Hostile School Climates: Explaining Differential Risk of Student Exposure to Disruptive Learning Environments in High School

Christy Lleras

ABSTRACT. Using data from a national sample of 10,061 African American, Hispanic, and White 10th graders, in 659 U.S. high schools, this study examines whether students in certain school contexts may be more likely to experience hostility in school that is detrimental to the overall learning environment. The results from the hierarchical linear models indicate that students are more likely to experience disruptive classrooms in large and high-poverty schools. Students also report feeling less safe in large and public high schools. Additionally, this study finds the effect of student characteristics on the likelihood of experiencing verbal bullying in school varies by school characteristics. The results suggest that high-achieving African American and Hispanic students are more at risk of verbal harassment within predominantly minority schools.

KEYWORDS. Bullying, verbal harassment, school environment, race and ethnicity, peer rejection

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Journal of School Violence, Vol. 7(3) 2008
Available online at http://jsv.haworthpress.com

doi:10.1080/15388220801955604

A vast literature exists on harmful things that happen in schools as well as the overall academic and social climate within schools. For example, school climate studies often examine the effects of school and classroom organization, resources, and disciplinary rules and policies on student achievement and academic performance (Shouse 1996; Gottfredson 2001; Bryk Driscoll 1988). On the other hand, safe school research has generally focused on determining which students are more likely to engage in delinquent and abusive behavior and, to a lesser extent, which students are more likely to be physically abused by peers (Elliott, Hamburg, & Williams, 1998; Borg 1999; Lowry et al., 1995). By and large, however, these studies have remained part of rather separate literatures, despite the fact that in reality, children experience school in a much more holistic way. Furthermore, little research has been done on who is more likely to be a victim of verbal harassment and physical abuse by peers in school. In this study, the primary goal is to determine in which kinds of places, and for which kinds of students, the learning environment is negative. In other words, are there particular school contexts and/or particular groups of students within those school contexts who are more likely to experience a school climate that is hostile to the overall learning experience?

By employing a broader conceptual framework, hostile school climates, this study recognizes that a diversity of experiences can contribute to a school climate that inhibits student learning and reduces overall school effectiveness. More specifically, a hostile school climate is defined as one in which students experience disruptive, physically and/or psychologically abusive situations that may directly or indirectly interfere with or draw attention away from the learning environment, resulting in a school climate that can negatively affect student engagement and performance in school. The main goal of this study is to determine whether certain school contexts, and groups of students within those schools, are more or less likely to experience a hostile school climate that may negatively impact the quality of their learning experience. The current study has four main goals: (1) to determine how common different kinds of hostile experiences are among a national sample of high school sophomores; (2) to examine where, across the broad range of school contexts, students are more likely to experience a hostile school climate; (3) to assess whether different groups of students are more or less likely to experience hostility during school; and (4) to determine whether certain students are more or less at risk for experiencing harassment with different kinds of school contexts. Unique to this study is the focus not only on school safety, but also on verbal harassment by peers and classroom disruptions which create a school climate that is hostile to student learning.

BACKGROUND

Research on delinquency in schools has covered a wide range of behavior from criminal acts like robbery and aggravated assault, to less serious forms of misconduct including tardiness, acting out in class, and talking back to teachers (Joseph, 1996; Lawrence, 1998; Moles, 1990; Welsh, 2000). However, the focus of the media and professional accounts has often been on the more severe delinquent behaviors, leading some to identify the recent past as constituting an "epidemic of violence" in our nation's schools (Elliott, Hamburg, & Williams, 1998, p. 4). For example, almost one quarter of students in grades 3–12 reported being kicked, bitten, or hit by another student at school during the previous year (Hamburg 1998). However, a recent study by the Department of Education (1999) highlighted the problem posed for school administrators and teachers by less serious, but more widespread forms of delinquent behavior, since these behaviors often interfere with the classroom routine and interrupt the normal flow of teaching (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Of the public high school principals surveyed, 67% reported that student tardiness was a serious or moderate problem, followed by student absenteeism (52%), and physical conflicts among students (17%). In another national survey, more than half of the teachers reported that students had talked back to them, and almost all the teachers reported that students passed notes, talked during class, or were tardy in the prior week. More importantly, between one third and one half of the teachers surveyed (varied by grade level) stated student misbehavior interfered with their ability to teach (Center for Education Statistics, 1986), and more than half of the teachers felt student misconduct interfered with other students ability to learn effectively (Center for Education Statistics, 1987).

While delinquency among adolescents has received a great deal of public attention, bullying behavior among U.S. youth, particularly verbal bullying, has traditionally been viewed by the public, teachers, and school administrators as constituting a "normal" part of growing up. Therefore, little systematic research on both the nature and prevalence of bullying specifically among U.S. school children has been conducted (Smith et al., 1999; Nansel, 2001). The vast majority of what we know about bullying comes from research conducted in schools in Scandinavian countries (Besag, 1989; Olweus, 1978, 1991, 1996), the United Kingdom (Whitney & Smith, 1993; Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Moran, Smith, Thompson, & Whitney, 1993), Australia (Rigby & Slee, 1991, 1993) and a growing

number of central European and other countries around the world (for a review of cross-national studies on bullying see Smith et al., 1999). However, interest in the prevalence of bullying behaviors and the student and school characteristics associated with perpetrators and victims of bullying in American schools is increasing (Harachi et al., 1999; Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Nolin et al.; 1995; Nansel, 2001).

Like delinquency, researchers have included a range of behaviors from physical aggression to verbal harassment when defining bullying behavior (Atlas and Pepler, 1998). Researchers generally agree, however, that bullying involves some aspect of repeated verbal and/or physical victimization over time (Nansel et al., 2001; Morita et al., 1999). Of the few studies conducted in the U.S., the majority have focused on the more physical forms of bullying (e.g., assaults), with much less attention paid to verbally aggressive behaviors (Harachi et al., 1999). Verbal forms of bullying include direct verbal harassment such as threats, teasing, or putting others down, and indirect harassment such as spreading gossip or rumors (Nansel et al., 2001).

