Research Article

Effect of Verbal Bullying and Gender on Self-esteem and Suicidal Ideation Among College and University Students of Kolkata

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The study investigated the effect of verbal bullying and gender on self-esteem and suicidal ideation among college and university students of Kolkata. The study is conducted on 235 college and university students residing and studying in Kolkata, by using 2 scales-Rosenberg's self-esteem scale (RSES) and Adult suicidal ideation questionnaire Form HS (ASIQ) along with an information schedule. Mean, Standard Deviation, Pearson's product-moment correlation, and 2×2 factorial ANOVA were used to analyze the data. The results revealed that male and verbally bullied participants have obtained higher scores in suicidal ideation, female and verbally non-bullied respondents showed high self-esteem scores. Self-esteem scores of both male and female participants, as well as verbally bullied and verbally non-bullied participants were found to have a significant negative correlation with suicidal ideation. Gender and verbal bullying showed a significant impact on suicidal ideation. However, gender and verbal bullying showed no interaction impact on self-esteem and suicidal ideation.

Key words: Gender, Verbal Bullying, Self-esteem, Suicidal ideation.

1. Introduction

Bullying is the behavior that a person shows towards another one who is less powerful than him/her, in order to hurt, threaten or force that person to do something against their will or sometimes just for fun. The person who shows this behavior is called the 'bully', the less powerful person upon whom it is shown is the 'victim' or 'bullied' and bystanders are the group of people who either seek pleasure seeing others being harassed or do not protest for the fear of being the next victim or simply lack the ability to stand up for others. Bullying can be physical (through contact), verbal (through words), and actions (by using subtle behaviors). Verbal bullying is a repetitive behavior, where a person mocks, ridicules, insults another person who is helpless and is less powerful in the presence or absence of others. This seems to be harmless at first, but it has a deep-rooted effect on one's mental health.

Gender deals with the social attributes which are associated with any sex. It is the cultural and social differences between man and woman that in-volve the concepts of gender roles, gender identity associated with the biological features that a person possesses from birth. The two most used and widely accepted gender categorizations are—male and female which are accepted worldwide, across all cultures, races, ethnicity, and religions. Any individual who is unable to identify his/her own self under the two previously said categories, consider themselves as a member of the 'non-binary' or 'gender queer' category. South Asian countries call this category often as 'third gender'. Alice H Eagly's 'Social Role theory' (1987) is a widely known and accepted theory of gender. The theory puts forward that individuals act or perform duties in a specific and predictable pattern that their gender allows them to or is the way these roles are assigned to the genders. The theory says that social norms are those set of roles or duties which the society has assigned to the different gender groups and which are permitted to be performed by individuals belonging to that group. When people are successful in performing or fulfilling the social norms or duties that are assigned to their gender groups they are rewarded and being unsuccessful they are punished. The theory mentioned that society expects individuals to conform to their respective social norms. Role theory has been divided into two types—

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- Structural functional role theory—where each and every individual has a particular place and role in society. This comes with a set of behaviors and expectations that society expects them to abide by.

- Dramaturgical functional role theory—this isn't a real situation but a play or 'drama' where every person is an actor. This puts forward the concept of 'role-playing'.

The theory also discussed the concept of "role conflict" which occurs when a person is asked to play several different roles and perform duties that don't seem to go with each other that is they contravene.

Self-esteem is the term used in psychology to reflect a person's overall emotional evaluation of oneself and his/her self-worth. Self-esteem makes an individual feel competent, helps to develop a sense of belongingness, feel secure and gain confidence over one's own self and develop a strong self-identity. Self-esteem plays an important role in helping people to make decisions, maintain relationships, maintain emotional well-being, and motivate a person to accept the challenges and struggles of daily life. Low self-esteem may lead to the development of self-doubt, reduce the confidence and courage to face problems, and be dependent on others. Such people face difficulties in reaching a goal or completing a task. They don't try out new things as they do not consider themselves worthy and competent. Sometimes people with very high self-esteem feel overconfident and may struggle to maintain relationships. They think of themselves as perfect and cannot work towards self-improvement [1]. This can also lead to the development of narcissistic traits.

