



Contents list available <http://www.kinnaird.edu.pk/>

Journal of Research & Reviews in Social Sciences Pakistan

Journal homepage: <http://journal.kinnaird.edu.pk>



STUDENT PERCEPTION OF INSTRUCTOR BULLYING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS OF PAKISTAN

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Abstract

In recent years, bullying by instructors in educational institutes has emerged as a problem. The purpose of present research was to investigate the relationship between instructor bullying and psychological distress in university students. Total number of participants was 350 with an age range of 18-25 years (Mean Age=20.57; SD=1.55) were selected from private and government universities of Lahore, Pakistan using purposive sampling technique. Student Perception of Professor/Instructor Bullying Questionnaire Scale and Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS) were used to assess variables. Correlational research design was used. Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient, Hierarchical Regression Analysis, and One Way Analysis of Variance were used. The results showed significant relationship of academic and personal bullying with subscales of psychological distress. There was significant predictive relationship between types of bullying and subscales of psychological distress except for personal bullying and stress. There were also significant differences in groups of students on subscales of psychological distress based on ways of coping with the bully, degree of nightmares, and ways opted to hurt the bully. The clinical implications of the present research include providing counseling to the victims and making policies in universities to reduce instructor bullying.

Keywords

Instructor bullying, Depression, Anxiety, Stress



1. Introduction

Each year a student spends thousands of hours in a classroom while interacting with his/her teachers and peers. The time spent in classroom contributes to the sense of self of a student. According to Vygotsky's (1962) theory of social constructivism, a classroom is a place where social and emotional development of a student takes place. In this process, the interaction with teachers has an important role to play in the development of self-esteem and self-concept in students (Burriss & Snead, 2018). Bullying by students has been studied extensively during the past decades in schools, colleges and universities. However, recent literature has suggested the existence of teacher bullying in college students. This type of bullying has not been studied quite often in previous literature which makes this topic more important to understand. The behavior of a teacher towards students affects the motivation of students, thus, affecting their interest and performance in education (Marraccini *et al.*, 2015).

1.1 Instructor/Professor Bullying

There is no specific definition for instructor bullying in literature. Multiple authors have defined instructor bullying in different ways. Instructor bullying was first defined by (Olweus 1996) as recurrent, sarcastic or arrogant acts or upsetting comments to a student. Instructor bullying was recently described as "a teacher who uses his/her power to penalise, control or criticize a student beyond what would be a reasonable disciplinary procedure" (Twemlow *et al.*, 2006). Instructor bullying may also include calling names, displaying negative facial or physical gestures,

contemptuous looks, verbal and physical attacks, insults, and favoritism. Embarrassing or shaming students in front of classmates, regularly giving poor grades to one student on objective assignments or projects, passing scornful remarks, or cracking jokes about a student etc are also a part of bullying behavior by instructors (Marraccini, Weyandt & Rossi, 2015).

Chapell *et al.* (2004) were the first ones to conduct a research to have an estimate of cases of instructor bullying. They discovered that 15% of 1025 college students reported to have been bullied at least once or twice by instructors, 4% were bullied occasionally and 2% were bullied frequently. It has been found that 64% of the young adults have reported to be bullied by their teachers at least once in a lifetime (Davies, 2011) and 93% of college students identified at least one instructor in their college as a bully (McEvoy, 2005). It was also found that instructors also reported that their students may have viewed them as bullies, recognizing bullying behavior as a problem in colleges (Twemlow *et al.*, 2006). The research further indicated that male instructors were found to be engaged in bullying behaviours more often as compared to female instructors. Also, male students appeared to perceive themselves as victims of bullying behaviour by their instructors more often as compared to female students (Twemlow *et al.*, 2006).