According to some researchers, 15% to 20% of American students will experience at least some form of bullying during their school years (Batsche & Knoff, 1994). This statistic varies widely, however, depending upon the survey instrument (e.g., self-report versus teacher reports) and the definition of bullying behavior. Recently, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (Health Behavior of School-aged Children (HBSC)) collected data from a nationally representative sample of 15,686 6th through 10th grade students, in public and private schools throughout the United States. The HBSC survey asked students whether and how often they were bullied in school during the current term. To provide the students with an idea of what constitutes bullying behavior, the following explanation preceded the questions regarding bullying:

> We say a student is being bullied when another student, or a group of students, say or do nasty and unpleasant things to him or her. It is also bullying when a student is teased repeatedly in a way he or she doesn't like. But it is not bullying when two students of about the same strength quarrel or fight. (Nansel, 2001, p. 2095).

According to the survey, almost 30% of students reported moderate or frequent involvement in bullying, either as victims (10.6%) or as bullies (13.0%), or both (6.3%). To date, this has been the only study of the prevalence of bullying victimization among youth in American schools

(Nansel et al., 2001), and no studies have examined whether there are systematic patterns of peer victimization across different school contexts.

DEFINITION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF "HOSTILE" SCHOOL CLIMATE

Broadly defined, a hostile school climate exists when students experience disruptive, threatening, or harassing situations that directly or indirectly draw attention away from the learning environment. These hostile situations can occur within the classroom and throughout the day in a variety of locations on school grounds. For example, student misbehavior in class could directly interfere with other students' learning experience by disrupting the classroom routine and interfering with students' ability to pay attention in class and concentrate on their schoolwork. However, a hostile climate outside of class could also affect a students' academic effort and performance. For instance, being put down or teased by peers could result in a low self-esteem, fear of school, and poorer attitudes toward school in general. Ultimately, students may adopt strategies to protect themselves from harassment. These strategies include not participating in class, dropping out of school activities, or skipping class or school, which in turn could lead to a reduction in effort and poorer academic performance. Student victims of verbal and/or physical harassment and students who feel physically threatened because of high levels of disorder may in turn feel that their school is unsafe. Students who feel unsafe in school may have difficulty adjusting, emotionally and socially, to the school environment, which could directly influence their ability to engage themselves in and do well at school.

Regardless of the form it takes, researchers generally agree that students who are victimized by their peers are at a heightened risk of developing a host of emotional, behavioral, and social difficulties, including anxiety and depression (West and Salmon, 2000), lower self-esteem (Olweus, 1994; Egan and Perry, 1998) and eating disorders among girls. Moreover, being victimized may negatively affect academic effort and performance (Ladd et al., 1997; Juvonen et al., 2000). Studies have shown that peer victimization can lead to more negative attitudes toward school (Whitney & Smith, 1993) and students who are bullied may also experience increased difficulty adjusting to school (Sutton & Keogh, 2000). For example, a recent study of middle school students in Los Angeles found that peer victimization led to poorer socioemotional adjustment in school

which in turn, negatively affected school performance (Juvonen et al., 2000). Students who are bullied may also develop coping strategies to reduce their risk of repeated victimization which could directly affect their overall attachment to school and academic performance, such as avoiding certain places in school, withdrawing from classroom and school activities, and cutting classes or skipping school altogether (NCES, 1995).

PRIOR RESEARCH

Contextual Factors Related to a Hostile School Climate

Schools are one of the primary socializing institutions in American society. However, while schools share many similarities, they differ in countless ways with respect to their organizational structures, physical characteristics, cultural norms and values, and social milieu (Anderson, 1982). These aspects combine to create a school climate that partially determines the quality of the learning experience students receive in a given school. Via a variety of contextual processes, characteristics of the schools and their students can have a profound impact on the cognitive, social, and emotional development of youth and affect the chances a student will experience hostility both inside and outside the classroom as well. In general, school disorder research has been somewhat limited due to its focus on individually centered factors, with a lack of attention paid to the role schools might play in fostering an environment that encourages or discourages student delinquency, bullying, and feelings of safety. To address this shortcoming, this study focuses on how school-level factors contextualize student experiences to provide a useful framework for examining hostile experiences across a variety of school characteristics.

Organizational Structure

School organizational structure refers to the overall "administrative structure, including patterns of school operations and rules governing various school practices" (Welsh et al., 2000, p. 248). Organizational characteristics include the nature of teacher-student relationships, opportunities for student participation, working conditions of teachers, ability grouping, and community and parent relationships to the school (Anderson, 1982; Welsh et al., 2000). Researchers often look for variation in the determinants of these variables by examining data collected from school

districts on the number of students enrolled in school, as well as classroom size, student-teacher ratios, and teacher salaries (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985; Toby, 1983, Welsh et al., 2000). In addition, school sector (e.g., public versus private) has often served as an important variable, distinguishing between different academic, social, and disciplinary structures within school (Coleman et al., 1982).

School size may also be an important factor determining school climate for several reasons. First, larger schools make it more difficult for teachers, principals, and administrators to monitor and regulate student behavior. Second, a larger student body also means more interpersonal relationships and opportunities for conflict between students or peer groups (Welsh et al., 2000). Third, larger schools may be more impersonal and may result in a greater sense of anomie among students and between students and teachers (McPartland & McDill, 1977). Indeed, students in large schools may feel "lost in the crowd" and become alienated and frustrated with school. These feelings can lead to decreased commitment and attachment to school and may increase the likelihood of engaging in delinquent or disruptive behavior. Finally, smaller schools may have more of a "community" culture where everyone knows everyone else. Thus, student-teacher relationships may be more intimate in smaller schools because teachers are more likely to know students and their parents outside school, and teachers in small schools may have more interactions with students during and outside of class (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985).

