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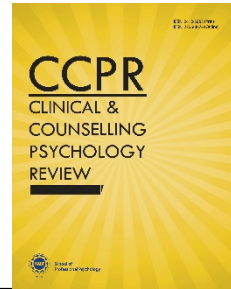
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Emotional Abuse, Bullying and Forgiveness among Adolescents

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Abstract

The current research was conducted to assess emotional abuse, bullying and forgiveness among adolescents. A sample of $N = 147$ adolescents ($n = 68$ boys and $n = 79$ girls) aged 13-17 years, ($M = 15$, $SD = 1.35$) were recruited through convenience sampling technique. The Demographic Form, Child Adolescent Bullying Scale (CABS), Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (self-developed), and Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM-18) were used to assess study variables. Chi-Square, Pearson Product Moment correlation, simple linear regression, and Independent sample t-test was used to analyze the data. Results revealed that non-significant gender differences were found in the study variables. Findings state that high levels of bullying and older participants showed high benevolent motivation. Girls were more likely to be emotionally abused for their appearance and boys are more likely to confront their bullies and feel worthless/inferior as a result of emotional abuse. Limitations and recommendations for research are also discussed.

Keywords: bullying, emotional abuse, forgiveness

Introduction

Bullying affects many adolescents across the globe and victims experience adverse outcomes, such as deterioration in physical and psychological health. Work to combat bullying is very limited especially here in Pakistan. Little attention is paid to the significance of bullying. It is often disregarded as an experience that every adolescent has to face. Emotional abuse refers to a way to embarrass, shame, blame or manipulate an individual (Gordon, 2020). Bullying and emotional abuse are two extremely hurtful acts and may impact the victim for a longer period of time, therefore, affecting the chances of forgiveness to occur. Forgiveness may act as a buffer against the impact of bullying. Research states that those who are more forgiving have been found to possess superior physical and mental health which could be protective against future offenses (Egan & Todorov, 2009). This research

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focuses on understanding how bullying and emotional abuse can affect school-going adolescents, also the role of forgiveness after experiencing bullying.

Emotional abuse is an offensive behavior that involves manipulation, humiliation, threats, degrading comments, and the intention to hurt one emotionally. Such abusers do not hold back from crushing one's spirits or self-confidence, they take pleasure in seeing their victim upset and consider it a success if the victim ends up absolutely disturbed. Emotional abuse is one of the toughest types of abuse to recognize, it can either be subtle or overt but regardless it still can affect the victim's self-esteem. Subtle emotionally abusive actions include: insulting someone, degrading, and gas lighting (refusing to accept that previous abusive incidents have occurred, thus making the victim doubt his/her sanity). There was no exact definition of emotional abuse till the 1990s, but researchers and clinicians provided some simple explanations such as emotional abuse is abuse that is emotional rather than physical in nature. It may comprise verbal abuse, insults, or any form of humiliation. Canadian research found that 25% of boys and 21% of girls from grades 6 to 10 have been victims of bullying with boys more likely to be physically abusive and girls being psychologically abusive in schools (Doherty & Berglund, [2012](#)).

Bullying is defined as an aggressive unprovoked act with the intention of physically or emotionally harming the victim (Al-Raqqad et al., [2017](#)). In such cases the strength between the oppressor and victim is unequal. Bullying is often seen to occur among peer groups where the power difference does not exist. The basis of bullying can be physical strength, financial situation, age, or social skills (Al-Raqqad et al., [2017](#)). Various types of bullying are physical bullying (hitting, slapping, or being forced to do something against own will), verbal bullying (swearing, name-calling, insulting, spreading fabricated rumors or use of racist slurs), sexual bullying (inappropriate touching, use of words or frightening), psychological bullying, and any other form of emotional abuse (harassing the victim, embarrassing, isolating or snubbing from a peer group) (Al-Raqqad et al., [2017](#)). Another type of bullying is cyberbullying which involves online harassment, leaking pictures, threatening to use sensitive information against the victim, or harming one's image over social networks.

