

The Phenomenon of Bullying in Contemporary Society and Its Psychological and Social Effects on Individuals

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Abstract

This study examines the phenomenon of bullying in contemporary society, highlighting its definition, forms, and the causes of its prevalence, with a specific focus on its psychological and social effects on individuals. Bullying is conceptualized as repeated aggressive behavior practiced by an individual or a group against a weaker peer with the intent to harm, demean, or control them. Its manifestations include physical, verbal, social, and electronic (cyber) forms. The spread of bullying is attributed to several multi-layered factors, including inadequate family upbringing, domestic breakdown, exposure to violent media content, and maladaptive desires for negative self-assertion. Consequent psychological effects on victims are severe, including loss of self-confidence, anxiety, depression, and social isolation. Socially, bullying weakens community cohesion and propagates a culture of violence. The study concludes that confronting bullying requires a comprehensive, ecological approach that integrates the family, school, and community through awareness campaigns, values education, psychological support for victims, and the enactment of deterrent policies to ensure a safe society based on respect and tolerance.

Keywords: Bullying, School Bullying, Psychological Effects, Social Effects, Contemporary Society.

Introduction

Bullying is considered one of the most alarming social phenomena to have risen significantly in recent years, particularly within schools and on social media platforms. It represents a deliberate aggressive behavior designed to inflict physical, psychological, or verbal harm on others. The gravity of this phenomenon lies in its compounding negative impacts on both the individual and

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society, causing a decline in self-confidence, fostering social isolation, and spreading violence throughout educational and social environments.

As a form of dominance-driven aggression, school bullying stands out as one of the most widespread challenges in academic institutions. It negatively impacts both victims and perpetrators alike, acting as a severe educational obstacle that disrupts the learning process and inflicts harm on the school environment, family structures, and broader social dynamics.

Based on these observations, this study addresses the following central research questions:

- *What is the impact of bullying in contemporary society on the psychological and social aspects of individuals?*
- *What factors contribute to its prevalence within society, particularly within the school environment?*

Study Hypotheses

1. There is a positive correlation between the prevalence of bullying in contemporary society and the occurrence of negative psychological outcomes in individuals, such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem.
2. Different forms of bullying—physical, verbal, social, and electronic—impact individuals to varying degrees, with cyberbullying exerting the most significant pressure on mental health.
3. Inadequate family socialization and domestic breakdown increase the likelihood of individuals either becoming victims of bullying or perpetrating bullying behavior toward others.
4. Targeted awareness programs and psychological support interventions can significantly mitigate the psychological and social impacts of bullying on individuals.

Objectives of the Study

- To clarify the scientific and sociological conceptualization of the phenomenon of bullying.
- To identify the primary forms and types of bullying prevalent in contemporary society.
- To analyze the underlying causes and contributing factors of this phenomenon.
- To highlight the psychological and social repercussions of bullying on individuals and society.
- To propose actionable solutions and recommendations to curb the spread of bullying within academic and social environments.

Methodology

This study adopts a **descriptive-analytical approach** as its primary methodology. This approach is highly suited for providing a comprehensive description of the phenomenon of bullying in contemporary society and analyzing its psychological and social effects on individuals. It enables the examination of relationships between independent variables (such as forms of bullying) and dependent variables (such as psychological and social consequences), while providing a scientifically grounded interpretation of the findings. Utilizing this methodology ensures a deep, theoretical understanding of the phenomenon, enabling the researcher to formulate precise results that support effective interventions to reduce bullying and its negative impacts.

1. The Concept of Bullying

- **Linguistic Definition:** In Arabic lexicography, the term "bullying" (*ta-na-mur*) translates to "behaving like a leopard/tiger" (*nimr*). It implies manifesting a fierce temperament,

becoming angry, or behaving maliciously. To "bully" (*tanammara*) someone means to show hostility toward them, behave threateningly, or treat them with aggression (Ibn Manzur, 2003, p. 235).

- **Idiomatic Definition:** Internationally, bullying is understood as an asymmetrical, aggressive interaction that occurs repeatedly as a routine occurrence within peer relationships in educational environments. It is characterized by dominance, control, and hegemonizing behavior between two parties: the bully (the aggressor) and the victim (the targeted individual) (Boukhit & Katfi, 2021, p. 177).
- Bullying is also defined as a form of violence perpetrated by a child or group of children against another child, involving deliberate, repeated harassment. This behavior can manifest in various ways, such as spreading rumors, threatening, physically or verbally assaulting the victim, isolating them socially to cause harm, or engaging in other subtle, covert acts of aggression (UNICEF Egypt, 2025).
- Dan Olweus, the pioneer of school bullying research, defines school bullying as:

"Negative, intentional actions on the part of one or more students directed against another student, occurring repeatedly and over time. These negative actions can be verbal (e.g., threats, taunting, teasing, and name-calling), physical (e.g., hitting, pushing, and kicking), or non-verbal/non-physical (e.g., making grimaces, inappropriate gestures, or deliberate exclusion from a group)" (as cited in El-Said, 2019, p. 10).