Research has repeatedly shown that school size, measured by total student enrollment, can influence student behavior. Gottfredson and Gottfredson (1985) found a significant bivariate correlation between student reports of fear in school and higher student enrollments. Haller (1992), utilizing a nationally representative sample of students and their principals in public and private high schools (HSB), found that school size had a large and significant impact on reports of truancy problems, disorderly conduct, and theft. Other studies have shown that large schools are associated with higher rates of teacher and principal reports of classroom misconduct, disruptions, and more severe behavioral problems (Weishiew & Peng, 1993; Bryk & Driscoll, 1988).

Social Milieu

In addition to the organizational attributes of schools, the characteristics of persons and groups within the school environment may also be

associated with the creation of a hostile school climate. According to Gottfredson (2001), schools are embedded within the larger social context of the neighborhood where students reside. Thus, the social class and ethnic background of students reflect those of the surrounding community, and contribute to the shared values and expectations comprising the academic climate of a particular school (Gottfredson 2001; Bryk & Driscoll 1988). For example, schools with a high proportion of students from economically disadvantaged families and neighborhoods may be less likely to have a clear academic mission, high expectations for students, and may lack the resources to be effective places of learning (Bryk & Driscoll 1988; Gottfredson 2001). Furthermore, high poverty schools may have an overrepresentation of students who lack the skills to meet curriculum requirements (Farkas, 1996). Moreover, these schools may experience difficulty in hiring and retaining quality teachers and administrators, and in acquiring other material resources necessary to create a positive school environment (Gottfredson, 2001; Anderson, 1998). As a result, teachers and students in high poverty schools may have lower academic expectations which can lead to lower student attachment to school, and increased frustration with the schooling experience. This interaction between the school context and student attitudes can foster a climate in which students are more likely to misbehave during school.

Many studies find a positive association between schools with higher percentages of economically disadvantaged and minority students and greater incidences of classroom misconduct, as well as more violent behavior (Anderman & Kimweli, 1997; Haller, 1992; Weishew & Peng, 1993; Lawrence, 2000; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985). In a reanalysis of the Safe School Study, researchers found that students are more likely to be victimized in schools with a high concentration of non-White students, and in schools with more socio-economically disadvantaged students (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985). Weishew and Peng (1993), analyzing a nationally representative sample of 8th graders from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS), also find that students in high poverty middle schools are significantly more likely to misbehave in school (e.g., tardiness, absenteeism, vandalism, theft), as are students in public and large schools. In a related study, Lee and Croninger (1996) employ hierarchical linear modeling to examine the relationship between school characteristics and student perceptions of safety. They find students in schools with a high concentration of minority students and schools with a high percentage of disadvantaged students are more likely to feel unsafe in school. There have been few

similar studies, using survey data, of verbal harassment across different kinds of school contexts. Therefore, it is uncertain whether the same school characteristics that are associated with increased classroom disorder and school safety (e.g., high poverty, and large schools) are also associated with an increased risk of verbal abuse. This study will address this uncertainty by examining the association between various school characteristics and student reports of disorder, physical safety, and verbal abuse.

School Culture

Every school is characterized by the values, attitudes, and beliefs of various groups in the school including students, teachers, and administrators (Anderson, 1982). These cultural factors contribute to a school-wide system of norms, expectations, rewards, and sanctions that reinforce certain behaviors and structure daily interactions among administrators, teachers, and students (Welsh et al., 2000). Peer norms comprise a fundamental part of school culture and can play an important role in the creation of academic, as well as hostile learning environments.

All adolescents are in the process of constructing their sense of self, and all are striving for status within their peer group. These struggles for dominance or social competition are closely associated with the adolescent's sense of self and image within the peer group (Fagan & Wilkinson, 1998), and often involve psychological conflict, aggressiveness, and feelings of sensitivity and hurt. Social comparison processes are one of the defining characteristics of peer group interactions during adolescence and can be an important source of competition, disputes, and interpersonal violence in schools (Fagan & Wilkinson, 1998; Gottfredson, 2001; Sutton & Keogh, 2000).

According to some developmentalists, rough and tumble play, including play-fighting, helps to establish dominance hierarchies throughout childhood, particularly among boys (Fagan & Wilkinson, 1998). This can be relatively harmless among very young children, but when it persists into older ages, and increases in severity as a pattern of aggression in pursuit of dominance, it can turn into bullying, which can be a precursor to antisocial and delinquent behavior (Olweus 1994; Nansel et al., 2001). More generally, it may be that in some schools social comparison processes generate a climate where the incidence of psychological and physical abuse directed at peers is particularly high. In other schools, the incidence of such acts may be lower.

For decades, social scientists have been aware that adolescent peer groups tend to value things other than academic performance (Coleman, 1961). While doing well in school may reduce a student's risk of becoming delinquent and disruptive in school, working hard and excelling academically may not result in higher status within the group (Juvonene & Murdock, 1995), and may not insulate students from peer sanctions or harassment (Wentzel & Asher, 1995; Sutton & Keogh, 2000, Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). The result can be a school climate where high-achieving students frequently encounter verbal or psychological, and sometimes physical, abuse from their peers. In some school contexts these social comparison processes may be particularly detrimental to the creation of a positive academic and social atmosphere that encourages student effort and learning.

Ethnographic research suggests that such *oppositional* climates are particularly common within high minority, low-income neighborhoods (Ogbu 1974, 1978; Fordham & Ogbu 1986). Recent ethnographic and survey research provide further evidence that high-achieving African-American students may be more at risk of being put down by their peers (Hemmings, 1996; Datnow, 1997; Datnow and Cooper, 1997; Farkas & Lleras, 2000), although this claim has also been disputed (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey 1998). However, other literature has found that Catholic and other private schools are very effective in preventing the emergence of such climates, particularly for low-income, African-American students (Greeley 1986; Hoffer & Coleman 1987; Bryk, Lee, & Holland 1993; Peterson & Hassel 1998).

Of course, student put-downs of peers who try to do well at school are not unique to any one subgroup of students. For example, the accusation of "brown-nosing" the teacher is a universal, adolescent, peer group put-down. Rather, the issue is whether there is a social patterning to the creation of school climates that are systematically hostile or not hostile to the learning environment within schools.

