

# PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS IN RELATION TO BULLYING/VICTIMIZATION AT SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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## ABSTRACT

### OBJECTIVE

To investigate psychological distress experienced by students as a result of bullying and victimization. Gender and grade differences were also observed.

### STUDY DESIGN

Cross sectional research design.

### PLACE AND DURATION OF THE STUDY

Different public sector secondary schools of Faisalabad were approached during a period of 3 months from February 2016 to September 2016.

### SUBJECTS AND METHODS

A convenient sample of 247 students was drawn from respondents and Olweus Bully Victim Questionnaire was used to classify students into bullies, victims, bully-victims and the students who were not involved. Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale was used as measure of psychological distress.

### RESULTS

Results of One way ANOVA showed that Victims of bullying was the most vulnerable group to be affected by depression and anxiety, as compared with uninvolved students, all the three involved groups experienced significantly greater levels of depression, anxiety and stress. Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) showed significant main effects of gender and grade on depression and anxiety and the same was true for interaction effect. Girls in lower grades were more depressed and anxious.

### CONCLUSION

Psychological distress among bully/victim groups is discussed for contributory factors and necessary preventive actions.

### KEY WORDS

Bullying, Victimization, Psychological Distress.

## INTRODUCTION

School violence particularly bullying, is a noticeable issue adversely affecting a large number of students in middle and secondary schools<sup>1</sup>. Bullying is any repetitive undesirable hostile behavior toward an adolescent by another adolescent or group of adolescents, who are not siblings, including an imbalance of power<sup>2</sup>. Olweus (1994) in his classic definition explains bullying as a type of violence that is characterized by imbalance of power, tormenting, and aggression to dominate others<sup>3</sup>.

The individuals involved in bullying tend to exhibit four main types of behavior as: bully, victim, bully/victim and bystander or not involved. Bullies are those students who bullied others; victims are those individuals who become targets of repeated aggression or negative acts against them and who had been bullied and also bullied others were categorized as bullying/victims. The students who do not participate in any bullying like behavior or victimized are labeled as bystanders or uninvolved<sup>4</sup>.

Bullying take a variety of forms such as verbal tormenting, for example, name calling, prodding, taunting and debilitating or may be physical, such as , hitting, pushing, spitting, punching, taking and harming property, or it may also appear as social harassing, for example, spreading gossipy tidbits, exclusion by peers or spreading rumors about him in school<sup>5</sup>. Around 10 to 20% of children and adolescents are regularly involved in school bullying/harassing as either bullies, victims, or both. Boys are more frequently involved in bullying as compared with girls, and a significant number of adolescents (especially in elementary grades) report exploitation from tormenting<sup>6</sup>. Prevalence of bullying in South East Asian countries ranged between 7 to 59% with highest rates reported in Philippine 30-59%<sup>7</sup>. Taiwanese researchers reported 10.9% bullies, 10.7% victimization and 5.5% bully/victims in China<sup>8</sup>. In a recent Turkish study 20.1% bullies and 24.6% victimization were reported by school students<sup>9</sup>.

Literature reports contradictory findings with regard to prevalence across gender, age and grade. It may depend on assessment tools and the type of bullying/victimization. Elementary grade children were more involved in physical bullying but it declined with age, and in secondary grades, they were engaged in verbal bullying<sup>10</sup>. Some studies found no gender differences<sup>11</sup> while other reported girls to be involved more in indirect bullying as compared with boys<sup>12</sup>.

This issue has recently captured the attention of Pakistani researchers. A study investigated the tendency and distinctive types of harassing and peer victimization among 817 students in grades 4 to 6, enrolled in public and private sector schools in Lahore, Pakistan. More boys than girls reported being harassed by verbal, racial and sexual means<sup>13</sup>. Another study conducted in Pakistan had found that 23.2% students were bullied, and

24.1% were victimized<sup>14</sup>. It had been demonstrated that involvement in bullying and deteriorated physical and psychological health are interconnected<sup>15</sup>.