- Randall and Mellor agree in defining bullying as a conflict between two parties of unequal power. It occurs when an individual or group targets someone who is unable to defend themselves, and it can be either physical or psychological in nature (as cited in Ali, 2021, p. 545).
- Espelage and Asidao define bullying based on participant surveys as involvement in verbal or physical harassment, threats, manipulation, rumor-spreading, destruction of others' property, theft, and deliberate acts of retaliation or revenge (as cited in Abu Diar, 2012, p. 31).

Synthesizing these definitions, school bullying can be broadly defined as a form of aggressive behavior carried out by a student or a group of students intended to cause physical, verbal, social, sexual, or electronic harm to a peer within the school or classroom, where a clear power imbalance exists between the bully and the victim.

Researchers have identified several key elements that characterize bullying behaviors, which include using degrading words or actions regarding a person's skin color, physical appearance, weight, clothing, or speech pattern in an intentionally provocative and loud manner.

Broadly, a behavior must meet three criteria to be classified as bullying:

- Intent to harm.
- Repetition over time.
- An imbalance of power (Ali, 2021, p. 554).

Salmivalli noted that academic interest in the term "bullying" originated in Norway in the late 1970s and gained significant momentum in 1983 following several tragic suicides among student victims of bullying. Since then, researchers worldwide have studied its nature and prevalence among school children. The term "mobbing"—initially used to describe a collective attack by a group on an

individual—was largely replaced by "bullying," which remains the dominant term in contemporary literature (as cited in Sharbat et al., 2018, p. 273).

Ultimately, school bullying is defined as deliberate, repeated, and unjustified aggressive behavior among students. It involves using physical or verbal power, or social manipulation, to demean, isolate, or harm another. It encompasses actions such as threats, insults, ridicule, physical assault, or deliberate exclusion. These repeated actions lower the victim's self-esteem and lead to social isolation and severe psychosomatic consequences within an unequal power dynamic.

2. Forms and Images of Bullying

Bullying manifests in several distinct ways:

- **Physical Bullying:** Such as hitting, pushing, or direct physical harm.
- **Verbal Bullying:** Such as ridicule, insults, and threats.
- **Social Bullying:** Such as social exclusion and spreading rumors.
- **Cyberbullying:** Exercised via the internet or social media platforms.

Specifically, bullying behaviors are categorized into the following types:

2.1 Physical and Material Bullying

This involves any physical contact intended to cause bodily harm. It takes forms such as slapping, severe beating, deprivation (such as withholding water), spitting, and vandalizing personal property. In some cases, physical bullying may yield a high degree of external visibility, which can ironically facilitate peer empathy toward the victim (Abu Diar, 2012, p. 32).

2.2 Verbal Bullying

This is the most common type of bullying among both male and female students across different educational stages. It is defined as any verbal attack or threat intended to cause harm through mockery, belittling, harsh criticism, public defamation, blackmail, false accusations, spreading rumors, or using derogatory labels based on gender, race, religion, social class, or disability. The bully typically performs these actions in front of a peer group to degrade the victim's self-esteem (Al-Qudah & Al-Subheen, 2013, p. 31).

2.3 Social Dominance (Relational Aggression)

Social dominance is often referred to as indirect or relational aggression. It is typically used to damage the victim's social standing, such as systematically excluding them from a peer group or social activities (El-Said, 2019, p. 17).

2.4 Sexual Bullying

This includes unwanted sexual insinuations, jokes, sharing inappropriate photos, derogatory remarks, or spreading rumors of a sexual nature. It may also involve physical behaviors, such as forcing someone into uncomfortable physical contact or coercing them into sexualized behaviors. Sexual bullying often reflects gender conflicts and the search for desired gender identities (Al-Qudah & Al-Subheen, 2013, p. 51).

2.5 Emotional (Psychological) Bullying

Also known as psychological bullying, this form aims to undermine the victim's self-worth and reduce their self-esteem. It includes silent treatment, isolation, deliberate staring or glaring, frowning, scowling, quiet mockery, and hostile body language. Because emotional bullying is covert, it is one of the most damaging forms of harassment, causing severe emotional distress that often goes unnoticed by teachers and parents (Al-Qudah & Al-Subheen, 2013, p. 51).