Student Characteristics Related to Hostile School Climate

Much of the research on school violence and disorder has focused on physical abuse and identifying students at risk for engaging in delinquent or violent behavior (Elliott et al., 1998). However, there is increasing interest in what kinds of students are at higher risk of peer victimization, in terms of psychological and physical abuse (Nansel, 2001). According to several national studies, boys are more likely than girls to be involved

in delinquent behaviors and peer-directed aggression, both as victims and as perpetrators (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Borg, 1999; Nansel et al., 2001). However, several recent studies found that while boys are more likely to engage in physically aggressive behaviors (e.g., hitting, kicking, threatened), girls are more likely to participate in verbally harassing behaviors (e.g., name calling, teasing, put downs) (Rivers & Smith, 1994; Hoover et al., 1992; Whitney & Smith, 1993). While some research suggests African American and Hispanic students may be more at risk of physical violence compared to similar White students (Lowry et al., 1995; Eron et al., 1994), fewer studies have examined whether minorities are also more likely to experience psychological abuse in school. Of these studies, many have found negligible differences in overall peer victimization (e.g., teasing, bullying) by ethnicity (Moran et al., 1993; Siann et al., 1994). However, the non-significant findings could be due to a limited number of ethnic groups to compare (e.g., comparing only Asians and Whites) and small sample sizes (Moran et al., 1993; Hannish & Guerra, 2000). Further, the effect of individual characteristics such as race and ethnicity on victimization could also depend on school context.

Survey research suggests that the influence of individual factors on the risk of peer victimization may vary depending on the characteristics of the school. A study by Anderman and Kimweli (1997) finds that once the characteristics of the school are controlled, student's ethnicity is no longer a strong predictor of the risk of victimization. One of the few studies to examine the relationship between school characteristics and the risk of verbal and physical victimization by peers utilizes data from African American, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic white elementary school children across 14 public schools in a large mid-western city (Hanish & Guerra, 2000). The results show that the risk of peer victimization (e.g., picked on by other students, pushed or hit) is dependent upon not only the race and ethnicity of the student, but also on the racial composition of the school. The authors find Hispanic children are the least likely to report being victimized by other students, followed by African Americans and White students. However, African American children are slightly more likely to be victimized in schools that are predominantly African American, and White children are significantly more at risk of victimization in predominately non-White schools. This research highlights the importance of considering physical and psychological forms of victimization, as well as the cross-level interactions between student and school-level factors, when examining factors associated with a hostile school climate.

CURRENT STUDY

While researchers are increasingly focused on the issues surrounding school violence, little attention has been paid to lesser but more widespread forms of harassment that may create a school environment hostile to the student learning process. Second, many of the studies on the relationship between student characteristics and school violence and peer victimization have utilized small and unrepresentative samples (e.g., schools within particular city). Finally, few studies utilizing nationally representative samples have examined whether certain students are more or less likely to experience a hostile school climate across different kinds of school contexts.

The current study will address these shortcomings by utilizing a national sample of African American, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic White 10th grade students in schools across the United States. According to school climate theories, the organization, social milieu, and cultural systems determine the overall academic and social milieu, and cultural systems determine the overall academic and social environment in schools (Welsh et al., 2000; Anderson, 1982). Drawing on prior research and using school climate and oppositional culture theory as guides, this study will also specifically test whether certain groups of students, in this case high-achieving African American and Hispanic students, are more likely to experience verbal harassment in certain school contexts. This study will also examine whether sex differences exist in the likelihood of experiencing verbal abuse among high-achieving students in different kinds of schools.

Drawing on prior research, this study hypothesizes that male students will be more likely to feel physically unsafe, but female students will experience more verbal abuse in high school. Since studies show that African American and Hispanic students may be more at risk of physical violence, this study hypothesizes they will be more likely to report feeling unsafe in school compared to similar White students. It is also expected that students in high poverty and high minority schools will be more at risk for experiencing disruptive, physically unsafe, and psychologically abusive school environments. Further, students in private schools and small schools are expected to be the most insulated from experiencing a hostile school climate. Finally, based on the oppositional culture theory and prior research, this study hypothesizes that high-achieving African American and Hispanic students will experience more verbal harassment when they are in predominantly minority high schools.

DATA AND METHODS

Sample

This study utilizes survey data from the second wave of the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS) conducted in 1990. The NELS is a nationally representative sample of approximately 17,000 high school sophomores in more than 600 public and private high schools. The data, collected by the National Center for Education Statistics, are part of a series of longitudinal surveys of students, and their parents, teachers, and school administrators. The NELS is uniquely suited to answer the research questions in this study because it includes student reports of classroom disorder, perceptions of school safety, and verbal harassment, as well as school-level information provided by administrators on a variety of school characteristics.

The sample includes Hispanic, African-American, and non-Hispanic White sophomores with no missing data on any of the school characteristics, student outcomes, and main student-level predictors (i.e., race and ethnicity, sex). These criteria yielded a final sample of 10,061 African-American, Hispanic, and White (non-Hispanic) tenth graders in 659 schools across the United States.

Variables

Dependent Variables

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the outcomes and explanatory variables, additional details are noted below. Three measures of school hostility are analyzed. First, students may experience a hostile learning environment via disruptive behaviors from students within the classroom. Therefore, a variable which asks students the extent to which they experience disruptions in class from other students will be used. Second, experiences of physical hostility, by using a student survey item which asks the extent to which "I don't feel safe at this school."