Psychological distress is a state full of emotions portrayed by symptoms of depression and anxiety<sup>16</sup>. A meta-analysis of researches demonstrated the connection between bullying and psychosocial maladjustment and found a significant relationship with measures of anxiety, depression, loneliness and self-esteem. Generally, victim reported higher levels of psychological distress<sup>17-19</sup>. Some researches with school children of age 8 to 16 years indicated that depression was fundamentally related with victimization<sup>20,21</sup>. Literature provided evidence for the relationship between involvement in bullying and depression. Many studies exhibited a simultaneous relationship between bullying and depression in children. Children or adolescents who bully others developed symptoms of depression<sup>6</sup>. A study had confirmed that victimized students indicated more unhappiness and distress as compared with uninvolved<sup>22</sup>. A recent study explored a strong relationship between bullying and anxiety. Typical symptoms of anxiety, misery, and negative affectivity had been reported by bully victims<sup>23</sup>. Many researches demonstrated that people who were victimized, usually encountered social anxiety<sup>24,25</sup>.

Current study particularly focuses on the bullying behavior and its psychological outcomes in secondary school students. This is such a transitional age that bullying and victimization bring major psychological consequences in this age group. Moreover existing research on bullying in Pakistan has mainly discussed elementary school students<sup>14,26</sup>. Keeping in view the deficiency of information on psychological outcomes of bullying and victimization in high school students, the current study explored the distressing aspects such as stress, anxiety and depression as result of involvement in a variety of bullying roles.

Current study was designed to assess the variety of bullying behaviors among secondary schools and also aimed to check the level of psychological distress (depression, anxiety, stress) among students involved in different forms of bullying (bullies victims, bully-victims, uninvolved). Furthermore this study was intended to examine the gender differences bullying, victimization and psychological distress in terms of depression, anxiety and stress.

The Study hypothesized the following;

1. The level of psychological distress (depression, anxiety, stress) would differ across bully victim group.
2. There would be gender and grade differences in bullying/victimization and level of psychological distress (depression, anxiety, stress) among secondary school students.

## SUBJECTS AND METHODS

### Participants

Sample for the present research comprised of 247 students (121 girls; 126 boys) having an age range between 12 to 17 years ( $M_{age} = 14.77$ ;  $SD_{age} = 1.21$ ). The participants were recruited from 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades of four secondary schools of Faisalabad using convenient sampling technique. Based on Solberg and Olweus (2003) criteria, students were identified as bullies ( $n = 37$ ), victims ( $n = 49$ ), and bully/victims ( $n = 37$ ). The sample is actually based on a larger study on psychosocial outcomes of school bullying and victimization, therefore a random sub-sample ( $n = 124$ ) of

uninvolved students was also included in the present research for the sake of comparison. However, it prevented to report the prevalence estimates in the current paper.

### Instruments

#### Olweus Bully Victim Questionnaire (OBVQ)

Olweus questionnaire is the most widely used self-report measure, especially used for identifying students in different bullying roles. It is a five point Likert scale (1-5) and consisted of 32 items. An Urdu version (26) was used that has shown excellent psychometric properties in terms of reliability ( $\alpha = .91$ ) and construct validity. Based on the prescribed cut off (4) students who always become the target and do not act as offenders are known as victims; those who always perpetrate and not victimized are referred to as bullies; while those who are frequently targeted and mostly act as offenders are said to be the bully-victims. Those who never or very rarely involved in offending others or being targeted are classified as uninvolved<sup>27</sup>.

#### Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS)

DASS is extensively used measure of psychological distress in terms of providing subscale scores on Depression, Anxiety and Stress. A short form, the DASS-21, is accessible with 7 items for every scale<sup>28</sup>. Urdu version of the measure has been used in the present study. It too has sound psychometric evidence and has been widely used with adolescents<sup>29</sup>.