1.2 Psychological Distress

Psychological distress has become one of the major problems over years in university students. It is similar to depression and anxiety and they all have almost the same symptoms. Commonly, their symptoms include hopelessness, depression of no reason, feeling sad or

unhappy and lost interest. An unaddressed distress over a longer time period may lead to serious symptoms such as headache, insomnia, and feeling exhausted (Kleinman, 1991; Kirmayer, 1989). Ross and Mirowsky (1989) defined psychological distress as an unpleasant internal thought of depression that has various forms including uneasiness, feeling scared, mood swings, and being short-tempered. Chalfant *et al.* (1990) confers that psychological distress is a constant event and all of its symptoms have a deep relation with each other. Burnette and Mui (1997) believed that the absence of passion is also a form of psychological distress and the person fails to focus on a certain matters, finds it difficult to sleep properly, always feels depressed, and has no hope for a bright future. If we make it more concise, then stress-distress model informs us that it is linked to a certain incident which threatens a person, triggers anxiety, and affects mental and physical health. Due to the ineffective coping methods, the issue gets more complicated which can often result in emotional confusion (Horwitz, 2007; Ridner 2004). Psychological distress can also be defined as negative thoughts and feelings that are unpleasant, frustrating, anxious, and worrisome caused by any event (Kawa & Shafi, 2015).

1.3 Relationship between Instructor/Professor Bullying and Psychological Distress

Previous researches have established a link between bullying and psychological distress (Schneider *et al.*, 2012). However, the relationship of instructor bullying have not been directly investigated. The previous researches have confirmed the existence of instructor bullying (Marraccini *et al.*, 2015). Pottinger and Stair

(2009) conducted research in Jamaican universities where they asked university students to recall their bullying experiences by peers and teachers when they were in elementary and high schools. They concluded that the most frequent forms of bullying included being verbally humiliated, beaten, and robbed. Also, the students who experienced bullying by teachers displayed poor psychological well-being along with display of oppositional behavior, loss of interest in social gatherings and depression. Monsvold *et al.* (2011) investigated the experience of teacher bullying in elementary and secondary schools of adult patients with personality disorders. The types of bullying by teachers included favoritism, humiliation, and neglect at least once a week. They concluded that the patients with personality disorders had experienced bullying in comparison to those without personality disorders. The researches have concluded that experience of bullying by teachers may be associated to development of high risk behaviors i.e drug abuse and poor academic performance in adolescents (Delfabbro *et al.*, 2006). In addition to this, high frequency of teacher bullying may have association with disciplinary and conduct related problems with increased suspension rate (Marraccini *et al.*, 2015).

1.4 Rationale

Since previous researches have not investigated all the impacts of bullying by teachers, the current research investigates the relationship of student perception of instructor bullying with psychological distress. There are a number of psychological problems that are associated with the experience of bullying, therefore, there is a need to investigate the relationship of

specific type of bullying, i.e instructor bullying with psychological distress. Previous researches have primarily focused on the experience of bullying during school years but the present research focuses on the experience of bullying in university students. The present research will help understand the emergence of symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress in those students who experienced bullying from their instructors which will be helpful in understanding the importance of instructors' behaviors towards students in university.

1.5 Hypotheses

H1: There is likely to be a significant relationship between student perception of instructor bullying and psychological distress in university students.

H2: Student perception of instructor bullying is likely to predict psychological distress in university students.

H3: There is likely to be a difference in psychological distress in groups of students based on different ways used for coping with bullying behavior of instructor.

H4: There is likely to be a difference in psychological distress in groups of students reporting different degrees of nightmares about bullying behavior of instructor.

H5: There is likely to be a difference in student perception of instructor bullying and psychological distress in groups reporting different ways opted to hurt the bully.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

Correlational research design was used to find the relationship between student perception of instructor bullying and psychological distress.

2.2 Participants

Total 350 participants were taken from private and government universities of Lahore with the age range of 18-25 years ($M=20.57$, $SD=1.55$). Purposive Sampling strategy was used to select participants.

2.3 Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria are as follows:

- The students were selected who had experienced any form of instructor bullying including calling names, favoritism, racist remarks, insults, or physical abuse (pushing/punching). They were asked a screening question to identify if they had experienced instructor bullying along with the types.
- Only those students were selected whose age was from 18 to 25 years.