Finally, psychological and verbal abuse in school will be measured by using a concrete, descriptive, behavioral variable which asks students "how often they feel put down by other students in school." I believe this questionnaire item captures a variety of experiences viewed by students as psychologically or emotionally hostile and by asking students about the frequency of such "put downs," also provides a measure of severity. All three of these student outcome measures were coded on a 4-point Likert

TABLE 1. Descriptive statistics for NELS 10th grade African American, Hispanic and White students across all schools

Variables	Description	Metric	Mean	SD
Student-Level Variables				
Dependent Variables				
Disrupt	Other students often disrupt class	1=Strongly disagree; 4=Strongly agree	2.84	.73
Unsafe	Student does not feel safe at this school	1=Strongly disagree; 4=Strongly agree	1.61	.68
Put Down	Student often feels put down by other students	1=Strongly disagree; 4=Strongly agree	2.02	.72
Individual Characteristics				
Male			.49	.50
African American			.09	.28
Hispanic			.10	.30
White (reference)			.81	.39
Family Background				
Socioeconomic Status	Continuous variable constructed from parent's education, occupation, and annual family income.	Ranges from –3.04 to 2.76	.05	.78
Single mother family	Adult composition of household	1 = Adult female only; 0 = otherwise	.14	.33
Good Student	Does student think that other students see him/her as a good student?	1="Very" good student; 0 = otherwise	.30	.46
		1 = "Not at all" good student; 0 = otherwise ("Somewhat" is the omitted category)	.10	.30
School-Level Variables				
Poverty Status				
High Poverty School	Percentage of total student body participating in free or reduced lunch program	1 = More than 50 percent of the total student body participates in program; 0 = otherwise	.09	.28
Minority Status				
High Minority School	Percentage of white non-Hispanic tenth grade students enrolled in school	1 = Less than 25% (non-Hispanic) White; 0 = otherwise	.10	.29

(*Continued*)

TABLE 1. (*Continued*)

Variables	Description	Metric	Mean	SD
School Size				
Small School	Total student enrollment as of October 1989	1 = Less than 400 students; 0 = otherwise	.12	.32
Large School		1 = 2,500 or more students; 0 = otherwise	.05	.22
School Sector				
Public School	Classification of school sector as reported by school administrator	1 = Public; 0 = Catholic, other religious or nonsectarian private school	.88	.32
School Urbanicity				
Urban School		1 = Urban or Central-City; 0 = otherwise	.25	.43
Rural School		1 = Rural; 0 = otherwise	.17	.38
School Region				
South		1 = South; 0 = otherwise	.36	.48

scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (4), such that higher responses indicate a more hostile school environment.

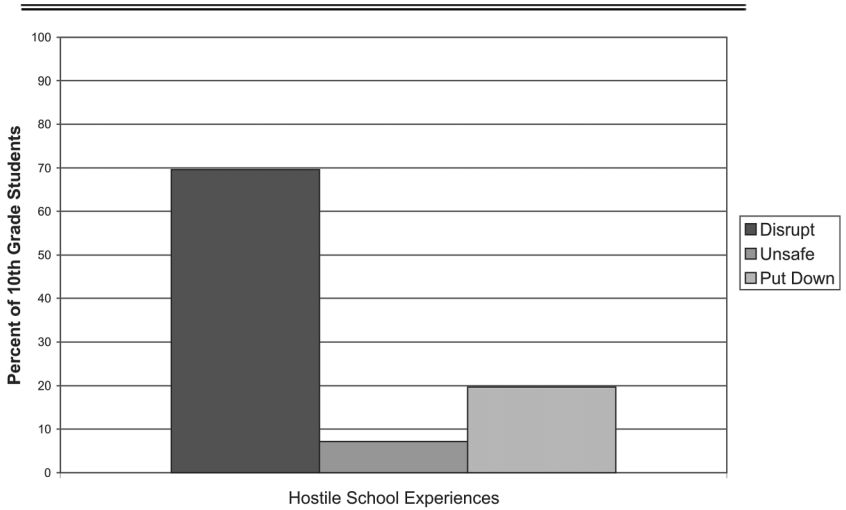
Figure 1 displays the percent of 10th graders across all schools who "agree" or "strongly agree they often experience disruptions in class by other students, feel unsafe in school, and are often put down by other students. Of all the students in the sample, most have experienced being in a disruptive classroom environment. Indeed, almost three fourths of the high school sophomores in our sample agree or strongly agree "other students often disrupt class," compared with only 7% of 10th graders who report feeling unsafe at school. This finding is similar to those reported elsewhere (Lee & Croninger, 1996). However, almost 20% of students agree or strongly agree that they often feel put down by other students in school.

These preliminary results suggests that while disruptions in class are a widespread and recurrent problem in schools across the U.S., students generally feel safe at school. However, since approximately one in five 10th graders experienced put downs from other students often during the school year, the problem of psychological or verbal harassment in high school is also highlighted.

Student-Level Variables

To estimate the within-school model several measures of student characteristics and family background that have been shown to be related to

FIGURE 1. Percent of 10th Grade Students Who Report Experiencing Disruptive Classrooms, Feeling Unsafe, and Being Put Down By Other Students in School.



students' chances of experiencing hostility in school are included. These variables are student's sex, race, and ethnicity, family socioeconomic status, and whether the student resides in a single mother household. These variables are also used as controls in the between-school analysis of school hostility.

Several additional student variables in the slopes-as-outcomes model testing the oppositional culture hypothesis that high-achieving minority students, in this case African Americans and Hispanics, are more likely to be sanctioned by peers for their efforts, particularly within minority schools are also included. School effort is measured by a variable which asks students whether others view them as being a good student. From this variable, two dummy variables representing "Very" good and "Not at all" good students, are created ("Somewhat" of a good student is the comparison group) and included in this analysis. Two dummy variables for race and ethnicity (Black and Hispanic) with Whites as the base category, and a dummy variable for male students is also included. These are entered both as main effects and as interactions with "very" good student and "not at all" good student in the slopes as outcomes model.

School-Level Variables

Guided by school climate theory and prior research on contextual effects, several objective school characteristics in the analysis of student reports of school hostility are included. To measure the social milieu of schools, two variables are used: the percentage of economically disadvantaged students and the percent of non-white students in the school. The organizational characteristics of schools is operationalized by including measures identifying school sector as public or private and school size. To measure school size the total school enrollment is used to create two dummy variables indicating whether the school is "small" (less than 400 students) or large (more than 2,500 students). A dummy variable for whether the school is located in the South and dummy variables indicating whether the school is urban or rural (suburban is omitted category), are also included as control variables in all analyses.