### Procedure

After obtaining permission from school authorities, an informed consent was obtained from the students. Those who gave consent were provided with the instruments by the researcher. Students first completed a set of questions from Olweus Bully Victim Questionnaire and later reported on DASS-21. They were instructed to be honest and were also assured of the confidentiality of the information provided by them. No compensation was presented, however, in case of experiencing any problems; the students were offered to consult the researcher for 2 weeks following the data collection. Data were analyzed through Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM SPSS 21 version).

## RESULTS

Results showed that sample consisted of approximately equal proportion of boys and girls. 43% of the sample were from 8<sup>th</sup> grade (see table 1 for details). Involvement in different bullying roles seems almost the same across gender except for higher frequency of boys as bully-victims. Across grades, percentage of students classified as bullies, victims and bully-victims was higher in lower grades i.e 8<sup>th</sup> grade, showing a gradual decline in higher grades i.e 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>.

The figure 1 showed victims scored higher than other groups on all the three subscales of DASS. Uninvolved group markedly seemed to have lower scores on depression anxiety and stress. Bullies and bully-victims had though obtained greater scores than uninvolved group on the 3 subscales, but not they were lesser than victims. The differences were further explored using one way ANOVA.

Results of One way ANOVA confirmed the differences illustrated in Figure 1, by showing significant differences among groups on all the three subscales; however to explore the nature of these differences, LSD Post Hoc test was performed.



Results indicated that Victims were more depressed than bully-victims ( $M.diff = 1.67, p < .05$ ) whereas the magnitude of depression did not differ than bullies. Similarly, bullies and bully-victims also experienced equal level of depression. All the three involved groups scored significantly higher than the uninvolved group on depression. Victims also experienced higher levels of anxiety than bullies ( $M.diff = 1.33, p < .05$ ) while no significant difference was reported between victims, bully-victims and bullies, bully-victims. Again Uninvolved students showed significantly lesser anxiety than victims, bullies and bully-victims. Finally, all the three involved groups experienced equal level of stress by showing no significant differences; however all of these reported significantly higher level of stress than uninvolved group.

Main effects of gender and grade were significant for depression and anxiety. Girls ( $M = 4.74; SD = 4.04$ ) felt more depressed than boys ( $M = 3.72; SD = 4.20$ ). They ( $M = 3.18; SD = 2.74$ ) also reported to be more anxious than boys ( $M = 2.64; SD = 4.40$ ). Grade differences were further analyzed using LSD Post Hoc test and the results are shown in table 5. Gender and Grade interaction effect was also found

significant for depression  $F(2, 243) = 4.77, p < .001$ , and anxiety,  $F(2, 243) = 6.26, p < .001$ . Figure 2 and 3 illustrated the nature of interaction effects.

Post hoc comparisons demonstrated significant differences for depression between students of 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade and also between 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students. These differences were also evident for anxiety in the same way. Student in class 8<sup>th</sup> scored higher on both depression and anxiety as compared with students of 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> class, while no significant differences were found between students of grades 9 and 10.

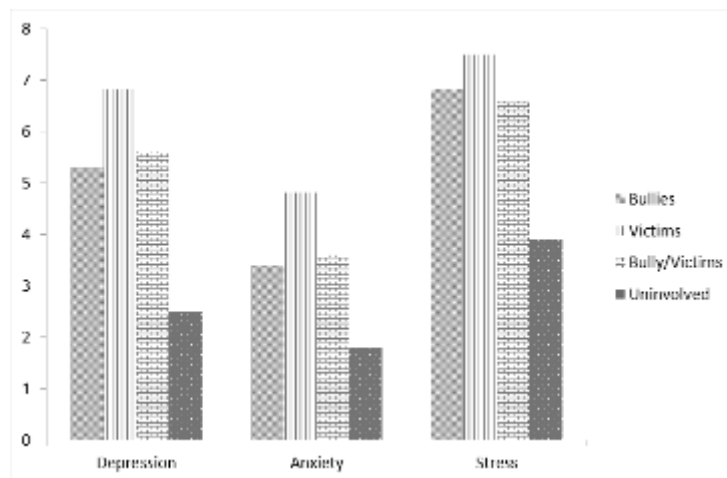
Figure 2 showed that boys especially of class 8<sup>th</sup> were more depressed than girls in the same class, while girls in higher grades scored higher on depression than boys.