2.4 Exclusion Criteria

The exclusion criteria are as follows

- Any student who was already diagnosed with psychological illness was excluded.
- The participants having any physical disability were excluded.
- Students who were in first semester at the time of data collection were excluded.

2.5 Assessment Measures

2.5.1 Demographic Questionnaire

The demographic related questionnaire was developed to find out the demographic related characteristics of the participants. The questionnaire included variables such as age, education, university, types of instructor bullying, etc.

2.5.2 *Student Perception of Professor/Instructor Bullying Questionnaire (SPPBQ; Marraccini, Weyandt, & Rossi, 2015)*

The SPPBQ was developed by Marraccini, Weyandt, and Rossi (2015). Short version of Student Perception of Instructor Bullying Questionnaire was used in English Language. It consists of 11 items. It is further divided in two subscales; academic bullying and personal bullying. There are 7 items in Academic Bullying Subscale and 4 items in Personal Bullying Subscale. Responses were taken on a 5-point Likert scale ranging 1=Never to 5=Daily. The reliability value of academic bullying for present research is $\alpha=.79$ and of personal bullying is $\alpha=.78$.

2.5.3 *Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995)*

Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale was developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995) to assess symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress collectively known as psychological distress. The scale consisted of 21 items. Three subscales of DASS included depression, anxiety, and stress scale followed by four response options that are rated on four-point scales ranging from 0=did not apply to me at all to 3=applied to me very much or most of the time. The reliability values of depression, anxiety, and stress for present research are $\alpha=.73$, $\alpha=.66$ and $\alpha=.66$, respectively.

2.5.4 Procedure

The students were approached from different areas of university and were requested to read the instructions and criteria before completing the questionnaire. The response rate was 100% although some students hesitated in the beginning to fill the questionnaire but

later on they filled the questionnaire. When they were responded to their questions and were assured of confidentiality, they agreed to respond. The respondents were thanked for their cooperation. The data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.

2.5.5 *Ethical Considerations*

The ethical issues were taken into consideration before conducting research. Firstly, the permission of respective authors of the scales was obtained. Secondly, permission was granted from the authorities of the respective universities. Thirdly, the informed consent was also obtained from the participants in written form and they were ensured that their information will remain confidential and also the information about the nature of the research was given to them before the administration of the questionnaire. Participants were free to leave the study at any time. Researcher assured them that their information will be used only for educational purpose.

2.5.6 Statistical Analyses

Descriptive statistics was used on demographic variables to analyze the characteristics of participants. Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was used to investigate relationships between student perception of instructor bullying and psychological distress. Hierarchical Regression analysis was used to find prediction of psychological distress from student perception of instructor bullying predicts. One Way Analysis of Variance was used to compare groups on study variables based on ways of coping used, degrees of nightmare experienced and ways opted to hurt the bully.

3. Results

Table 3.1: Demographic characteristics of the research participants

Characteristics	M(S.D)	f(%)
Age (Years)	20.57(1.55)	
Gender		
Men		175(50)
Women		175(50)
Education (Years)	14.1(1.03)	
University Sector		
Government		242(69.1)
Private		108(30.9)
Types of Perceived Bullying		
Calling Names		170(48.6)
Favoritism		190(54.3)
Racist remarks		63(18.0)
Insults		136(38.9)
Pushing/punching		58(16.6)
Ways Used to Cope with Bullying		
Making fun of situation		56(16.0)
Avoiding the behavior		193(55.1)
Fighting back		52(14.9)
Coping by keeping it to oneself		49(14)
Methods Opted to Hurt the Bully		
Verbal Abuse		177(50.6)
Slapping/Kicking/Hitting		103(29.4)
Shouting		70(20)