Suicidal ideation is the urge or the desire of a person to die, thinking about death, making plans of committing suicide, writing suicide notes, and actually attempting suicide which may be due to various reasons including depression, demoralization, stress, overwhelming hopelessness to name a few. Suicidal ideation is one of the major symptoms of psychiatric conditions like major depression, an extreme state of being demoralized, and being overwhelmed by hopelessness [2]. The prevalence of suicidal thoughts among the general population of the world is found to be 9% and nearly 2% within one year time [3]. The research by National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) in 2017, in the US it was found that 4.3% of adults of age 18 and above had suicidal thoughts, the most prevalent group being people from 18 to 25 years.

Suicide ideation can be categorized into two categories–

A) Passive suicide ideation—where the person thinks to die but do not attempt suicide or have any plans to commit one

B) Active suicide ideation—where one wants to die and so plans and attempts suicide.

Lowered self-esteem because of mocking, insulting, teasing, body shamming, harassment, poorly developed gender identity, or being unhappy with an assigned gender, having role conflict, facing gender discrimination, lacking rights/privileges that members of other gender enjoy may trigger thoughts of intense self-harming behavior in individuals.

2. Literature Review

There are several differences in the characteristic features of self-esteem found in males and females. A study on characteristic features of self-esteem of male and female adolescent subjects revealed that male self-esteem tends to be more influenced by independence and autonomy; while female self-esteem is more influenced by interdependence and sensitivity [4]. Victims of bullying often are found to develop a negative self-perception that affects their academics and results in poor grades in exams and standardized tests [5]. Victims of bullying tend to develop some characteristics which include–lacking social skills, being isolated and rejected by peers and family, they are submissive, quiet, sensitive having lower self-confidence and negative self-image [6]. Research that studies the relationship between bullying experiences, self-esteem, and depression among secondary school students revealed that bullied students had lower self-esteem and they displayed more symptoms of depression. The results even revealed that female students who faced bullying were more at risk of developing low self-esteem and high depression symptoms when compared to boys [7].

Studies on suicide show that the death rate of men is higher in suicide [8]. Recent literature demonstrates that there is an increasing number of men each day who end their lives unexpectedly because of having active suicidal ideations along with any other physical, mental, or social problems. Statistical reports show that suicide occurred about 1.8 times more often among men than among women in 2008, and 1.7 times in 2015 [9]. In Western

countries, the mortality rate of men due to suicide is 3 to 4 folds more often than women [10]. Recent studies show an association between bullying and suicide-related behaviors [11]. Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death among college students [12]. Reports of studies reveal that there is more prevalence of moderate and severe suicidal thoughts among students of under graduation degree than post-graduation degree. A study to investigate the relationship between bullying and suicidal behavior in youth, was conducted on patients of 18 years of age with a mental health complaint to the emergency departments in hospitals of Canada showed that 77% of patients had experienced bullying, 68.9% had ideas of suicide. When age, gender, grade, psychiatric illness, abuse was controlled, a history of bullying was found to be one of the most significant predictors of suicidal ideation. Subjects in this mentioned study who reported cyberbullying were 11.5 times more likely to have suicidal ideation, while respondents reporting verbal bullying were 8.4 times more likely to have suicidal thoughts [13].

3. Materials and Methods

Design

In the current research work, there were two independent variables (IV) and 2 dependent variables (DV).

The independent variables selected are—

1. Verbal bullying (levels–verbally bullied and verbally non-bullied)
2. Gender (levels–male and female)

The dependent variables selected are—

1. Self-esteem
2. Suicidal ideation

Hypotheses

The hypotheses for the current research are as follows:

1. There is a significant difference between verbally bullied and verbally non-bullied groups of college and university students of Kolkata with respect to self-esteem and suicidal ideation.
2. There is a significant difference between male and female groups of college and university students of Kolkata with respect to self-esteem and suicidal ideation.
3. There is a significant interaction effect of gender and verbal bullying on self-esteem and

suicidal ideation among college and university students of Kolkata.

4. There is a significant correlation between self-esteem and suicidal ideation among verbally bullied college and university students of Kolkata.
5. There is a significant correlation between self-esteem and suicidal ideation among verbally non-bullied college and university students of Kolkata.
6. There is a significant correlation between self-esteem and suicidal ideation among male college and university students of Kolkata.
7. There is a significant correlation between self-esteem and suicidal ideation among female college and university students of Kolkata.