2.6 Racial Bullying

This form of bullying is driven by prejudice and bias toward a specific individual or group. It includes mocking someone's race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, or gender, as well as targeting individuals with special needs. Victims do not merely feel personally attacked; they feel their entire identity is targeted. The prevalence and nature of racial bullying vary significantly across different societies (Al-Qudah & Al-Subheen, 2013, p. 52).

2.7 Cyberbullying

With technological advancements, bullying has expanded into digital environments. Cyberbullying is particularly damaging due to the rapid spread of information, the difficulty of removing harmful content once published, the lack of centralized authority on the internet, and the anonymity that shields perpetrators from immediate accountability (Abu Diar, 2012, p. 53).

3. Elements of the Bullying Process

The dynamic of bullying consists of three primary components:

- **3.1 The Bully:** The individual who initiates aggressive acts to exert control and dominate others or their possessions.
- **3.2 The Victim:** The individual targeted by the aggression and subjected to harm or exploitation.
- **3.3 Bystanders (Spectators):** Observers of the bullying event, categorized into:
 - **3.3.1 Reinforcers:** Those who support the bully due to their social alignment, actively encouraging or participating in the aggression.
 - **3.3.2 Defenders (Guardians):** Those who empathize with the victim and attempt to offer help or intervention (El-Said, 2019, p. 12).

4. Social and Psychological Dimensions of Bullying

- **From a Social Perspective:** Bullying reflects a breakdown in educational and moral values, as well as deficiencies in the socialization roles of families and schools.
- **From a Psychological Perspective:** Bullying is often the externalization of internal conflicts within the bully, such as feelings of inferiority, insecurity, or a maladaptive need for attention and power.

5. Causes of the Prevalence of Bullying

Key factors driving the spread of bullying include:

- Weak parental and educational supervision.
- Exposure to violent media and digital content.
- The absence of a culture of dialogue and tolerance.
- Lack of effective, deterrent disciplinary policies within educational institutions.

The specific causes of school bullying can be classified as follows:

5.1 Biological Causes

Some bullies possess physical advantages (e.g., greater size or strength) over their peers, coupled with genetic predispositions toward high impulsivity or aggression.

5.2 Psychological Causes

Bullies often exhibit high levels of aggression, impulsivity, and a strong desire to dominate, control, and display power over others.

5.3 Cognitive Causes

Bullies may suffer from cognitive distortions in their thought patterns, often misinterpreting neutral peer interactions as hostile or aggressive, which prompts them to react aggressively.

5.4 Family Causes

The family environment is one of the most critical factors influencing bullying behavior, primarily through:

- **5.4.1 Family Problems:** Such as parental divorce, separation, or high levels of domestic conflict.
- **5.4.2 Faulty Parenting:** Parenting marked by harsh physical punishment, humiliation, neglect, or the encouragement of aggressive behavior.
- **5.4.3 Lack of Parent-Child Communication:** A severe lack of open dialogue and emotional connection between parents and children (El-Said, 2019, p. 11).

5.5 Social Causes

In some peer groups, bullies enjoy high social status or popularity because peers associate their aggression with strength and leadership. Consequently, peers may support and appease the bully to gain approval or protection.

5.6 School Causes

These include poor school monitoring, overcrowded classrooms, and a hostile school climate. Whitted notes that bullying can also stem from teachers or school administrations through poor teacher-student relationships, student discrimination, exclusion, public humiliation, harsh punishment, and a lack of positive reinforcement.

Similarly, several factors increase the likelihood of students becoming **victims** of bullying:

- **1.6.5 Biological Causes:** The victim is often physically smaller, weaker, or less physically developed than the bully.
- **2.6.5 Psychological Causes:** Victims may struggle with shyness, anxiety, or low self-esteem. They often lack assertive coping strategies, choosing to withdraw or flee rather than confront conflict.
- **3.6.5 Cognitive Causes:** Victims may develop deeply internalized negative self-images and doubt their own abilities.

- **4.6.5 Social Causes:** These include poor social skills, difficulty forming peer relationships, low social status, passivity, and underdeveloped verbal communication skills (Abu Ghazaleh, 2010, p. 275).

6. Characteristics of Bullying Students

- High levels of hyperactivity, impulsivity, and physical strength.
- Aggressiveness toward both peers and authority figures (teachers).
- Relatively low anxiety levels, with self-esteem profiles comparable to non-bullying peers.
- A lack of empathy or remorse for the distress caused to their victims.
- A background of coming from punitive families that use physical punishment, lack warmth, and provide minimal supervision.
- Positive attitudes toward violence.
- A strong drive to dominate and control others.
- Cognitive rationalization of their behavior, often blaming the victim for the aggression.

