

School Bullying and Empathy among Preadolescents: A Correlational Study

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Abstract

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between school bullying and empathy among preadolescents. Bullying was studied across three dimensions of being a bully, victim, and fighting, whereas empathy was examined as a unidimensional construct. Data were collected from preadolescents between ages 10-12 years in District Haripur. Descriptive statistics, frequencies/percentages, correlation, and t-tests were performed. The findings showed that there is a negative relationship between school bullying and empathy, and less empathic preadolescents were more tended to bully and fight more than more empathic. An equal number of participants reported fighting with others and bullying them in one last month. However, a large majority reported being the victims of bullying 7 or more times in the last 30 days (52, 36.4%). The level of empathy was in the moderate to high range among 178 students and low among 22 students. Boys scored higher on all dimensions of bullying and were less empathic than girls. These findings highlight the need for the screening, prevention, and intervention of school bullying. Can help teachers, parents, school administrators, and counselors to eradicate aggressive behavior.

Keywords: bullying, empathy, preadolescents, peer relationships, sex.

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Introduction

Bullying is a prevalent problem in peer relationships during adolescence. Many adolescents experience bullying in school. Students report victimizing others or being a victim of bullying, as well as observing and defending it over time in classrooms or playgrounds. According to National Center for Educational Statistics (2019), 20.2% of students were victimized and one in five students reported being bullied. Moreover, 41% of students thought to be victimized again at school. This shows that bullying is a serious concern for parents, teachers, and school administrators, among others. Previous researchers have informed us about the antecedents and consequences of bullying. There is a vast literature on the role of individual, family, peers, school, community, and cultural factors in predicting bullying (Swearer & Hymel, 2015). Scholars also examined the effectiveness of anti-bullying interventions. But less attention was paid to the study of certain individual traits, such as empathy.

Scholars realized a need to develop agreed-upon definitions of bullying and empathy. Byrne et al. (2016) performed a content analysis on adolescents' definitions of bullying and noted incongruence among the well-established research definitions. Preadolescents considered bullies as being mean to others, while older adolescents emphasized more on feelings associated with the experiences of victims. Younan (2019) systematically reviewed over 18000 studies on bullying. He differentiated between studies that included a definition of bullying or not. In all, 12 studies defined participants' perception of bullying, and only five studies examined the effects of presentation formats of definition upon how participants construe the phenomenon of bullying. He concluded that different definitions of bullying and formats of presenting it produced varied effect sizes across empirical studies (Younan, 2019).

Both constructs of bullying and empathy have inconsistent definitions that limit understanding, clear communication, and application (Byrne et al., 2016; Cuff et al., 2016). Olweus (1994; p.9) was the first to define bullying in terms of power imbalance and stated, "*a student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed and over time, to negative actions by one or more other students.*" Bullying is aggressive behavior that is deliberate and purposeful, in which the perpetrator harnesses an imbalance of power to control the victim repetitively. The power imbalance, intentionality, and repetition were three salient features in Olweus' definition (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Volk et al. (2014, p.327) defined bullying as "*an aggressive goal-directed behavior that harms another individual within the context of a power imbalance*". Ireland (2014, p.5) enlisted five characteristics as defining features of

bullying. He argued that bullying behavior is "*aggressive, intentional, repetitive, involves a power imbalance and is unprovoked in favor of the perpetrator*".

Like bullying, the concept of empathy has a long history of multiple definitions and so are its measurement procedures. de Vignemont and Singer (2006) postulated that there are perhaps as many definitions of empathy as there are authors in the field. Empathy is the capability of understanding the emotional states of others and being aware of the fact that the source of the emotional state corresponds to the other person (Morese et al., 2018). Blair (2005, p.699) stated that "*empathy may result as a response to emotional stimuli or as the response to the emotions of another person.*" Cuff et al. (2016) reviewed 43 formal and informal definitions of empathy and noted 8 conceptual themes based on similarities and differences among them. They reflected on empathy as "*an emotional response (affective), dependent upon the interaction between trait capacities and state influences. Empathic processes are automatically elicited but are also shaped by top-down control processes. The resulting emotion is like one's perception (experienced or imagined) and understanding (cognitive empathy) of the stimulus emotion, with the recognition that the source of the emotion is not one's own* (p.145)."