Analytic Strategy

This study addresses three main questions. First, what student characteristics are associated with an increased chance of experiencing a hostile school climate? Second, net of student characteristics, which schools are associated with higher levels of hostility? Third, are students who try hard and do well in school more likely to be verbally abused, and does this depend on the student's race, sex, and school context? To answer these questions it is necessary to model the effect of student and school characteristics, as well as their cross-level interactions, on measures of school hostility. This requires hierarchical data whereby students are nested within schools which the NELS (1990) data provide. Since students are not randomly assigned to the schools they attend, a multilevel statistical modeling approach, Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM), is used to estimate the models (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992).

The basic HLM model takes into account the nesting of students within schools and estimates equations both at the student-level and at the school-level. HLM deals with the complex error structures associated with nested data and models the cross-level interactions between student and school characteristics more properly. As a result, this multilevel model produces better estimates of the slopes and standard errors compared to standard ordinary least squares regression (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992).

To answer the first question—What student characteristics are associated with increased chances of experiencing school hostility?—a

random-coefficient regression or within-school model is estimated. In this model, two measures of school hostility reported by students (classroom disorder and physical safety) are regressed on each of the student characteristics. Since the predictors and the outcomes are measured at the student-level, this model, referred to as the within-school model, estimates the variance of the outcome that can be attributed to differences among students within schools, without regard to differences between schools.

To answer the second question—What school characteristics are associated with increased or decreased school hostility?—a one-way ANOVA or unconditional model is estimated to determine the amount of variance that lies within and between schools in students reports of school hostility (i.e., classroom disorder, physical safety, psychological abuse). This between-school model includes the school-level characteristics as predictors, and the student-level characteristics as controls. This HLM model allows the estimation of the effects of each of the school characteristics on the between-school variance in each of the measures of school hostility, while controlling for the within-school differences due to the characteristics of the student respondents.

The final question—Are high-achieving students more likely to be psychologically or verbally abused, and does the likelihood vary by race, sex, and school context?—requires the estimation of a more complex HLM model, the slopes-as-outcomes model. In the slopes-as-outcomes model, the outcome is a function of the overall intercept, the main student-level effects, and the cross-level interactions between the student predictors and the school characteristics. Therefore, this model allows the effects of student characteristics on the measure of verbal abuse to vary non-randomly by the school-level predictors.

RESULTS

Within-School Analysis

Question 1: Which different groups of students are more or less likely to experience verbal harassment by other students, and feel physically unsafe at school?

To address this question, a random-coefficient or within-school model is estimated whereby the student outcomes are regressed on student sex,

race and ethnicity, family socioeconomic status, and single mother family (Level-1 model). To simplify the analysis and aid in interpretation, all student-level variables are centered on their group means. Table 2 presents the results for student reports of feeling unsafe and being put down.

As predicted, in a typical school, male students are significantly more likely than females to report feeling unsafe, but less likely to feel put down by other students. More affluent students are much less likely to fear for their own safety and to be put down by other students. Contrary to our predictions, African American and Hispanic students actually report feeling safer in school. Further, African American students are the least at risk of experiencing verbal harassment from their peers, followed by Hispanic and White 10th graders, respectively. In subsequent analyses, however the extent to which the relationship between race, sex, and experiencing verbal "put downs" from their peers varies by being a good student, as well as by school context will be investigated.

TABLE 2. HLM within-school model of students' feelings of feeling unsafe at school and being put down by other students, across all schools (n=10,061 students in 659 schools)

	STUDENT OUTCOMES			
	Student Does Not Feel Safe In School		Student Often Feels Put Down By Other Students	
Student-Level Fixed Effects[a]	Coefficients	se	Coefficients	se
School Mean	1.618***	.010	2.017***	.008
Individual Characteristics				
Male	.036*	.014	–.050**	.016
African-American[b]	–.086*	.036	–.165***	.033
Hispanic	–.071*	.030	–.092**	.032
Family Background				
Family socioeconomic status	–.058***	.011	–.040**	.012
Single mother family	–.036	.021	.018	.025

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

[a]All student-level variables are group-mean centered.

[b]White students are the omitted category.

Between-School Analysis

Question 2: What school characteristics are associated with increased student reports of classroom disruptions, verbal harassment or put-downs, and feeling unsafe in school?

In the previous random-coefficient regression model, significant variability in reports of feeling unsafe and verbal harassment by student characteristics was found. The next question is whether there is also significant variation in students' experiences of hostility across different school contexts. First, an unconditional HLM model with random effects is estimated (no student-level or school-level predictors included) for each of the student outcomes. This model allows the estimation of the total amount of variability in the student reports of hostility that is within schools and between schools. The results, presented in Table 3, indicate the highest amount of between-school variability is among student reports of feeling unsafe (14%), followed by classroom disruptions (13%) and verbal harassment (8%). These initial results indicate that while most of

TABLE 3. HLM regression coefficients from between-school model of students' perception of hostile school climate

	STUDENT OUTCOMES		
	Other Students Often Disrupt Class	Student Does Not Feel Safe In School	Student Often Feels Put Down By Other Students
Fixed Effect			
Average School Mean, γ_{∞}	2.845***	1.618***	2.017***
Random Effect			
Between School Variance (τ_{∞})	.036	.038	.010
Within School Variance (σ^2)	.491	.421	.513
HLM Reliability Estimate	.516	.565	.210
Proportion of the Total Variance is Between Schools[a]	.125	.138	.078

***p<.001

[a]To determine what proportion of the total variance in the outcome is attributed to between school variance I calculated the intraclass correlation: $\tau_{\infty}/ (\tau_{\infty}+\sigma^2)$ (Bryk and Raudenbush, 1992). And since the reliability for the level 1 outcome was somewhat low, I adjusted the within school parameter variance (σ^2) downward to account for the presence of random error: $\tau_{\infty}/ [\tau_{\infty}+(\sigma^2 \times$ HLM reliability estimate$)]$ (Lee and Croninger, 1996).

the variance in student reports of different dimensions of a hostile school climate lies within-schools, a significant proportion of the total variance in each of the student outcomes is indeed, between schools.