To understand the motivations behind bullying the Social Capital Theory introduced by Putnam ([2000](#)) explains the benefits one gain from

social relationships. It can further be elaborated as social ties between individuals who belong to the same group and promotes a sense of belongingness. Bridging social capital includes social ties with people outside the homogenous group for a bigger social network. There are four benefits of social ties. First, access to information that may not be available to the people out of the group; second, influence people of power as being friends with the most popular student at school can provide its own privileges. Third, social credentials such as being a popular girl or football star, allow protection against bullies and access to more social resources. Finally, social ties reinforce an individual's self-esteem and public image (Evans, 2016). When linked with bullying, we see bullying victims having low social capital. They may have a few friends but these friends do not provide them with a social network or social credentials to be recognized by others. Thus, they are more likely to be targets of bullies, therefore, affecting their self-esteem (Evans, 2016). Bullying fuels, the desire for dominance in the abusers and hurts the victims in many ways.

Forgiveness is defined as a way to reduce intolerant and angry thoughts, feelings, and emotions followed by an increase in positive and calming feelings. It is mostly adopted as a coping strategy to deal with oppressive and unfair situations. Forgiveness may also act as one's emotional battle in which we disarm our supposed opponent with calmness and patience, ultimately getting the greatest form of revenge by declaring peace (Souders, 2020). DiBlasio's (1998) Decision-Based Model states that decision-based forgiveness is the cognitive letting go of bitterness, hatred, and need for revenge but not necessarily the end of emotional pain. Will plays a vital role in this model for forgiveness because a choice exists to either let go or hold on (Souders, 2020). People can isolate their thoughts of resentment and bitterness from their emotions (such as being hurt) which means the grudge can be let go but the negative emotions may remain and even persist. Forgiveness is considered an effective coping strategy that allows the individual to forget about the transgression and move on with his/her life.

Considering the existing literature, numerous research has been carried out focusing on each of the three variables. Malik and Kaiser (2016) conducted a study to explore the impact of emotional maltreatment on adolescents' self-esteem and also to explore any gender differences. The sample consisted of 400 adolescents, ages 14-18 years from private and public schools in Sargodha, Pakistan. Findings revealed a significant

negative relationship between emotional maltreatment and self-esteem, which means increased emotional maltreatment resulted in low self-esteem. Khawar and Malik (2016) conducted research with the aim to explore the prevailing forms of bullying behavior among Pakistani pre-adolescents. A sample of 817 adolescents (grades 4-6) from private and public schools in Lahore, Pakistan was recruited. Findings stated that boys were more bullied through physical, verbal, cyber, and sexual means whereas girls were more bullied through rejection or excluding method. Barcaccia et al. (2018) conducted a study to analyze the role of forgiveness and friendship in adjusting psychological effects on victimized youth. The sample consisted of 2,105 adolescents (ages 13-20 years). The results suggested that a high level of victimization and not having a close friend resulted in maladjustment whereas participants low in forgiveness tended to have more depressive and anger symptoms.

Rationale

It has been obvious from the above-discussed literature that there exist some gaps in the literature that require further research. Therefore, the main objective of the current study is to identify the association between gender and the level of responses to emotional abuse (such as factors, labels for confrontation, and consequences of abuse). Also, to identify gender differences in emotional abuse, bullying behavior, and forgiveness; followed by exploring the relationship between bullying and forgiveness and see if bullying can predict forgiveness.

Objectives

1. To explore the gender differences in the levels of bullying and forgiveness among adolescents.
2. To identify the relationship between bullying and forgiveness among adolescents.
3. To find out bullying and age as predictors of forgiveness among adolescents.

Hypotheses

1. There will be a significant negative correlation between bullying and avoidance motivation.

2. There will be a significant negative correlation between bullying and revenge motivation.
3. There will be a significant positive correlation between bullying and benevolence motivation.
4. There will be a significant gender difference in emotional abuse among adolescents.
5. Bullying and Age will significantly predict forgiveness.