Generally, bullies tend to be self-assured, socially dominant, and supported by a subset of passive followers who reinforce their behavior, which boosts the bully's self-concept and perpetuates the cycle of abuse (El-Said, 2019, p. 17).

7. Characteristics of Victim Students

Wong classifies victims into two primary types:

- **7.1 The Passive Victim:** The submissive student who does not defend themselves, displays avoidant behaviors, and experiences high levels of fear, anxiety, and suspicion toward peers.
- **7.2 The Provocative Victim:** The student whose behavior, appearance, clothing, or intrusive actions (such as curiosity or prying) unintentionally provokes the bully, triggering aggressive reactions.

Common signs exhibited by victims of bullying include:

- Severe anxiety, especially when traveling to and from school.
- Social withdrawal and having few or no friends.
- High rates of school absenteeism or truancy.
- A noticeable decline in academic performance.
- Persistent sadness, depression, and reluctance to participate in school activities.
- Frequent loss of money or school supplies.
- Returning home with torn clothes, bruises, or damaged belongings (El-Said, 2019, p. 16).

8. Repercussions and Effects of Bullying

The consequences of bullying are among the most critical aspects of this phenomenon, as they extend beyond the immediate victim to impact families, educational institutions, and society at large.

8.1 Effects on the Victim

- **Psychological:** Bullying causes chronic fear, anxiety, low self-worth, and social withdrawal. Victims often suffer from clinical depression or a complete withdrawal from social life.

- **Cognitive and Behavioral:** It leads to cognitive distraction, poor concentration, and a drop in academic achievement. Victims may also display internalized withdrawal or externalized aggressive outbursts as coping mechanisms.
- **Physical:** Physical bullying can cause injuries and somatic symptoms resulting from chronic stress, such as headaches, loss of appetite, and sleep disturbances.

8.2 Effects on the Educational Institution

- It creates a school climate dominated by fear and tension, reducing student engagement.
- It lowers overall academic achievement due to a pervasive lack of psychological safety.
- It deteriorates teacher-student relationships due to a breakdown in classroom discipline and mutual trust.
- It increases absenteeism and dropout rates, especially among victims who no longer feel safe at school.

8.3 Effects on the Family

- Parents experience chronic stress and anxiety regarding their children's safety.
- Family communication deteriorates when victimized children emotionally withdraw.
- In some cases, school bullying can indirectly trigger domestic tension, as frustration and displaced aggression are brought into the home.

8.4 Effects on Society

- It fosters a culture of social violence and erodes values of respect and tolerance.
- It increases discriminatory behaviors among different social groups.
- It weakens social cohesion by undermining empathy and mutual cooperation.
- Long-term, it risks producing a generation struggling with psychological distress and maladaptive social integration.

Conclusion

Addressing the phenomenon of bullying requires a collective effort that begins within the home and extends through schools to broader social institutions. Prevention relies on cultivating moral values, promoting a culture of respect, and implementing educational initiatives that foster empathy and cooperation. Bullying is not merely an isolated behavioral issue; it is an indicator of systemic social dysfunction that demands early and targeted intervention.

The consequences of bullying are multifaceted, affecting individual psychology, peer dynamics, and the broader educational environment. Therefore, intervention strategies must go beyond simple punishment. They must include comprehensive educational and psychological support programs that instill humanistic values and foster balanced, resilient personalities capable of positive social interaction.

The findings of this study demonstrate that the impacts of bullying reverberate across individual and social spheres, requiring coordinated efforts among families, schools, and social institutions. These results align with previous literature confirming that bullying is not an accidental behavior but a phenomenon deeply embedded in the social and cultural ecology of the individual.

Furthermore, psychological distress and social maladjustment interact bidirectionally: victimized individuals tend to withdraw socially, which weakens their social support networks and further

compounds their psychological distress. This relationship supports the study's hypotheses regarding the profound impact of bullying on mental health and social integration. Finally, these findings underscore the necessity of adopting comprehensive, multi-tiered prevention strategies involving families, educators, and community leaders to effectively mitigate and manage bullying behaviors.

Study Recommendations

- Enhance the role of the family in raising children on the values of mutual respect, tolerance, and non-violence.
- Integrate educational modules into school curricula that explicitly define bullying and address its negative consequences.
- Provide specialized training for teachers and school counselors to identify and intervene in bullying cases early.
- Encourage cooperative learning and peer-support systems to strengthen solidarity among students.
- Utilize media and digital platforms to raise public awareness about the dangers and signs of cyberbullying.
- Establish clear, consistent, and restorative disciplinary policies within educational institutions to curb aggressive behavior.

Conflict of interest. Author declares that he has no any conflict of interest.

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