A review of the literature contains lengthy categorizations of empathy, such as a trait or state empathy, automatic response or controlled behavior, feelings for real versus imagined, or present versus absent persons (Cuff et al., 2016). The detailed discussion of these categories is out of the scope of the present paper. The state and trait factors both affect empathy which can be an automatically elicited response, but at the same time, individuals possess the ability to control and regulate their empathic feelings (Heyes, 2018). Neuroscientists supported this contention by showing the neural images of activated brain areas upon observing another person's suffering and pain (Preckel et al., 2018). Cuff et al. (2016) equated the empathic feelings for the real or imagined, and present or absent individuals the same. Importantly, Morese et al. (2018) mentioned two subtypes of empathy: cognitive empathy as the ability to comprehend others' emotions, and affective empathy as the ability to sense others' emotions.

Theoretical Background and Empirical Evidence

Various theoretical frameworks explained the constructs of bullying and empathy. The theory of the mind (TOM) fits well because it explains positive and negative social behaviors at opposite ends of a continuum. Premack and Woodruff (1978, p.515) outlined the theory of mind as a person who "*imputes mental states to himself and others.*" It includes the

abilities of mind-reading, perspective-taking, predicting, and explaining others' behaviors, unlike one's own, based on the understanding of their mental states. Adolescents' peer relationships affect the psycho-social process of bullying. The bullying situation involves at least two individuals - one who bullies and the other who is bullied. The presence of peers, their roles as bystanders or defenders, and active or passive involvement in bullying make it a complex group process (Salmivalli, 2010). All the parties involved in bullying possess different levels of empathy.

Studies revealed that a well-developed theory of mind skills is simultaneously associated with prosocial and antisocial behavioral tendencies. Individuals with an excellent theory of mind could develop and maintain conflict-free peer relationships than their counterparts with a poor skill set (Dunn & Cutting, 1999). With growing age, adolescents' peer interactions strengthen, and parental monitoring decreases. They are exposed to good or bad influences and may adopt certain behaviors under peer pressure. Adolescents start bullying others or maybe the victims of bullying. Those adolescents were more vulnerable to bullying who had internalizing and psychosomatic problems (Gini & Pozzoli, 2013). A systematic review of 76 studies was conducted to examine the relationship between the theory of mind and prosocial actions. A significant positive association was traced among a sample of 6,432 children and preadolescents between ages 2-12 years. It was concluded that children were more prosocial when they could understand others' thinking and emotions (Imuta et al., 2016).

K Smith (2017) reviewed studies on the theory of mind skills about antisocial (i.e., bullying) and prosocial behaviors (e.g., defending, empathy). He reported a positive association of bullying with the theory of mind in five studies out of nine. He found that theory of mind was positively correlated with bullying and defending behaviors, and negatively correlated with victimization. Victims of bullying probably had poor theory of mind skills and bullies adaptively used aggression to exercise power (K Smith, 2017). Bullies used their social skills to target their victims who had low peer group support, popularity, and social status (Ybarra et al., 2019). Some studies supported the longitudinal transactional association between the theory of mind and social behaviors. Bullying was an indirect outcome of the theory of mind through poor social preferences, and the theory of mind was a direct outcome of bullying after two years (Fink et al., 2020).

Empirical studies supported that bullies lacked empathy as compared to the defenders (Antoniadou & Kokkinos, 2018). A study found that defenders had empathic feelings for the victims and were intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to stop bullies (Longobardi et al., 2020). Literature

also supported the longitudinal cross-lagged links between bullying and empathy. Gini et al. (2007) found a significant bidirectional association between bullying and empathy across two waves of data collection from adolescents.

