongingness and prosocial behaviors, internalizing problems, and externalizing problems were set to be equal across the two groups.

The results of the MGM showed two partially different patterns of findings for youth of immigrant versus nonimmigrant backgrounds. The two-way interactions between bullying experience and family cohesion or school belongingness tested hypotheses 1 and 2; the three-way interaction tested hypothesis 3; and the results from the two models tested hypothesis 4. We will present the results from the immigrant and nonimmigrant youth (Figure 1), first for prosocial, then internalizing, followed by externalizing behaviors.

More prosocial behaviors were reported by immigrant and nonimmigrant youth alike who had a stronger sense of school belongingness or experienced more bullying. Note, however, zero-order correlations showed a nonsignificant relation between bullying and prosocial behaviors for both groups (Table 1). Additionally, nonimmigrant background girls reported more prosocial behaviors than did nonimmigrant background boys. None of the three two-way interactions between school belongingness, family cohesion, and bullying experiences emerged as significant predictors of prosocial behaviors for either the immigrant or the nonimmigrant youth. For immigrant youth, feeling greater cohesion in one's family was significantly related to reporting more prosocial behaviors, though this effect was also qualified by a higher order three-way interaction between family cohesion, school belongingness, and bullying experience; this interaction, as depicted in Figure 2 showed that having a stronger sense of school belongingness and, especially, family cohesion was associated with more prosocial behaviors for immigrant youth, even when they had experienced more bullying (again, see Table 1 for zero-order correlations).

FIGURE 2 Immigrant youth three-way interaction between family cohesion, school belongingness, and bullying experience for prosocial behaviors

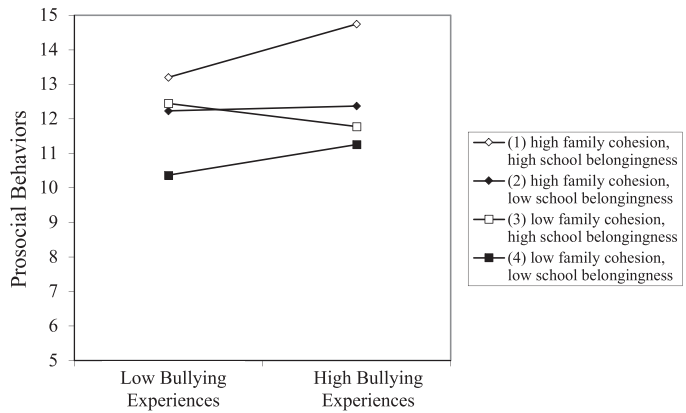
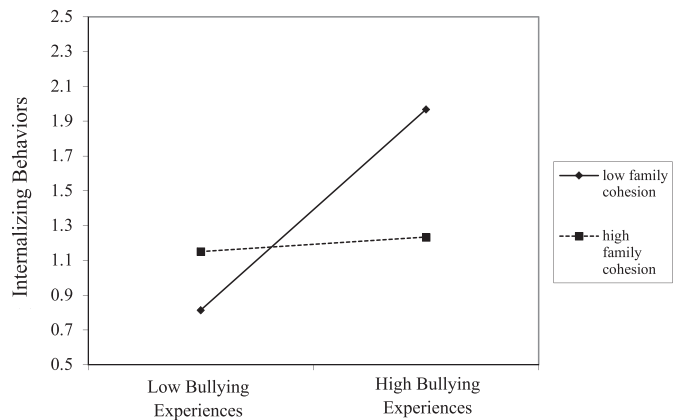


FIGURE 3 Immigrant youth two-way interaction between family cohesion and bullying experiences for internalizing behaviors



Regarding internalizing behaviors, having a stronger sense of school belongingness was associated with fewer internalizing problems for all youth, as was reporting fewer bullying experiences. However, nonimmigrant girls reported more internalizing problems than did nonimmigrant boys. Neither direct nor indirect effects on internalizing behaviors emerged for family cohesion, school belongingness by family cohesion, school belongingness by bullying experience, or family cohesion by school belongingness by bullying experience, for either participant group. For immigrant youth only, however, the effect between bullying experiences and internalizing problems was buffered by family cohesion as is depicted in Figure 3; immigrant youth who experienced higher rates of bullying but also had greater family cohesion reported fewer internalizing problems.