Methodology

Research Design

Correlational research design was used to analyze the relationship between bullying and forgiveness among adolescents.

Sampling Strategy

The convenience sampling strategy was used for the selection of the sample.

Participants Characteristics

A total of $N = 147$ participants, $n = 68$ adolescent boys (46.3%) and $n = 79$ adolescent girls (53.7%) were selected. The age range of the participants was between 13-17 years ($M = 15$, $SD = 1.35$). The participants were selected from 108 private (73.5%) and 39 public/government (26.5%) sector schools in Lahore.

Inclusion Criteria

Only adolescents currently enrolled in schools around Lahore were selected for the study. Participants with access to the internet and electronic devices (tablets, phones, or computers) were selected for the study. Participants with minimum education from Grades 8 and onwards were included.

Exclusion Criteria

Adolescents with physical disabilities were not included in the study. Adolescents with a history of depression, anxiety, or any form of psychological distress due to bullying or personal reasons were not selected to be part of the study.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Studied Participants

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Boys	68	46.3
Girls	79	53.7
School Type		
Private	108	73.5
Public/Government	39	26.5
Age		
13	24	16.3
14	31	21.1
15	30	20.4
16	35	23.8
17	27	18.4
Grade/ Class		
7	19	12.9
8	28	19.0
9	29	19.7
10	29	19.7
11	28	19.0
A level/Intermediate	14	9.5

Assessment Measures

Demographic Information Sheet

The demographic information sheet was constructed to get background information on the study participants. Participants were asked about their

gender, age, school type (private or public/government), grade/class, and city.

Emotional Abuse Scale

Since this study focuses on emotional abuse faced from peers in school, it was difficult to find a scale that full filled the required criteria. To get an insight about the experience of emotional abuse of adolescents, a questionnaire was developed with help of existing emotional abuse questionnaires. A self-developed questionnaire consisted of three items each measuring one factor. Item 1-Appearance, item 2- Over-reaction, item 3- Inferiority/Worthlessness, surrounding the signs of emotional abuse. The first item, “Have you ever been humiliated or insulted in front of your friends or class fellows by another peer (such as made fun of your appearance, color, family, etc.). If Yes, how?” asked the participant if they have ever faced emotional abuse in the form of humiliation or insult, commonly by friends or peers. The second item, “Has another peer ever made you feel sad, depressed or angry but when you confront him/her you are labelled as too sensitive or overreacting. If yes, how?” questioned if emotional abuse had ever resulted in feelings of sadness, depression or anger and if the participant had ever confronted her/his bully. Finally, the third item, “Has another peer made you feel inferior or worthless? (i.e. no one cares about you, do not deserve respect, love & purposely try to keep you out of activities). If Yes, how?” questioned if consequences of emotional abuse led to feelings of worthlessness or inferiority due to the abuse from peers or friends. Reliability of the scale assessed through a pilot study showed an internal consistency with values $\alpha = .75$.

Child Adolescent Bullying Scale (CABS)

The CABS is a newly developed scale created by Strout et al. (2018). It helps in assessing the level of bullying experienced by adolescents, aged 13-18 years (Strout et al., 2018). CABS is a 22-item scale, each item's responses are coded with a number ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). The total CABS score range from 20 to 100 with a high score stating high exposure to bullying (Strout et al., 2018). A high internal consistency value of Cronbach's $\alpha = .96$ was reported in the current study.

Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM-18)

This scale was developed by McCullough in 2006. The primary focus of the scale is to assess motivation toward forgiveness (McCullough, 2006).

TRIM-18 is an 18-item scale, with each item measuring one of the three aspects of motivation: avoidance, revenge, and benevolence. The scales are measured on a Likert scale which ranges from point 1 to 5, i.e. 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*. The avoidance subscale measures motivation to avoid the transgressor (7 items: items 2, 5, 7, 10, 11, 15, and 18), revenge subscale measures the need for revenge (5 items: items 1, 4, 9, 13, and 17), and benevolence subscale measure intentions of forgiveness (6 items: items 3, 6, 8, 12, 14, and 16). Revenge, Benevolent, and avoidance motivation subscales report high internal consistency values $\alpha = .86$, $\alpha = .85$, and $\alpha = .88$ respectively.