Sample

The sample consisted of 235 college and university students of Kolkata. Age of the respondents ranged between 18 to 25 years. Exclusion criteria set for the sample that respondents with past history of psychiatric illness were not included in sample. Multi-stage sampling was used for collecting data. The sample was categorized in the following ways—

- Verbally bullied respondents-105
- Verbally non-bullied respondents-130
- Male respondents-61
- Female respondents-174

Tools

The following tools were applied to gather the data—

1. The Rosenberg's self-esteem scale (RSES) developed in 1965 by Morris Rosenberg. It deals with general feelings one has about his/her own self. It is a self-administering test. The internal consistency ranged from 0.77 to 0.88, the test-retest reliability is from 0.82 to 0.85. The criterion validity is found to be 0.55 and construct validity when correlated with anxiety is -0.64, depression -0.54, anomie -0.43.

2. Adult suicide ideation questionnaire Form HS (ASIQ) developed by William M Reynolds in 1991. The questionnaire contains 25 items without any subscales. It aims to measure the individual's level of suicidal ideation. This is a self-administering questionnaire. High internal consistency is observed where the value of $\alpha = 0.97$, and the test-retest reliability is 0.86. Correlation with depression, hopelessness, anxiety, and self-esteem ranged from

0.38 to 0.67. The multiple correlation coefficient was found to be 0.67 with depression, hopelessness, anxiety, self-esteem, and previous suicidal attempt.

Ethical concern

Informed consent was obtained from every respondent before data collection. They were all informed regarding the procedure of the research. Confidentiality of the data and anonymity of the participants was maintained. No human rights were violated.

Procedure

The topic was selected for the research, followed by which relevant literature was read to get an idea of the previous work done in the selected topic. The research design was made. The tools for data collection were selected, followed by which the datasheet was made. Data were collected from the respondents via online mode (Google form). After data collection, the responses were scored, and finally, statistical analyses were done.

4. Results

Table 1: Showing the Mean and Standard Deviation (SD) Values of Self-Esteem and Suicidal Ideation among Male and Female Individuals (Gender) and Verbally Bullied and Verbally Non-Bullied Individuals (Verbal Bullying)

Variables	Gender		Verbal Bullying	
	Male	**Female**	**Verbally Bullied individuals**	**Verbally Non-Bullied individuals**
	Mean (SD)	**Mean (SD)**	**Mean (SD)**	**Mean (SD)**
Self-Esteem	25.852 (5.182)	26.080 (5.126)	25.152 (5.188)	26.723 (4.994)
Suicidal Ideation	29.967 (35.407)	20.172 (27.452)	33.514 (34.487)	13.992 (22.291)

Table 2: Showing Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (r) between Self-esteem and Suicidal Ideation on Gender and Verbal Bullying

Variables	Gender		Verbal Bullying	
	Male	**Female**	**Verbally Bullied individuals**	**Verbally Non-Bullied individuals**
Self-esteem & Suicidal Ideation	−0.584**	−0.335**	−0.518**	−0.261**

** Correlation significant at 0.01 level (2 tailed).
* Correlation significant at 0.05 level (2 tailed).

5. Discussion

Self-esteem is an individual's view which he possesses about himself/herself. It is the person's overall sense of worth, respect, competence, and confidence which the individual has for himself. It includes factors like the sense of security, belongingness, and helps in shaping a person's identity. Self-esteem tends to develop from childhood through adulthood. During childhood, self-esteem is the lowest, and it tends to increase from adolescence and may also increase in adulthood [14]. From Table 1, it is observed that self-esteem score is found to be higher in female than male respondents. The cause behind such a finding may be attributed to the fact that the women in the present case have developed a sense of worth, self-confidence in themselves, they seem to love and care about themselves and accept themselves the way they are. They have a positive attitude towards themselves and towards life and have developed healthy relationships with others. Respondents seem to be aware of their strengths and flaws. A study conducted by Jan and Ashraf (2008) reveals that self-esteem in women has a highly significant relationship with their family type and with aspects of their personal life [15]. Self-esteem also shows significant differences among women belonging to different family types like—joint, nuclear, and extended families, and is concerned with their family relations, career, and family income. Again, results from Table 1 reveal that the mean score of self-esteem is found to be higher in the case of verbally non-bullied individuals. The verbally bullied victims—both children and adults, suffer from a broad range of adverse consequences as a result of verbal bullying, the most common of which is—low self-esteem. They feel unworthy, incompetent, hopeless, and lack a feeling of belongingness, and develop a negative attitude of themselves. It is also seen that people with low self-esteem are often targeted to be bullies. Such may be the reason behind the above findings.