Finally, for externalizing problems, the only significant result that emerged for both immigrant and nonimmigrant youth was a direct effect for school belongingness; youth who felt stronger sense of belongingness on their schools reported fewer externalizing behaviors. Immigrant boys reported more externalizing problems than did immigrant girls—a gender effect that did not emerge for nonimmigrant youth. Moreover, with non-immigrant participants, the main effect of school belongingness as well as one for bullying experience were qualified by a three-way interaction between bullying experience, school belongingness, and family cohesion. As depicted in Figure 4, nonimmigrant youth who have high family cohesion and, especially, a stronger sense of school belongingness were likely to report fewer externalizing problems, even when they experienced more bullying. This interaction did not emerge for immigrant youth, however. Furthermore, neither direct

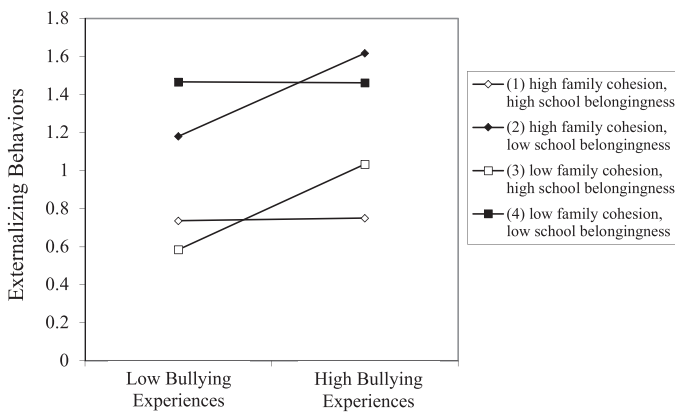


FIGURE 4 Nonimmigrant youth three-way interaction between family cohesion, school belongingness, and bullying experience for externalizing behaviors

nor indirect effects emerged for family cohesion, school belongingness by family cohesion, school belongingness by bullying experience, or family cohesion by bullying experience for either participant group.

4 | DISCUSSION

Grounded in Ecological Systems Theory and PVEST (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Spencer et al., 1997), this study was the first of its kind to examine whether (a) family cohesion and social belongingness independently and jointly buffered the positive association between bias-based bullying experiences and internalizing and externalizing problems; and (b) the negative association between bias-based bullying experiences and prosocial behaviors in a sample of immigrant and nonimmigrant middle schoolers in the United States. Because of the high value immigrant families place on togetherness, we also examined whether family cohesion served as a stronger protective factor of well-being for immigrant youth than for nonimmigrant youth reporting higher rates of bias-based bullying experiences. Primary contributions of this study include the importance of considering the interacting systems in which immigrant youth are embedded, and evidence suggesting that family cohesion as a protective factor may work differently for immigrant than for nonimmigrant youth experiencing bias-based bullying. These findings are critical to child and family policy and practice given the peak in anti-immigrant sentiment and prevalence of hate-driven youth victimization in the United States over the past few years.

4.1 | Family cohesion and school belongingness as independent protective factors

In partial support of our hypothesis, we found that family cohesion moderated the association between bullying experience and internalizing problems for immigrant youth only. Middle schoolers who experienced higher levels of bullying reported fewer internalizing problems when they perceived higher levels of family cohesion. The moderation between bullying experience and internalizing problems was not significant for nonimmigrant youth, supporting our hypothesis that family cohesion would be more impactful as a protective factor for immigrant than for nonimmigrant youth. However, neither family cohesion nor school belongingness moderated the associations between bias-based bullying and externalizing and prosocial behaviors for either immigrant or nonimmigrant youth.

Therefore, study findings indicated that in immigrant families, where family togetherness is highly prioritized, youth's experiences of family cohesion is a critical protective factor for internalizing symptoms such as depression and anxiety. Family cohesion may provide a distinct form of resilience to immigrant youth's experiences of bias-based victimization by serving as a socialization context for their cultural identities and norms (Burgos et al., 2017; Ghazarian et al., 2008). It is also important to note that bullying was not significantly related to externalizing behaviors for immigrant youth, although it was for non-immigrant youth. These findings are consistent with past research indicating that immigrant youth, in general, are more likely to report internalizing as opposed to externalizing difficulties compared to native born youth (Kremer, Sutton, & Kremer, 2019). According to Ecological Systems Theory, cultural values such as *simpatia* (i.e., seeking harmonious social interactions; sacrificing one's own needs for the sake of others' needs; Holloway, Waldrip, & Ickes, 2009) and norms that are strengthened through family cohesion, may make immigrant adolescents more likely to repress their feelings from bullying victimization as opposed to acting out. Additionally, immigrant youth are taught that acting out in response will be ineffective due to macro-level inequalities and to ignore discrimination (Ayón, 2016). As a result, this too can lead to internalization rather than externalization of the harm incurred from bias-based bullying. Conversely, nonimmigrant adolescents in the United States may have learned to prioritize individual over group; hence, they may not feel the same pressure to regulate their expression of stress when experiencing higher levels of bullying. In line with PVEST and Ecological Systems Frameworks, the study findings point to the importance of considering protective factors within the multiple environments in which adolescents are embedded (e.g., cultural context; family cohesion; school context) and the interactions of these systems on adolescent development.

Contrary to our hypothesis, school belongingness did not moderate the relations between bullying experience and any of the 3 social-emotional outcome variables (internalizing, externalizing, and prosocial behaviors). The Ecological Systems Theory explains that it is important to not only examine microsystem (school, family) influences on children's development, but also the interactive effects between microsystems (i.e., mesosystem influences). Thus, it is possible that the interaction between school belongingness and family cohesion may reveal a more accurate understanding of how adolescents experience and adapt to experiences with bias based bullying.