Table 3.1 shows the demographic characteristics of the research participants. It shows that the mean age of the participants was 21 years (SD=1.55). The research included 175(50%) men and 175(50%). Table 3.2 shows the correlation matrix for relationships among demographic characteristics, student perception of instructor bullying, and psychological distress. Men perceived to have experienced more academic bullying

by their instructors as compared to women. Further, students from private sector universities reported the experience of both academic as well as personal bullying more as compared to those who studied in government sector universities. Students who reported that their instructors displayed name calling behavior with them, such as ridiculed them in class, also reported high on stress subscale. Students who

received racist remarks reported to have experienced academic bullying along with high scores on all three subscales of psychological distress: depression, anxiety, and stress. The physical forms of bullying such as punching or pushing had positive relationship with depression and stress subscales which demonstrates that students who experienced physical bullying from their instructors reported to have

increased symptoms of depression and stress. Further, both academic bullying and personal bullying were associated with depression, anxiety, and stress which implies that students who perceived their instructors to have insulting attitude towards them in classroom regarding academics as well as on personal level reported high symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress.

Table 3.2: Correlation Matrix of Demographic Characteristics, Subscales of Student Perception of Instructor Bullying and Psychological Distress in University Students (N=350)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Age (Years)	-	.14**	.58**	.26**	.05	-.00	-.11*	-.05	-.16**	.08	-.01	.01	.02	.01
2. Gender		-	-.05	.09	.06	-.12*	.11*	-.02	.03	.16**	.02	.06	.05	.07
3. Education (Years)			-	.30**	-.01	.01	-.08	-.06	-.14**	.06	.11*	.01	-.04	.00
4. University Sector				-	.06	-.02	.02	.06	.06	.13*	.12*	.03	.04	.05
5. Calling Names					-	-.01	.15**	.25**	.21**	.03	.05	.04	.05	.11*
6. Favoritism						-	.02	.09	.03	-.04	-.08	-.07	-.06	-.06
7. Racist Remarks							-	.14**	.15**	.20**	.07	.22**	.17**	.20**
8. Insults								-	.26**	.04	.07	.02	.00	.06
9. Punching/Pushing									-	.01	.04	.18**	.10	.18**
10. Academic Bullying										-	.50**	.42**	.39**	.38**
11. Personal Bullying											-	.33**	.31**	.27**
12. Depression												-	.68**	.70**
13. Anxiety													-	.64**
14. Stress														-

Note: *p<.05, **p<.01, Gender; Men=1, Women=0, Government Sector University=0, Private Sector University=1, Calling Names; Yes=1, No=0, Favoritism; Yes=1, No=0, Racist Remarks; Yes=1, No=0, Insults; Yes=1, No=0, Punching/Pushing; Yes=1, No=0.

Table 3.3 shows the hierarchical regression analyses predicting psychological distress from student perception of instructor bullying. Receiving racist remarks from instructors significantly predicted depression, anxiety, and stress implying that students who received insulting remarks from their instructors based on their ethnic background are likely to develop

symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. Academic bullying predicted depression, anxiety, and stress whereas personal bullying by instructors predicted depression and anxiety. This implies high psychological distress in those students who perceived their instructors to be bullying and insulting them

regarding their academic performance along with display of aggression towards them outside classroom.

Table 3.3: Hierarchical Regression Analysis with Student Perception of Instructor Bullying as Predictor and Psychological Distress as Outcome (N=350)

Variable	Depression		Anxiety		Stress	
	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β
Block 1	.09**		.05*		.07***	
Age		.05		.09		.04
Gender		.02		.00		.03
Education		.02		-.08		.01
University Sector		-.00		.03		.02
Calling Names		-.02		.02		.04
Favoritism		-.08		-.06		-.06
Racist remarks		.21***		.17**		.17***
Insults		-.03		-.04		-.00
Punching/Pushing		.18***		.08		.15**
Block 2	.16***		.15***		.12***	
Academic Bullying		.31***		.29***		.30***
Personal Bullying		.16**		.17**		.11
Total R ²	.25***		.20***		.20***	
N	350		350		350	

Note: *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 Gender; Men=1, Women=0, Government Sector University=0, Private Sector University=1, Calling Names; Yes=1, No=0, Favoritism; Yes=1, No=0, Racist Remarks; Yes=1, No=0, Insults; Yes=1, No=0, Punching/Pushing; Yes=1, No=0.