Procedure

Pilot Study

The pilot study was conducted on a sample of 10 participants to assess the language comprehension, feasibility, and understandability and the time duration of the scales used in the current study. The emotional abuse scale was also tested for its reliability during this pilot study. The participants were satisfied and thanked for their input.

Main Study

The first step of the study involved getting approval from the authors of the tests to use their tests. Then approval from Kinnaird College for Women was obtained to conduct this research. Afterward, formal approval was taken from the respective authorities of the school to refer those participants who were willing to be a part of this research. However, the data were collected through the online survey facility Google forms, due to COVID-19 restrictions and the closure of schools around the city. Participants were properly briefed about the objectives of the study, their right to withdraw at any point in the research, and confidentiality; before proceeding to the assessment measures in the Google forms.

155 participants were approached but only 147 were included in the final analysis, because 5 participants did not either fill the forms with accurate information or were not finished. The normality assumptions were computed and the 3 cases were excluded because they were outliers.

Results

The obtained data were analyzed by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 22). The reliability analysis was employed to assess the reliability of the scales used in the current study.

Table 2

Psychometric Properties of Major Study Variables in the Sample (N = 147)

Variables	<i>k</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>	Range	Skewness	Kurtosis
1. Bullying	20	53.58	14.94	.96	20-100	.08	-.75
2. Avoidance Motivation	7	24.97	4.33	.88	7-35	.79	-.02
3. Revenge Motivation	5	15.82	3.77	.86	5-25	.35	-1.26
4. Benevolence Motivation	6	15.66	3.98	.85	6-30	.06	-.67

Table 2 shows the reliability results of the scales. The bullying scale (CABS) has a high internal consistency of .96. On TRIM-18 subscales; avoidance motivation has a high internal consistency of .88, and Revenge motivation and Benevolence motivation too state high internal consistency of .86 and .85 respectively. The sample size is large enough (greater than 30) so normality can be assumed on the basis of the central limit theorem (Table 2).

Chi-square test was carried out to examine differences in the emotional abuse variables among adolescents.

Table 3

Frequencies and Chi-Square Results for significant differences between boys and girls and Emotional abuse item responses (N= 147)

Variables	Boys		Girls		χ^2
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
1. EA Q1: Appearance	28	48.3	30	51.7	36.29
2. EA Q2: Over-reacting	54	50.5	53	49.5	107.69
3. EA Q3: Worthless/Inferior	42	52.5	38	47.5	69.62

Note. EA = Emotional Abuse

In Table 3, results showed that more girls were bullied for their appearance ($N = 30$) as compared to boys ($N = 28$). Results for item two showed more boys being labeled as over-reacting ($N = 54$) compared to girls ($N = 53$). Finally results for item three showed more boys feeling inferior/worthless ($N = 42$) compared to girls ($N = 38$).

Table 4

Independent Sample t-test showing differences among boys and girls in Bullying and Forgiveness

Variable	Boys ($n = 68$)		Girls ($n = 79$)		t (145)	p	95% CI		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
Bullying	2.62	.62	2.74	.73	-1.12	.26	-.35	.10	-.18
Avoidance Motivation	3.63	.61	3.53	.61	.942	.35	-.10	.29	.16
Revenge Motivation	3.14	.69	3.17	.70	-.143	.89	-.24	.21	-.04
Benevolence Motivation	2.61	.64	2.62	.60	-.098	.92	-.21	.19	-.02

The results in Table 4 reveal non-significant gender differences in bullying and three aspects of motivations for forgiveness (avoidance, revenge, and benevolence).