4.2 | Family cohesion and school belongingness as joint protective factors

The primary novel contributions of our study were findings on the joint effects of high family cohesion and high school belongingness on the positive association between bullying and prosocial behaviors for immigrant children. Immigrant youth experiencing high levels of bullying showed increasing levels of prosocial behaviors when also reporting high levels of family cohesion and school belongingness. Previous research has shown that discrimination experiences can predict later prosocial behaviors as adolescents strive to reestablish social connection and acceptance (Davis et al., 2016). In addition, it is possible that prosocial behaviors are learned by immigrant youth from interacting with warm, supportive family members, school staff, and peers (Bandura, 1962). The joint effects of two positive contexts, the family and school (mesosystem), may help immigrant children to model prosocial behaviors from these environments when experiencing high levels of bullying (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Thus, school-based practitioners should consider both microsystems, school and home, in conjunction when seeking to promote prosocial behaviors in immigrant youth.

In contrast, high family cohesion and high school belongingness worked differently for nonimmigrant youth. Only the positive relation between bullying experience and externalizing behaviors was moderated by the joint effects of high family cohesion and high school belongingness; however, predominantly driven by school belongingness. In line with social identity theory, it is possible that feeling a sense of belonging to school enhanced by family support may help nonimmigrant youth in their development of self-efficacy and self-esteem that protects them against the negative effects of bullying such as externalizing behaviors (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Finally, our hypothesis that family cohesion would be a stronger protective factor against bias-based bullying for immigrant children than nonimmigrant children was partially supported. Family cohesion interacted with school belongingness to moderate the positive association between bullying experience and prosocial behaviors; yet similar associations were not found for internalizing and externalizing behaviors. When both family cohesion and school belongingness were considered as part of the interaction with bullying experience, findings revealed that family cohesion was a relatively stronger protective factor than school belongingness in the association between bullying and prosocial behaviors for immigrant children. This was not true for internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Thus, immigrant children who experienced higher levels of bullying engaged in more prosocial behaviors when they reported more family cohesion, and this was true above and beyond the effects of school belongingness (Figure 2). These findings are in line with past studies that have found family cohesion to be a powerful protective factor for immigrant youth than native youth (Mood et al., 2017), and the Ecological Systems Theory that explains the importance of considering cultural context in understanding adolescent development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

4.3 | Limitations and future directions

This study is not without limitations. First, the cross-sectional design precluded our ability to make causal inferences on the impact of bullying experiences with immigrant and non-immigrant adolescents and to examine possible underlying processes that would explain associations between bullying and youth adjustment. Thus, future studies should implement longitudinal designs. Second, all study variables were reported by adolescents and may have contributed to shared method error. Third, school belongingness and family cohesion were both measured using unidimensional scales. This may have contributed to the lack of findings for school belongingness as a moderator. Future studies should examine multiple dimensions of connection to the family and school (e.g., warmth, support, loyalty) for a more comprehensive account of these moderations which may also help explain the differential pattern of results for the various outcomes. Fourth, this study assessed only two contexts of the bullying social ecology. It is possible that other moderators such as socioeconomic status may provide further insight into risk or protective factors of adjustment for immigrant youth experiencing bullying at school as well as the form and role of family cohesion and school belongingness. For example, if parents have to work many hours would school belongingness take on greater importance or would family cohesion grow to encompass different family members. Finally, past research has found that the immigrant and racial/ethnic composition of schools may influence school belongingness as well as psychosocial adjustment (Georgiades, Boyle, & Fife, 2013); however, concentration or percentage of immigrants in school was not able to be considered in this study. Future studies should consider school compositions when assessing school belongingness.

4.4 | Conclusion

Guided by Ecological Systems Theory and PVEST (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Spencer et al., 1997), this study addressed an important question: what factors protect the development of immigrant youth, especially during a time in which anti-immigrant sentiment and hate crimes have peaked in the United States? Findings from this study extend current understanding by revealing the importance of concurrent experiences of school belongingness and family cohesion on the prosocial behaviors of immigrant youth. In addition, novel findings demonstrated that protective factors such as family cohesion may function in different ways for immigrant and nonimmigrant youth. School and family counselors should consider the joint benefits of high family cohesion and high school belongingness on victims of bullying, especially those who are from immigrant backgrounds. While it is critical that the focus not be drawn from preventing bias-based bullying in the first place, it is also necessary for child and adolescent researchers to further identify unique protective factors according to youth's social ecologies to inform culturally relevant family interventions and policies and create protective social environments for immigrant youth. This study is a first step in building the knowledge base critical to developing empirically based culturally and contextually driven practice and policies that benefit the health and well-being of all youth.

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