Next, to determine whether, net of the characteristics of students attending the school, hostile school experiences differ by various school contexts, a second model which includes school level characteristics as predictors and student characteristics as control variables for each of the student outcomes is estimated. Table 4 presents the school-level coefficients from the between-school HLM analysis. Note, the analyses include

TABLE 4. Regression coefficients from between-school HLM analysis of students' perceptions of a hostile school climate across different school contexts (n=10,061 students in 659 schools)[a]

	STUDENT OUTCOMES		
	Other Students Often Disrupt Class	Student Does Not Feel Sale In School	Student Often Feels Put Down By Other Students
	Coefficient (S.E.)	Coefficient (S.E.)	Coefficient (S.E.)
Fixed Effect[b]			
Intercept (school average)	2.551*** (.040)	1.345*** (.030)	1.946*** (.024)
School Composition[c]			
High poverty school	.087* (.037)	.051 (.035)	–.003 (.031)
High minority school	–.014 (.037)	.034 (0.36)	–.064* (.032)
School Sector			
Public school[c]	.247*** (.039)	.276*** (.030)	.034 (.025)
School Size			
Large school[d]	.008 (.038)	.127** (.049)	–.024 (037)
Small school	–.012 (037)	–.060* (0.28)	.027 (.029)

*p< .05 **p< .01 ***p< .001.

[a]Each column shows the coefficients for the effect of the school-level variables on each of the student reports of school hostility, controlling for the within-school differences in student-level characteristics (presented in Table 2). The analysis estimates includes both the student-level and school-level variables in the model.

[b]All models include student-level control variables for student's sex, race and ethnicity, family SES, and single mother family which are centered around their group means, and additional school level controls for school's urbanicity and region.

[c]Catholic and other non-Catholic private school are the omitted category.

[d]Schools with total student enrollments between 400 and 2.499 are the omitted category.

controls for student characteristics (i.e., sex, ethnicity, family SES, single mother), as well as for school urbanicity and region.

Looking at the first two panels of coefficients in Table 4, we can see that many of the hypothesized relationships are in fact observed. The largest are the strong, positive effects of public schools on classroom disruptions and feeling unsafe in school (the effect on put down is also positive but does not reach statistical significance). Consistent with prior research, private schools manage to create a climate in which the chance of student misbehavior in class and fear of physical abuse is greatly reduced from the level observed in public schools. Following these two large positive effects in magnitude, the results show that students who are in large schools are significantly more likely to report feeling unsafe, while students in small schools feel more safe compared to larger schools. Consistent with prior research, high poverty schools are associated with significantly greater reports of classroom disruptions. Taken together these results suggest that private schools are best at minimizing disruptions within the classroom, as well as fostering a non-hostile and safe school environment. Also important is school size. As prior theories suggest, large schools may have a particularly difficult time regulating student behavior and creating a safe and non- threatening environment.

The third panel of Table 4 shows the results for verbal abuse, "often feels put down by other students." The only significant effect on being put down is that of high minority schools, where students are less at risk of experiencing put-downs from their peers. No other school-level variables are significant in this analysis. Since theories and prior research predict that attending high poverty and high minority schools might place students at increased risk of verbal harassment and put downs due to an oppositional climate, these results are perplexing. Also surprising is that the school characteristics identified as protecting students against disruptions and physical violence in school, namely smaller schools and private schools, do not protect students from psychological or emotional abuse in the form of verbal harassment. Given the current debate over whether oppositional culture exists, specifically within minority schools, and the perplexing results from the analysis of "put down," a more refined test of the oppositional culture hypothesis is conducted in the next analysis.

Slopes-as-Outcomes Analysis

Question 3: Is the likelihood that different groups of students will experience verbal harassment dependent upon the social context?

In other words, are some groups of students more or less at risk for experiencing verbal harassment within different kinds of school?

Few survey research studies directly address the question of which students find themselves most at risk of experiencing verbal abuse from their peers in school. However, according to Coleman, adolescent peer groups often value or respect things other than academic performance (Coleman, 1961). In addition, the oppositional culture theory suggests that students who work hard in school and are good students are not always viewed positively by other students, particularly within minority peer groups in low-income, minority schools (Ogbu, 1978; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). More recent empirical survey research has debated the existence of an oppositional culture specifically among African-American peer groups (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; 2000; Farkas, Lleras, & Maczuga 2000). Thus, the next test will be whether high-achieving African American and Hispanic students are more likely to experience verbal abuse or put-downs in schools, specifically within predominantly minority schools. And, unlike prior research, this study also tests whether male and female high achieving students also experience peer harassment differently depending on school context.

A slopes-as-outcome ordered logit HLM model is estimated to address these questions, which includes the eight school-level variables (high minority school, high poverty school, small school, large school, private school, urban school, rural school, and South), and their cross-level interactions with the student-level predictors. The test of the main oppositional culture hypothesis is whether the coefficients for the interaction terms between African American, "Very Good Student," and High Minority School, and between Hispanic, "Very Good Student," and High Minority School, are positive and significant. Table 5 presents the results from the ordered logit HLM analysis. Note, the dependent variable has been recoded so that a positive sign indicates a greater likelihood of "put down" by other students.