Table 3.4 shows ANOVA comparing groups of students on subscales of psychological distress based on type of coping strategies they used. There was significant difference in symptoms of depression in students using different types of coping strategies to deal with instructor bullying. The students who tried to cope with the insult by making fun of situation reported highest on depression whereas those who avoided the situation reported lowest on depression.

Table 3.5 shows ANOVA comparing groups of students on subscales of psychological distress based on degree of nightmares they have about instructor’s bullying. Students who reported to always have nightmares about instructor’s bullying behavior reported significantly high on symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress implying significant difference among groups on all subscales of psychological distress.

Table 3.4: One Way Analysis of Variance showing Differences on Subscales of Psychological Distress in Groups Based on Different Ways of Coping with Bullying Behavior (N=350)

	Ways of Coping with Bullying	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>P</i>
Depression	Making fun of situation	7.39	3.98	2.79	.02
	Avoiding the behavior	6.06	3.66		
	Fighting back	7.26	3.30		
	Coping by keeping it to oneself	6.93	3.60		
Anxiety	Making fun of situation	8.62	3.93	1.04	.38
	Avoiding the behavior	7.60	4.35		
	Fighting back	7.07	3.62		
	Coping by keeping it to oneself	7.58	3.88		
Stress	Making fun of situation	7.67	4.90	1.36	.24
	Avoiding the behavior	6.83	3.95		
	Fighting back	7.73	3.73		
	Coping by keeping it to oneself	7.87	4.09		

Table 3.5: One Way Analysis of Variance showing Differences on Subscales of Psychological Distress in Groups Reporting Different Degrees of Nightmares about Bullying Behavior of Instructor (N=350)

	Nightmares about Bullying	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Depression	Never	5.29	3.70	13.05	.000
	Rarely	7.44	3.46		
	Sometimes	7.29	3.20		
	Always	8.76	3.49		
Anxiety	Never	6.66	4.32	6.53	.000
	Rarely	8.16	3.96		
	Sometimes	8.52	3.71		
	Always	9.42	3.33		
Stress	Never	6.21	4.07	6.98	.000
	Rarely	7.97	4.60		
	Sometimes	7.70	3.38		
	Always	9.30	3.41		

Table 3.6 shows ANOVA comparing groups of students on subscales of student perception of instructor bullying and psychological distress based on ways opted to hurt the instructor who bullied. The results revealed that the students who experienced both

forms of bullying and reported high on subscales of psychological distress reported using physical ways to hurt the bully that included slapping, kicking, or hitting.

Table 3.6: One Way Analysis of Variance showing Differences on Student Perception of Instructor Bullying and Psychological Distress in Groups Reporting Different Ways Opted to Hurt the Bully (N=350)

Ways Opted to Hurt the Bully		M	SD	f	P
Academic Bullying	Verbal Abuse	13.44	5.35	9.72	.000
	Slapping/Kicking/Hitting	16.50	5.87		
	Shouting	14.01	6.15		
Personal Bullying	Verbal Abuse	8.79	1.80	7.77	.000
	Slapping/Kicking/Hitting	9.82	2.48		
	Shouting	9.31	2.33		
Depression	Verbal Abuse	6.03	3.69	4.31	.01
	Slapping/Kicking/Hitting	7.34	3.49		
	Shouting	6.74	3.80		
Anxiety	Verbal Abuse	7.05	3.97	5.09	.007
	Slapping/Kicking/Hitting	8.66	4.30		
	Shouting	7.82	3.97		
Stress	Verbal Abuse	6.56	3.92	4.93	.008
	Slapping/Kicking/Hitting	8.02	4.15		
	Shouting	7.75	4.30		