Bullying perpetration had a negative association with affective and cognitive empathy (Kokkinos & Kipritsi, 2018; Zych et al., 2019). Bullies had a high level of exploitation and a low level of empathy, and this association strengthened over time during each year of high school. There occurred a gradual decrease in the level of empathy among adolescents, which increased their involvement in bullying over time (Farrell et al., 2020). Evidence exists for the association between empathy and victimization. On one hand, empirical literature supported a significant positive (Caravita et al., 2010) and a significant negative relationship between empathy and victimization (Antoniadou & Kokkinos, 2018). On the other hand, it supported a non-significant relationship between the two (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017; Zych et al., 2019). Another study linked cognitive empathy with bully perpetration and affective empathy with victimization (Younan, 2019). Adolescents with a high level of empathy were less involved in bullying, particularly girls (Antoniadou & Kokkinos, 2018). Certain behavioral dispositions made adolescents more vulnerable to bullying. Bullies are targeted to victimize quiet, lonely, and unpopular peers (Ybarra et al., 2019). Contrarily, bullies were aggressive and competent, but they faced high peer rejection (Guy et al., 2019).

The frequency of bullying fluctuates during adolescence. Younger adolescents understood bullying in physical forms of aggressive and non-aggressive behaviors, whereas older adolescents could understand both physical and verbal forms of bullying (Younan, 2019). A longitudinal study found that adolescents in the age range of 12-15 years had the highest frequency of bullying, which declined by age 18-19 years (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Especially among boys, bully perpetration was relatively reduced during early adolescence, and victimization was reduced during late adolescence (Smith et al., 2019). These findings informed that bullying takes different forms and has alternate frequency during sub-stages of adolescence.

Sex Differences

Sex predicts variations in the levels of bullying and empathy among adolescents. Empirical studies supported that boys had low empathy and more frequent involvement in bullying than girls (Guy et al., 2019). Earlier prosocial behaviors predicted a high level of empathy among adolescents, and it was particularly true for girls (Van der Graaff, et al., 2018). Smith

et al. (2019) conducted five cross-countries surveys with early and middle adolescents. The findings showed that the rate of bully perpetration and victimization was consistently higher among boys than girls. Boys not only bullied others more frequently than girls, but they were also the target of victimization at alternate time points (Griezel et al., 2012). Girls were the victims of online bullying at a higher rate than offline bullying (Smith et al., 2019). Another study found that boys were more involved in physical bullying as compared to girls who were more involved in relational bullying, including spreading rumors or social prohibition (Idsoe et al., 2021).

Socialization practices have a pivotal role in determining sex differences in bullying and empathy. Leaper (2015) postulated concerning traditional socialization practices that boys are expected to be aggressive, assertive, and masculine. In contrast, girls are expected to be compliant, caring, and cooperative. Therefore, girls are more sympathetic and empathetic towards others and feel psychological inhibition to engage in bullying. An empirical study found that girls had higher scores on empathy than boys (Richaud de Minzi, 2013). Focus group research with Swedish adolescents found that the expression and strategies of bullying were affected by sex-specific expectations and social norms. Adolescent boys and girls chose different strategies to cope with bullying due to sex-based expectations (Hellström & Beckman, 2020). In a patriarchal Pakistani society, boys were more involved in aggression, violence, and perpetration of bullying than girls were (Karmaliani et al., 2017). Further research reported that Pakistani girls were the target of bullying more often than boys (Abdul-Razzaq et al., 2021).

With an interest in empathy, sex differences, and sex roles, Baez et al. (2017) aimed to compare the effect sizes of experimental and self-reported data on empathy. They conducted two large-scale empirical studies with nearly 11000 adolescents and found varied outcomes across assessment procedures and measures. The response bias affected the self-report measures, and girls identified themselves as being more empathic towards others on the self-report data. While there were minor sex differences in empathy in the experimental data.

The current study aimed to determine the levels of school bullying and its relationship with empathy among preadolescents. The sex differences were also examined in the study variable among preadolescents. The following hypotheses were checked:

1. There will be a negative relationship between school bullying and empathy, i.e., bullies will show low empathy than non-bullies.
2. Girls will score lower on school bullying and higher on empathy than boys and vice versa.

Method

Research Design

A cross-sectional correlational research design was used in this study.

Participants

The preadolescent students ($N = 200$) from five different elementary schools of Khalabat Township in District Haripur through the convenience sampling technique. Their age ranged between 10-12 years. There was an equal number of boys ($n = 100$) and girls ($n = 100$) to facilitate sex comparison. They were fourth and fifth-grade students and were contacted in their respective schools after institutional and parental permission for data collection.