Examining the coefficient for African Americans that are very good students, we see a large, significant, positive effect on being put down when, and only when, these students are in a high minority schools. Additional analyses were conducted which interacted variables such as family SES with "good student," but these results appear *only* for high-achieving African-American students (results not shown). Examining the coefficient for Hispanics that are very good students, again we see that

TABLE 5. Slopes-as outcomes HLM model of effects of being viewed as a good student, by race and sex of student, on being put down across different school types (n=10,061 students in 659 schools)[a]

	Student Often Feels Put Down By Other Students
Effect of Independent Variables	
On School Mean of Being Put Down	
Intercept	1.945**
High poverty school	–.003
High minority school	–.064*
Public school	.034
Small school	.027
Large school	–.024
Individual Characteristics	
On Male	
Average male slope	.124*
High poverty school	.095
High minority school	–.023
Public school	–.127*
Small school	.015
Large school	–.053
On African American	
Average African American Slope	–.061
High poverty school	.058
High minority school	.124
Public school	–.129
Small school	.216
Large school	–.108
On Hispanic	
Average Hispanic Slope	–.083
High poverty school	.092
High minority school	–.105
Public school	–.024
Small school	.012
Large school	–.081
On "Very Good" Student	
Average "Very Good" Slope	.110
High poverty school	.104
High minority school	–.214*
Public school	–.171*
Small school	–.142
Large school	.104

(Continued)

TABLE 5. *(Continued)*

	Student Often Feels Put Down By Other Students
On "Not at All Good" Student	
Average "Not Good" Slope	.070
High poverty school	.087
High minority school	.266
Public school	.055
Small school	–.037
Large school	.176
Race X Good Student Interactions	
On African American X "Very Good" Student	
Average "Very Good" African American Slope	–.057
High poverty school	–.408*
High minority school	.493**
Public school	–.160
Small school	–.550*
Large school	–.007
On Hispanic X "Very Good" Student	
Average "Very Good" Hispanic Slope	–.036
High poverty school	–.051
High minority school	.140
Public school	–.237
Small school	–.106
Large school	.108
On African American X "Not at all Good" Student	
Average "Not at all Good" African American Slope	.443
High poverty school	–.438
High minority school	.062
Public school	–.619
Small school	–.092
Large school	–.013
On Hispanic X "Not at all Good" Student	
Average "Not at All Good" Hispanic Slope	.718
High poverty school	–.218
High minority school	–.189
Public school	–.542
Small school	–.046
Large school	
Sex X Good Student Interactions	
On Male X "Very Good" Student	
Average "Very Good" Male Slope	–.130
High poverty school	–.121
High minority school	.117
Public school	.146

(Continued)

TABLE 5. *(Continued)*

	Student Often Feels Put Down By Other Students
Small school	.230*
Large school	–.092
On Male X "Not at all Good" Student	
Average "Not at All Good" Male Slope	–.092
High poverty school	–.546**
High minority school	–.286
Public school	–.028
Small school	.023
Large school	.449*

*p<.05, **p<.01.
[a]All student-level variables are non-randomly varying in the analysis (the slopes vary strictly as a function of the school-level predictors).
Includes controls for family socioeconomic status and single mother household.

they are less likely to be put down in every school context, except in high minority schools. Here, as with African American "good" students, they are more likely to be put down, although the coefficient fails to reach statistical significance. The results also suggest that high achieving male students are significantly more likely to experience verbal harassment from peers if they are in smaller schools.

The results presented in Table 5 are complex and likely represent only one aspect of the multifaceted social interactions among different groups of teenagers today. However, it is noteworthy that the only consistent positive effects on put down are for very good African American and Hispanic students in high minority schools. This lends support for the existence of an oppositional culture within predominantly minority high schools. More research is needed, however, to more fully understand the complex interactions between school characteristics, peer group culture and processes, and a school climate resistant to student effort and performance.

CONCLUSION

This study has extended prior work on school climates and school violence by examining the extent to which students' experiences of classroom disorder, physical safety, and verbal abuse differ across school contexts. The analyses tested whether specific groups of students were more or

less likely to experience psychological abuse and feeling unsafe in school. Furthermore, given the debate over the existence of an oppositional culture, this study also examined whether African American and Hispanic students who try hard in school were more likely to be verbally harassed by peers in predominantly minority high schools.

The HLM analyses of hostile school climates supports much of the prior research on school disorder and school violence. On average across all schools, students from low SES households are more likely to feel unsafe and to experience peer harassment in the form of verbal put down in high school. Consistent with prior research, private schools and smaller schools are also more likely to provide an environment where students feel physically safe in school. In addition, students in private schools and schools with lower percentages of economically disadvantaged students are less likely to experience disruptions during class.

The analysis also yielded some surprising results. In general, African American and Hispanic students are less likely to report feeling unsafe and to be put down by peers in school compared to Whites. Unlike the findings for physical safety and disruptions, school size, school sector, and the percentage of students in poverty are not significantly related to the likelihood that a student will experience psychologically harassing situations or verbal put-downs in school. Indeed, the only significant effect on being put down is a decreased likelihood for students in high minority schools.

These findings suggest that school characteristics which have traditionally been associated with lower levels of disorder and increased physical safety, namely private schools, smaller schools, and higher SES schools do not also protect students against psychological or verbal forms of abuse. In light of these findings, additional tests were conducted to see whether high performing African American and Hispanic students in predominantly minority schools had an increased chance of being put down by their peers. The answer is “yes.”

In the final analysis (Table 5), which examined the interaction between student’s race and being a “good student” on the frequency of being put down, African American high achieving students were significantly more likely to report being put down by other students only when they were in high minority schools. Similar results held for Hispanic students, although the coefficient failed to reach significance. The analyses also revealed that high achieving males are more likely to be put down in small schools compared to similar female students.

First-hand reports of oppositional culture-related behavior continue to be brought forward. They have been reported among African American high school students in Canada (Solomon 1992) and in survey data from U.S. college students (Lovaglia, Thompkins, Lucas & Thye 2000). Among African-American fourth-graders on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 2000, 39% agreed or strongly agreed that "my friends make fun of people who try to do well," compared to only 17% of Whites (Farkas, Lleras, & Maczuga 2002). Similar results held for 1998 (NCES 2001). However, more empirical work, and new and richer data sources will be required if we are to fully understand the complex social dynamics underlying the creation of hostile school climates.

In sum, this study provides evidence that some students attend schools where they must cope with an additional handicap-a hostile school climate. Classroom disruptions, as well as situations that are physically and/or psychologically abusive to students can contribute to an overall school environment, which inhibits student learning and reduces school effectiveness. Indeed, these environments may reduce the likelihood that once a student falls behind that they will be able to catch up in their schoolwork. We must continue to work to decrease the prevalence of such school environments.

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RECEIVED: 06/06/07
ACCEPTED: 07/18/07