Figure 3 demonstrated that boys in lower grades (8<sup>th</sup>) were more anxious than girls while girls in higher grades (9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>) tended to score higher on anxiety as compared to boys.

**Table 1**  
**Frequency of Bullying Roles across Gender and Grades (N = 247)**

		Bullying Roles				Total f (%)
		Bullies f (%)	Victims f (%)	Bully-Victims f (%)	Uninvolved f (%)	
Gender	Boys	17 (13.9)	25 (19.84)	24 (19.04)	60 (47.62)	126 (51)
	Girls	19 (15.70)	24 (19.83)	14 (11.57)	64 (52.89)	121 (49)
Total		36 (14.57)	49 (19.84)	38 (15.38)	124 (50.20)	247 (100)
Grade	8.00	19 (17.92)	23 (21.70)	20 (18.87)	44 (41.51)	106 (43)
	9.00	8 (10.96)	14 (19.18)	11 (15.07)	40 (54.79)	73 (29.5)
	10.00	9 (13.23)	12 (17.65)	7 (10.29)	40 (58.82)	68 (27.5)
	Total		36 (14.57)	49 (19.84)	38 (15.38)	124 (50.20)

**Figure 1**  
**Mean Differences on DASS Subscales across Bully/ Victim Groups (N = 247)**



**Table 2**  
One Way ANOVA Showing Main Effects of Bully/Victim Status on DASS Subscales (N = 247)

		SS	df	MS	F
Depression	Between Groups	780.53	3	260.17	17.99***
	Within Groups	3498.09	242	14.45	
	Total	4278.63	245		
Anxiety	Between Groups	349.28	3	116.42	13.62***
	Within Groups	2059.91	241	8.54	
	Total	2409.20	244		
Stress	Between Groups	624.18	3	208.06	14.73***
	Within Groups	3403.05	241	14.12	
	Total	4027.24	244		

\*\*\*p < .001.

**Table 3**  
LSD Post Comparisons across Bully-Victim Roles for Depression, Anxiety and Stress (N = 247)

DV	(I) BV Roles	(j) BV Roles	M.diff (I-J)	SE	95% CI	
					LB	UB
Depression	Victims	Bully/victim	1.67*	.82	.05	3.29
		Uninvolved	Bullies	-2.81***	.72	-4.22
	Anxiety	Victims	Bully/victim	-4.35***	.64	-5.61
Uninvolved			Bullies	-2.68***	.70	-4.07
Stress		Bullies	Victims	-1.33*	.64	-2.61
	Uninvolved		Bullies	-1.64**	.56	-2.75
	Stress	Victims	Bully/victim	-2.97***	.49	-3.95
Uninvolved			Bully/victim	-1.76**	.54	-2.83
Stress		Uninvolved	Bullies	-2.93***	.71	-4.33
	Victims		-3.61***	.63	-4.85	-2.35
			Bully/victim	-2.75***	.69	-4.13

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001.

DV: Dependent Variable; BV Roles: Bully/victim Roles

Note: Only significant results are reported.

**Table 4**  
MANOVA Showing Main Effects and Interactions of Gender and Grades for DASS Subscales (N = 247).

Source	Dependent Variable	SS	df	MS	F
Gender	Depression	95.54	1	95.54	5.89**
	Anxiety	30.54	1	30.54	3.68*
	Stress	32.29	1	32.29	1.97
Grade	Depression	184.67	2	92.33	5.69***
	Anxiety	233.13	2	116.56	14.04***
	Stress	60.02	2	30.01	1.83
Gender * Grade	Depression	154.61	2	77.30	4.77***
	Anxiety	104.04	2	52.02	6.26***
	Stress	67.74	2	33.87	2.07
Error	Depression	3840.31	237	16.20	
	Anxiety	1967.01	237	8.30	
	Stress	3876.28	237	16.35	
Total	Depression	8592.00	243		
	Anxiety	4386.00	243		
	Stress	11470.00	243		

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001.