Measures

Illinois Bully Scale

Espelage and Holt (2001) developed this measure to examine the frequency of occurrence of bullying, victimization, and fighting in one last month. It has 18 items across Illinois Bully Scale (IBS; 9 items), Illinois Victimization Scale (IVS; 4 items), and Illinois Fighting Scale (IFS; 5 items). Threats, arguments, fun-making, and rumor-spreading are some of the behaviors of a bully. Being a target for name-calling, hitting, and pushing, are example behaviors of the victim. Getting into a physical fight, threats to hurt, and beating are example behaviors of fighting. The five-point response options ranged from 0 to 4 and included (0) for never, (1) for 1 or 2 times, (2) for 3 or 4 times, (3) for 5 or 6 times, and (4) for 7 or more times. By adding the respective items, subscale scores are calculated. Higher scores showed higher bullying perpetration and victimization. The alpha reliability was 0.83 for the bully subscale, 0.75 for the victim subscale, and 0.78 for the fighting subscale.

Index of Empathy for Children and Adolescents

Bryant (1982) developed this measure to examine empathy development among children and adolescents, and how it links to interpersonal competencies. It is a unidimensional, self-report measure in paper-pencil format. This scale can be administered to children aged 5-12. It comprises 22 items, with 11 items in reversed direction. The score

1 is used for yes and 0 is used for no. Negative items were reversed and scored. This measure was low in reliability.

Procedure

A survey method was used to collect the data from participants. Before data collection, the respective school administrators and parents of the children were contacted to seek permission for research participation. Written informed consent was taken from preadolescents and their parents. Students were provided with oral and written instructions to report on the scales. They responded to the study questionnaires from October to December 2020. Their responses were coded to ensure the confidentiality of personal information. Participants were given the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Data Analysis

The data were entered in SPSS version 25. Data screening was done prior to statistical analysis. There was no missing data and all participants fully responded to the study measures. First, Cronbach's alpha reliability was estimated for three subscales of the Illinois Bullying Scale. The Kuder-Richardson was used to estimate the reliability of the Index of Empathy. The mean scores, standard deviations, and frequencies/percentages were computed. Then, correlation coefficients were calculated at $p < 0.5$. Last, t -tests were run to examine sex differences in school bullying and empathy.

Results

The main purpose of the present study was to investigate the level of school bullying across three dimensions of Bully, Victim, and Fight and its relationship with empathy among preadolescents.

Table 1
Cronbach's Alpha, Descriptive Statistics, and Correlation Among Study Variables (N=200)

Scale	k	α	M	SD	IVS	IFS	IECA
Illinois Bully Scale (IBS)	9	0.83*	4.22	4.36	.71**	.87**	-.58**
Illinois Victim Scale (IVS)	4	0.75*	3.37	3.89		.42**	.15
Illinois Fighting Scale (IFS)	5	0.78*	3.80	4.38			-.30**
Index of Empathy (IECA)	22	0.65*	13.37	2.51			

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. Note. K = the number of items, M = mean; SD = Standard deviation.

Table 1 shows the reliability coefficients for the bullying scales were in the acceptable range from 0.75-0.83. The Bully, Victim, and Fight scales had low to high correlation coefficients with each other. The Bully and Fight scales were significantly negatively correlated with empathy, though coefficients had modest magnitude. These findings suggest that the less empathic preadolescents were more tended to bully and fight more than the more empathic. There was a non-significant correlation between the Victim scale and the Index of Empathy ($r = .15, p < .01$).

The frequencies and percentages of preadolescents on a five-point rating scale of the IBS, IVS, and IFS are presented in Table 2. A large majority of the respondents reported no exposure to school bullying. Above 163, preadolescents had never experienced being a bully, a victim, or a fighter in one last month. About one-fourth of the total respondents experienced bullying 1 or 2 times and their percentages were between 40%-50%.