Table 5

Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient between Bullying and Forgiveness among boys and girls (N = 147)

Variables	1	2	3	4	M	SD
1. Bullying	-	-.61***	-.47***	.53***	2.68	.68
2. Avoidance Motivation		-	-	-	3.58	.61
3. Revenge Motivation			-	-	3.16	.69
4. Benevolence Motivation				-	2.61	.62

Note. *** $p < .001$.

Results in Table 5 show that there is a strong negative correlation between bullying and avoidance motivation ($r = -.61$, $p < .001$), which

suggests adolescents who experienced a high level of bullying showed low avoidance motivation. There is a moderate negative correlation between bullying and revenge motivation ($r = -.47, p < .001$), which suggests adolescents who experienced high levels of bullying showed low revenge motivation. Moreover, there is a significant strong positive correlation between bullying and benevolence motivation ($r = .53, p < .001$), which suggests adolescents with high bullying showed high benevolence motivation.

Table 6
Simple Linear Regression showing Bullying & Age as Predictors of Avoidance Motivation (Forgiveness) among Adolescents (N= 147)

Predictors	Avoidance Motivation	
	R^2	β
Bullying	.38***	-.53***
Age		-.03

Note. *** $p < .001$.

In Table 6 bullying was entered as a predictor variable for avoidance motivation. Regression model was significant, $R^2 = .38, F(2, 144) = 44.97, p < 0.001$. Bullying was revealed as a significant negative predictor of avoidance motivation among adolescents. This shows that adolescents who experienced bullying showed less avoidance motivation. Age was also entered as a predictor variable but the regression model was not significant.

Table 7
Simple Linear Regression showing Bullying & Age as Predictors of Revenge Motivation (Forgiveness) among Adolescents (N= 147)

Predictors	Avoidance Motivation	
	R^2	β
Bullying	.26***	-.41***
Age		-.09**

Note. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

In Table 7, bullying and age were entered as predictor variables for revenge motivation. Regression model was significant, $R^2 = .26, F(2, 144)$

= 25.26, $p = .01$. Results showed that bullying and age are significant negative predictors of revenge motivation among adolescents. This shows that adolescents who experienced bullying and older in age showed less revenge motivation.

Table 8

Simple Linear Regression showing Bullying & Age as Predictors of Benevolence Motivation (Forgiveness) among Adolescents (N= 147)

Predictors	Avoidance Motivation	
	R^2	β
Bullying	.28***	-.55***
Age		.00

Note. *** $p < .001$.

In Table 8, bullying was entered as a predictor variable for benevolence motivation. Regression model was significant, $R^2 = .28$, $F(2, 144) = 28.48$, $p < 0.001$. Findings revealed bullying as a significant positive predictor of benevolence motivation among adolescents. This shows that adolescents who experienced bullying showed more benevolence motivation. Age was also entered as a predictor variable and the regression model was not significant.

Discussion

Many researchers have discussed the impact of bullying on adolescents and the role of forgiveness in response to being bullied such as avoidant, revengeful, or benevolent. More research is necessary to further elaborate on the role both variables play in affecting the lives of adolescents. The role of emotional abuse as a new variable must also be explored. The primary purpose of the current research was to find if a relationship existed between gender, bullying, and forgiveness. It also aimed to explore whether bullying would act as a predictor of forgiveness among adolescents, and identify any gender differences between bullying and forgiveness. Apart from examining the links between bullying and forgiveness, understanding and finding the association between gender and emotional abuse responses between factors bullied for (appearances, hobbies, weight or background), labels received from confrontations (over-reacting/sensitive or not), and the consequences of being emotionally abused by peers (feelings of

worthlessness/inferiority, exclusion or lack of respect) was the purpose of this study.

Results from this research yielded several significant findings that were either consistent with or expanded beyond the findings of available literature. Non-significant gender differences were found between bullying and forgiveness (measuring three motivations: avoidance, revenge, and benevolence). This finding is not in line with previous literature that found school boys being more involved in bullying than girls (Abbas et al., [2014](#)).