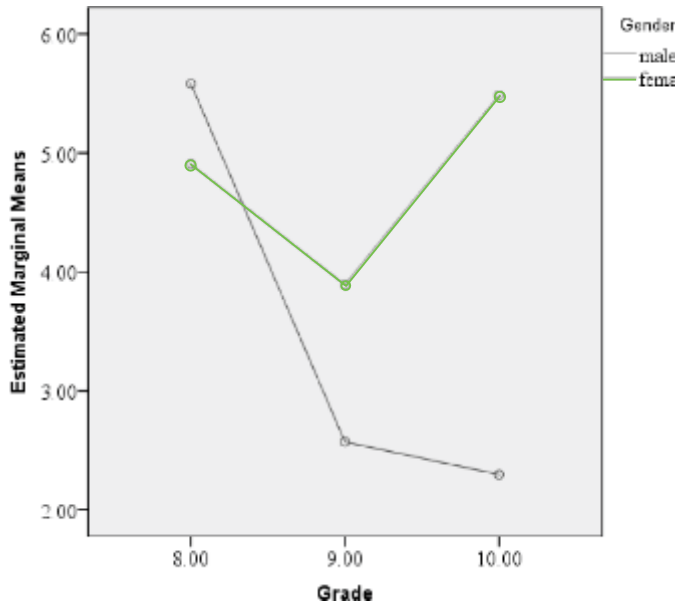
**Table 5**  
LSD Post Hoc for within Grade Comparisons (N = 247)

DV's	(I) Grade	(J) Grade	M.diff (I-J)	SE	95% CI	
					LB	UB
Depression	8.00	9.00	1.98**	.62	.76	3.20
		10.00	1.48*	.63	.24	2.72
Anxiety	8.00	9.00	1.99***	.44	1.12	2.87
		10.00	2.01***	.45	1.12	2.89

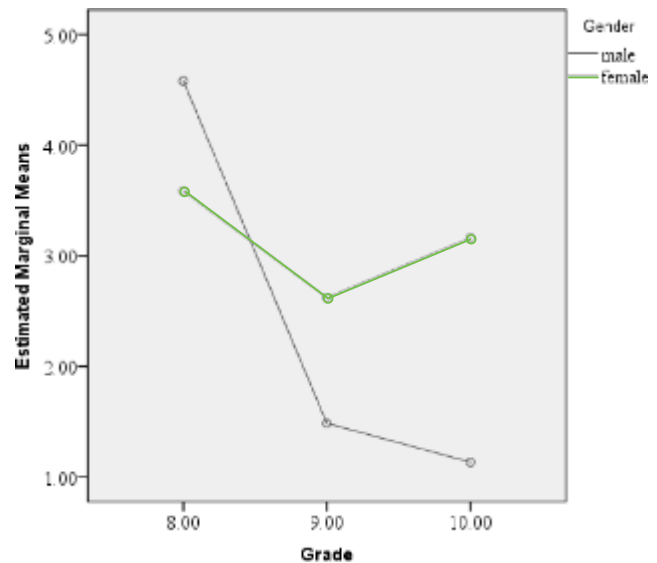
\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001. Note: Only significant results are reported



**Figure 2**  
Gender and Grade Interaction Effect on Depression Scores (N = 247)



**Figure 3**  
Gender and Grade Interaction Effect on Anxiety Scores (N = 247)



## DISCUSSION

The study evaluated the impact of school bullying and victimization on mental health of secondary school students by studying the psychological distress in terms of depression, anxiety and stress. Students were identified as bullies only, victims only, and bully-victim and these three groups were compared with a control group of students who have been completely uninvolved in bullying and victimization.