Table 2
Frequencies and Percentages of Preadolescents on the Illinois Bullying Scale (n=200)

Scales	Counts and percentages of Preadolescents					Total
	Never	1-2 Times	3-4 Times	5-6 Times	≥ 7 Times	
IBS	163, 131.5%	56, 45.2%	38, 30.6%	22, 17.7%	45, 36.3%	124, 100%
IVS	168, 117.5%	58, 40.6%	43, 30.1%	25, 17.5%	52, 36.4%	143, 100%
IFS	167, 125.5%	67, 50.4%	43, 32.3%	24, 18%	45, 33.8%	133, 100%

Note. IBS = Illinois Bully Scale (IBS); IVS = Illinois Victim Scale (IVS); IFS = Illinois Fighting Scale (IFS).

A similarity was noted between the percentages of responses to 3-4 times (score of 2) and 7 or more times (score of 4). The range of percentages for both response options was from 30% to 36% for all three scales of bullying. Interestingly, 45 preadolescents reported being bullies (36.3%) and fighters (33.8%) simultaneously 7 or more times in the last month. In contrast, 36.4 % of preadolescents reported experiencing victimization 7 or more times. The total count shows that more preadolescents reported being a victim of school bullying than being exposed to the other two dimensions of school violence.

Table 3

Mean, Standard Deviation, t-scores of Preadolescent Boys and Girls on Study Variables (n=200)

Scales	Boys (n=100)		Girls (n=100)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL
Illinois Bully Scale	5.59	4.82	2.84	3.37	4.65*	.00	1.58	3.91
Illinois Victim Scale	4.34	4.56	2.40	2.82	3.62*	.00	.88	3.00
Illinois Fighting Scale	5.80	4.92	1.81	2.56	7.17*	.00	2.89	5.08
Index of Empathy	13.60	2.52	13.15	2.50	1.25	.21	-.25	1.14

df = 197. **p* < .05.

The secondary purpose of the research was to examine sex differences in the study variables. Table 3 displayed preadolescent boys had significantly higher scores on all dimensions of school bullying than girls. However, they had a non-significant sex difference in empathy. As the Index of Empathy was a dichotomous measure with a score range from 0 to 22, the participants scoring below 11 were separated from those who scored above 11. The frequency was computed for participants' level of empathy. Only 22 participants reported having low empathy and the rest of the 178 had moderate to high levels of empathy.

Discussion

Bullying, in any of its forms, is deleterious for the mental health and well-being of youth. Where behavioral problems and relationship

difficulties of bullies are the outcome of their negative experiences or temperamental complications, the psychological distress, sleep difficulties, and socio-emotional troubles of victims are outcomes of their being bullied. Bullying distorts self-image and causes maladjustment among youth. National Center for Educational Statistics (2019) reported the detrimental effects of bullying on the physical, psychological, social, emotional, and academic well-being of students. Bullying is well-studied in different age groups, but the literature shows a dearth of empirical studies on preadolescents who are in transition from elementary school to middle school.

The present study is planned to address this limitation and the relationship between dimensions of school bullying and empathy is uncovered among preadolescents. A negative relationship was assumed between bullying and empathy, with the premise that those who bully others are less empathic toward their feelings. They fight and behave aggressively in routine. Findings supported the presence of a negative association between both constructs. Significant negative correlation coefficient values alluded to the fact that preadolescents who lacked empathy had significantly higher scores on bullying and fighting. Another way around, it can be inferred that bullies possess fewer positive feelings toward peers and victimize them via physically hitting or pushing them, verbally abusing them, calling names, making fun, insulting them, and much more. Although the magnitude of coefficients was small, the significant negative correlation coefficient values confirmed the hypothetical assumption and aligned with the previous studies. For instance, Jolliffe and Farrington (2006) found that children with low empathy were at greater risk for displaying bullying and aggressive behaviors.

Various studies have analyzed the relationship between school bullying and empathy. Some have included studying the level of empathy among bystanders and defenders and examining if they intervened to stop bullies or to help the victims (Choi & Park, 2021; Wang & Kim, 2021). Other studies have sliced empathy into cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects, and have examined it with bullying (Choi & Park, 2021; Garandean et al., 2021). Some others have studied the bidirectional associations between two variables over time. Bullying at time 1 was correlated with empathy at time 2 and empathy at time 1 was correlated with bullying at time 2 (e.g. Gini, et al., 2007). Such studies facilitate establishing a close connection between the study variables and their temporal precedence. However, it is imperative to examine the connection between school bullying and empathy across varying dimensions of bullying.