Suicidal ideation is the thoughts, ideas, or wishes a person has about suicide and their own death. It is often a dangerous behavior where an individual thinks about ending his/her own life using lethal means. Results obtained from Table 1 shows that, suicidal ideation scores are higher among male participants and victims of verbal bullying. Recent studies [9,10] have shown that there is an increasing number of suicide (1.8 and 1.7 times more often among men than women in 2008 and 2015 respectively; 3 to 4 times more in

western nations) who end their lives abruptly because of having active suicidal ideations associated with any other physical, mental, or social problems. Men are reported to have active suicidal thoughts whereas women seem to have passive suicidal ideation. An American study conducted by National Centre for Injury Prevention reveals that suicide is the 7th largest cause of death in men in the US [16]. In 2017, the suicide rate in men skyrocketed 3.5 times, when compared with women. The causes behind such results may be unemployment, a history of sexual or physical abuse, social isolation, difficulties in their relationship, financial crisis, stress, bullying, struggling with mental illness, and so on. Such events may be due to overwhelming family expectations in the fields of academics and jobs, unable to vent out emotions as it is discouraged by traditional gender roles, undiagnosed mental illness, too reluctant to ask for professional help when they are in need of it and finally, masking problems by relying on unhealthy coping methods like smoking and drinking which often aggravate the problem which results in extreme self-harming behavior. Men are reported to use more lethal ways while attempting suicide which causes irreversible damage as studied by American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Suicide Statistics. Studies conducted on men who are indulge into alcohol use showed that alcohol-positive cases to be positively associated with suicide (10–69%) and non-fatal suicide attempts (10–73%) [17]. Alcohol abuse when increased can be regarded as a warning sign in the suicidal tendencies of men. Unemployment and financial problems may also act as active reasons for suicidal ideation in men as studies speculated [18].

It is a known fact that bullying not only disrupts mental and physical well-being and deflates self-esteem, but may also result in psychological distress like anxiety, conflict, frustration which may lead to depression. Long-term depression has a variety of negative impacts on the victim, one of the most dangerous of which is suicide. A person who is bullied over a long period of time may show symptoms like isolating themselves from others, feeling sad, lonely, hopeless, irritable, embarrassed, and angry, having the desire to die. Such people might label themselves as complete failures who are not worthy of living. Such negative thoughts are often associated with behaviors like substance abuse, getting hold of firearms, or any dangerous life-threatening weapons which the person might use to commit suicide. Reports of suicide ideation associated with bullying were studied by Borowsky on 6th, 9th, and 12th graders, the results of which showed that 1.2% of uninvolved students attempted suicide, compared with 5% for those people who were frequently involved in verbal or social bullying and 6.5% of those who were frequent victims of verbal or social bullying; and finally, 11.1% for those who were frequent bully-victims of verbal or social bullying [19].

From Table 2 it is observed that self-esteem scores of both the genders (male and female) as well as verbally bullied and verbally non-bullied respondents are found to have a significant negative correlation with suicidal ideation at 0.01 levels. This result is indicative of the fact that when the self-esteem of individuals increases, then there are lesser chances of the individual developing suicidal thoughts (while other factors that may cause such problems are not present). A person who is self-confident feels worthy and competent, has self-respect, and has a well-developed identity seems to have lower chances of having wishes and ideas of dying or committing suicide. Individuals who are confident, respectful towards themselves, have a well-developed self-identity, self-worth and competence are successful in keeping feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, sadness, frustration, and ideas of suicide at a distance. Findings reveal that low self-esteem was closely associated with depression, hopelessness, and suicidal tendencies [20]. Bullying lowers the self-esteem of the victims which creates a fear of being judged, feeling incompetent, unworthy of thriving, feeling miserable about themselves, and thinking of themselves to be of no-good use. Victims feel ashamed, embarrassed, lonely, and anxious. These thoughts tend to deflate self-esteem which may eventually result in the development of suicidal ideas. Thus, from Table 2 it can be said that hypothesis numbers 4, 5, 6, 7 are accepted.