A significant relationship between forgiveness and bullying was found in the current research. This result is in line with the previous research which states that a high level of forgiveness results in a high level of life satisfaction along with a lower risk of suicide (Quintana-Orts & Rey, [2018](#)). Previous literature also suggests that participants low in forgiveness tended to have more depressive and anger symptoms (Barcaccia et al., [2018](#)). When compared with the findings of this research, a similarity can be found. The findings reveal correlation between bullying and forgiveness (across its three motivations). High levels of bullying resulted in low levels of revenge and avoidance motivation, which means adolescents who experienced bullying showed low revengeful motives and less avoided their bullies. Additional findings stated high levels of bullying resulted in high levels of benevolence motivation, which means adolescents who experienced bullying still showed a positive and forgiving attitude towards their bullies such as wanting to move forward, holding no grudges, and wanting to restore their relationships to health.

Little to no research has been done on emotional abuse, especially its relationship to bullying among adolescents. Emotional abuse involves behaviors like manipulation, humiliation, threats, degrading comments, and clear and direct intentions to hurt one emotionally. Research on Pakistani pre-adolescent on bullying behavior by Khawar and Malik ([2016](#)) found that emotional abuse has some effect on bullying that is after reporting the equivalent distribution of bullying among males and females. Females were more likely to use rejection or excluding methods which are known signs of emotional abuse. In this research, it was found that adolescents were bullied by another peer, with appearance being the highest factor (girls more than boys). Appearance-based factors such as one's skin color or complexion (mostly dark), having frizzy or curly hair, wearing glasses or braces, having acne or prominent scars, especially on the face, body hair, etc. were the

causes of bullying. Most participants were labeled as overreacting when their bullies were called out for their abuse or unacceptable behavior, most participants when confronting their bullies were told to relax, learn to take a joke or gaslight. Finally, the association was found in consequences of being emotionally abused by peers, with most participants complaining about feelings of worthlessness or inferiority (boys more than girls) such as doubting their abilities or achievements, feeling insecure about their appearance, feelings of worthlessness when called ugly or other comments of appearance, etc.

Conclusion

The current study has found that adolescents who experienced high levels of bullying had low avoidance and revenge motivation which means they were less likely to avoid interacting with their bullies or have the intention to get revenge from their bullies. But what the concluding findings state is adolescents with high bullying actually had high benevolent motivation which means they were more forgiving, looked forward to improving their relationship with the bullies, and were not interested in holding grudges. Adolescents were more bullied for their physical appearances, labeled sensitive or overreacting after confrontation, and experienced a sense of inferiority and worthlessness as a result of the abuse.

The research highlighted the significant role of bullying and its impact on forgiveness which turned out to be positive along with underlining factors and consequences of emotional abuse. If further research is conducted I believe this study will be beneficial to our society and may play a role in combating bullying.

Limitations

This study presents several limitations that require further research. Since convenience sampling was used, the generalizability of the results is affected, therefore highlighting the fact that these findings may not represent adolescents in various other institutes or cities and their experiences of bullying and motivation towards forgiveness may be different. The participants were provided with self-reporting scales; thus the presence of social desirability may be a factor of concern. The emotional abuse questionnaire was self-developed which raises concern if the accurate findings of emotional abuse cases were reported or if the questionnaire allows understanding of the variable in detail. For emotional abuse,

qualitative responses were labeled (by assessing the most frequently received responses) to find differences between item responses in quantitative form, which may not allow us to understand the experiences in detail. Further research is required to focus on emotional abuse as a contributing factor in experiences of bullying and its impact on forgiveness that can help understand or reveal the role it plays in affecting adolescents.

Recommendations

Further research can be conducted to focus on the relationship between bullying and forgiveness, along with emotional abuse as a contributing factor to bullying. More research is recommended to study emotional abuse as a variable in quantitative form through the development of self-reporting scales. Further research can be conducted to identify the relationship between other demographic variables (school type and age) and bullying, emotional abuse, and forgiveness.

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