Theory of Mind (TOM) is extensively tested and applied in Western culture but has not ever studied in Pakistani culture. This is the reason for the conduct of the present research to test this theory and evaluate youth's perspective-taking in peer relationships. It was an effort to get an indigenous picture of the behavioral and mental status of preadolescents. An observation was the use of self-report foreign measures to assess school bullying and empathy. This is the reason that internal consistency for the Index of Empathy could not reach the threshold of the acceptable range. Also, its inter-correlation with bullying was moderate to low. It is plausible that empathy is a heterogeneous construct, but this index measures it as a unidimensional construct. Thus, it necessitates examining the factor structure of the Index of Empathy and examining its multidimensional nature.

Data for the present study were collected from normal children, without any reports of emotional and behavioral problems. Most of the preadolescents did not report experiencing any form of bullying. Around one-third of the 200 participants reported experiencing school bullying 7 or more times in one last month. Overall, a higher number of preadolescents reported being victims of bullying, followed by fighting. There was an equal number of preadolescents ($n = 45$) who were on the higher end of the bullying continuum and reported bullying others and fighting with them. Linking the number of preadolescents' count on both variables of empathy and school bullying, it is evident that more participants had never experienced bullying in the last month and reported having a high level of empathy. Thus, the counts of participants' reported data aligned with alternate statistical analyses.

Sex was tested as a control variable and sex differences were examined in the levels of school bullying and empathy. The assumption was that girls will have a low level of school bullying and high level of empathy than boys and vice versa. The findings supported the hypothesis. Girls showed more empathic behavior and a low tendency to bullying than boys. Preadolescent boys reported more frequent experiences of school bullying and scored low on empathy. This finding is consistent with the previous research, which suggested that boys got involved in bullying and were also the target of bullying more often than girls (Griezel et al., 2012). While preadolescent girls were more empathic than boys (Richaud de Minzi, 2013).

Limitations and Recommendations

The present study was an attempt to examine the relationship between the three-dimensional phenomenon of school bullying and unidimensional

empathic behavior. The bystander and defender behaviors were excluded from the study of bullying. The salient behaviors of bullies, victims, and fighters were measured on a five-point scale. The direction and magnitude of the relationship were measured through correlation coefficients. This study did not plan for the use of advanced methodological and analytic procedures. The data is collected only from preadolescents and further studies can be planned on subgroups during adolescence. Not much of the participants' demographic information was collected.

It is recommended to future researchers to unveil the multi-dimensional nature of empathy across different dimensions of bullying. Data on more rigorous measures can be analyzed with innovative and sophisticated analytic techniques. The literature shows the dearth of bidirectional longitudinal studies and mixed methods research on the said variables, which provide directions for future research.

Implications

The foremost implication of the findings is the screening of preadolescents with different profiles of bullying behaviors. The present study provides empirical information about the dimensions of bullying and the levels of empathy among tweens. This study can be a starting point for similar studies with alternative samples in different demographic areas. Adolescents with perpetration of bullying can be timely identified and exposed to the anti-bullying intervention. The victims can be helped to save them from negative consequences. Parents, teachers, school administrators, and policymakers can use the findings to screen out and eradicate the aggressive and violent behaviors of youth in classrooms, playgrounds, and around school premises. Large-scale studies with a bigger sample size can help to gain precision in the testing of bullying behaviors and empathy. Such information navigates a pathway to establish a secure environment for learning in academic institutions via the prevention and intervention of school bullying and violence at large.

Conclusion

Three dimensions of school bullying are differently related to empathy among preadolescents. The preadolescents who scored higher on scales for bully and fighting showed low empathic behavior. Overall, bullying and empathy were significantly negatively correlated with each other, but the victimization scale had a non-significant correlation with bullying. In other words, empathy contributes to reducing aggression and violence in peer relationships.

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