Findings indicated that bully victimization exerted an adverse impact on mental health of students. The students who had experienced bullying most frequently were the most depressed of all bullying roles especially as compared with the bully-victim group who can also be called the offensive. Existing literature supported these findings by reporting depression in victims at school<sup>30</sup>. Bully victimization at school is associated with poor self-esteem and other psycho-social problems. Being unable to fulfill the social demands and feelings of worthlessness at the same time makes the students more vulnerable to depression. This effect can be two ways actually as students who were already vulnerable to depression as being less confident or having poorer self-esteem tend to become the victims always. So further investigation of personal and situational factors associated with depression among victims is required. Bully-victims in some extent find a way to express their distress by bullying others and therefore feel less depressed. However contradictory findings exist as some studies suggested that bully-victim group experienced higher levels of distress for being involved in victimization and bullying<sup>31</sup>.

Bully victims also suffered from higher levels of anxiety as compared with bullies. Their frequent experience of being targeted and fear to be in danger contributes to the higher levels of anxiety. Anxiety of being harmed by bullies in both direct and indirect ways could haunt their thoughts and result in apprehension<sup>32</sup>. Unfortunately these adverse impacts may take more severe forms as studies had

confirmed the association of childhood anxiety as a result of victimization with increased risk of generalized anxiety disorder, agoraphobia and panic disorder in adulthood<sup>33</sup>. It is important to note that in the present study, involvement in bullying in any of the roles (bullies, victims, bully-victims) proved to be a significant contributor to distress (depression, anxiety, stress) for students as compared with the students who were categorized as uninvolved. Therefore bullies are also at risk of psychological maladjustment though less frequently than bully-victims and pure victims. A meta-analysis found that bullies experienced poor school adjustment, delinquent behavior, poor social relationships and tendency for drug abuse<sup>34</sup>.

Lastly the study explored gender and grade differences in psychological distress in total sample. Results of MANOVA suggested that girls and students studying in lower grade (8<sup>th</sup>) typically reported higher levels of distress in terms of depression and anxiety. Findings are in line with the previous studies on gender and grade differences in depression and anxiety among adolescents<sup>35,36</sup>. Interaction effects however presented somewhat inconsistent findings as boys rather than girls in lower grade were more depressed and anxious. The results should be interpreted carefully as a large number of students in the present sample were involved in bullying and victimization that should have been controlled while analyzing the scores. However, length did not allow discussing this aspect in the current manuscript as paper mainly focused on differences across bully/victim groups.

## CONCLUSION

Bullying and victimization in any form has devastating and long-term effects on psychological well-being of children and adolescents and findings of the present study not only emphasize the recognition of bullying and victimization as a serious threat to mental health of youngsters but also alert school authorities, parents and mental health professionals to draw attention to the



gravity of this issue that is usually ignored by considering an age related casual outburst. These symptoms could further influence physical health, academic performance and social relationship of students. Promoting healthy peer relationships in schools by preventing violence and endorsing pro-social attitude is the dire need of time. School based mental health services are also highly recommended.

## RECOMMENDATIONS




Bullying and victimization has devastating effects on students in terms of their mental as well as physical wellbeing. Present research can be helpful for teachers, parents and school counselors in perceiving bullying and victimization as a serious threat for physical and psychological health of children and adolescents. These findings would provide profound understanding in the bullying phenomenon and its adverse effects on psychological and physical health of students. Intervention programs to eliminate bullying and victimization from our schools should be implemented. Counseling services should be provided to students as well as parents in order to drop bullying and related psychological issues (depression, anxiety, stress). Following research focused on psychological distress related to bullying other psychological phenomenon (social support, quality of life, emotional well-being etc) should also be explored related to this population. For present study sample was collected from few schools of Faisalabad due to the shortage of time that's why generalize ability of findings is questionable; so, for future researches a large sample size should be incorporated from different regions of different cities.

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