4. Discussion

The findings of the present research have indicated that men reported to have experienced more academic bullying in comparison to women. These findings are consistent with what Marraccini *et al.* (2015) concluded. Further, they also found that overall prevalence of instructor bullying was low in men in comparison to women. The reason could be that men experienced only a certain kind of bullying by instructors more often than women that is academic bullying, which is also concluded in the present research. However, contrary to the previous literature, there was no significant gender difference in experience of personal bullying by instructors. The contradiction could be because of women not wanting to report personal nature of bullying experienced by

their instructors as they might feel uncomfortable report such kind of bullying. There was significant relationship of both academic and personal bullying with depression, anxiety, and stress. Academic bullying also predicted all the three subscales of psychological distress where as personal bullying significantly predicted depression and anxiety subscales of psychological distress. Pottinger and Stair (2009) concluded in their findings that students who experienced bullying in school reported poor psychological well-being and symptoms of depression. The similar pattern can be observed in the present research as well. The students who experienced bullying reported high on subscales of psychological distress. The experience of bullying might have made students anxious about coming to classes along with

generating symptoms of depression that include loneliness, sadness, etc. There was significant difference in symptoms of depression in students using different types of coping strategies to deal with instructor bullying. The students who tried to cope with the insult by making fun of the situation reported highest on depression whereas those who avoided the situation reported lowest on depression. These findings suggest that the students who made fun of the insult may have internalized the anger or embarrassment they felt and tried to cope with it by using humor. Newman, Holden, and Delville (2011) suggested that victims of bullying often use internalizing strategies which can later lead to symptoms of depression in such victims. On the other hand, the students who avoided the bullying behavior of teacher reported lowest on depression. The important factor that is needed to be considered here could be the personality of the students. The students who ignored the insulting behavior of teacher may not have gotten affected by it in the first place, thus making it non-significant. Students who reported to have frequent nightmares about instructor's bullying behavior reported significantly high on symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. It has been found in previous researches that children and adolescents who were bullied by their peers reported to have experienced frequent nightmares and sleep problems along with internalizing problems such as depression, anxiety, and stress (Wolke & Lereya, 2015). The present research has focused on the bullying of adult students by teachers and it has concluded similar results. The students who reported to have experienced most

frequent nightmares also reported high on symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress suggesting similar effects of teacher bullying on adult students as of peer bullying on children and adolescents. The students who experienced both forms of bullying and reported high on subscales of psychological distress reported using physical ways to hurt the bully that included slapping, kicking, or hitting. This suggests that students who reported highest on symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress due to teacher bullying may have developed externalizing problems such as anger and conduct related problems (Marraccini *et al.*, 2015). The extreme psychological distress may have lead victims to take revenge from the bully in the form of slapping, kicking, or hitting. These findings suggest that bullying behavior by teachers may lead students towards disciplinary problems, such as taking revenge from teacher, disobeying him/her, missing classes etc, along with emergence of depression, anxiety, and stress. On the basis of the findings of present research, adverse consequences of teacher bullying on adult students can be concluded in the form of internalizing problems (depression, anxiety, stress, nightmares) as well as externalizing problems (anger, disciplinary, and conduct problems). This is alarming to find out the frequency of instructor bullying in academic institutions of Lahore, Pakistan. Measures should be taken to address instructor bullying in universities. Instructors must be trained where they should be taught on how to express their work related anger towards students appropriately. Furthermore, strict policies must be made to protect students from such kind of victimization. There must be a platform in

universities to deal with such issues ensuring confidentiality of the victim. Also, counseling services to the victims must be provided on campus. The workshops must be organized where both instructors as well as students must be taught on how to have healthy student- instructor relationship on and off campus. The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

5. Limitations

The limitations of the present research are as follows

1. The characteristics of bully such as age, gender, race etc were not asked in the present research.
2. The race of the participants was unknown.
3. The actual process of taking revenge from the bully was not investigated.
4. There were no comparison group i.e students who did not experience instructor bullying.

6. Recommendations for Future Research

Future researches can shed light on the experience of bullying by instructors in detail by qualitatively exploring the experience and its psychosocial consequences on victims. The researches should also focus on this topic more in future in terms of investigating the characteristics of those instructors who bully their students in universities. The student related factors are also suggested to be investigated in future researches to understand what makes some students more vulnerable to be victimized in comparison to others.

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