Results obtained from Table 3 revealed that gender has no significant impact on self-esteem and both male and female respondents show almost equal levels of self-esteem. Gender differences in self-esteem are studied by researchers for a long time. Researches over the past two decades revealed that male individuals tend to have high self-esteem scores, male and female individuals' manifest increases in self-esteem from late adolescence to middle adulthood [14, 21, 22, 23]. But the scenario is not the same now. The majority of women in today's generation have access to education, they earn for themselves, and in some cases; they are the only bread-earners of the family, they are involved in every professional field from as-

tronomy to medical science, besides men. Education has boosted self-confidence in women; they understand their importance and worth in their home and their workplace. Women now can efficiently manage their homes and their career that makes them feel competent and satisfied. Such may be the reason behind the fact that higher scores in self-esteem are not only limited to men now but are found in women too. Results obtained from table 3 also indicate that gender shows a significant impact on suicidal ideation in this present study. Studies have shown a large number of men die because of having active suicidal ideations [10] connected with any other physiological, mental or social problems. Women tend to have more passive suicidal thoughts. They attempt suicide but the fatality rate as compared to men is low. Women generally tend to use less dangerous means of suicide. Verbal bullying is found to have no significant impact on self-esteem. Verbally bullied and non-bullied individuals show almost the same levels of self-esteem in the present study. However, there is a significant impact of verbal bullying on suicidal ideation. Thus, it can be said that hypothesis numbers 1 and 2 are partially accepted, as there is no significant difference between male and female college and university students of Kolkata with respect to self-esteem whereas, there is a significant difference between verbally bullied and verbally non-bullied college and university students of Kolkata with respect to suicidal ideation.

In the current study, there is no impact of the interaction effect of gender and verbal bullying on self-esteem and suicidal ideation among college and university students of Kolkata. The absence of impact of the combined interaction effect of gender and bullying on self-esteem and suicidal ideation may be due to the fact that gender and verbal bullying may not be correlated with each other. Therefore, hypothesis number 3 is rejected.

Table 3: Showing 2 × 2 Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) [main effect and interaction effect] of Gender and Verbal Bullying on Self-esteem and Suicidal Ideation

Source	Variables									
	Self Esteem					Suicidal Ideation				
	SS	DF	MS	F	LOS	SS	DF	MS	F	LOS
Gender	.310	1	.310	.012	.913	3046.37	1	3046.37	3.809	.050*
Verbal Bullying	76.213	1	76.21	2.933	0.88	16715.13	1	16715.13	20.90	.000**
Gender × Verbal Bullying	13.753	1	13.75	.529	.468	18.64	1	18.64	0.023	.879

SS-sum of squares, MS-mean square, LOS-level of significance

** F significant at 0.01 level (2 tailed), * F significant at 0.05 level (2 tailed).

6. Conclusion

Male respondents have obtained elevated scores in suicidal ideation. Female respondents showed high self-esteem scores. Verbally Non-bullied individuals have higher self-esteem scores and verbally bullied individuals have higher scores in suicidal ideation. Self-esteem scores of both male and female subjects, as well as verbally bullied and verbally non-bullied respondents are found to have a significant negative correlation with suicidal ideation. Gender and verbal bullying showed a significant impact on suicidal ideation. However, gender and verbal bullying showed no interaction impact on self-esteem and suicidal ideation.

Limitations

– In present investigation participants who are residents of Kolkata were only taken in the study, so the result obtained can't be generalized worldwide.

– Sample size was small ($N = 235$) and male participants were very few in number ($n1 = 61$) compared to females ($n2 = 174$).

– Only verbal bullying was studied, other forms of bullying like physical bullying, sexual bullying, and cyber-bullying were not considered.

Applications

Gender differences are of supreme importance in studying how a man or a woman differs psychologically. The present study indicated the difference between male and female individuals on the basis of self-esteem and suicidal behaviors. The study tries to explain a part of biological as

well as psychological reasons behind such differences. It also points out several new trends observed among males and females which differ from the pre-established findings. With the increasing numbers of verbal bullying cases each day and students being the worst sufferers of the negative impact of verbal bullying, the study holds special importance to understand the types, causes, long term and short impacts of verbal bullying. The study will help researchers to understand how self-esteem is thwarted by verbal bullying and how often victims develop suicidal thoughts after being verbally bullied. The research can be further conducted on people of different age groups, different occupations, and different residential countries who experienced other kinds of bullying (like—physical bullying, sexual bullying, and cyber-bullying) on larger samples.

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