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Case Study

Sociological Impacts of Peer Bullying among Adolescents: A Case Study among Students of Private Schools of Kathmandu, Nepal

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the prevalence and effects of peer bullying among adolescent students in selected secondary schools in Kathmandu. The research aims to understand the factors influencing bullying, its psychological and social consequences, and students' responses to such experiences. Bullying is a significant issue that affects students' mental health, academic performance, and social well-being. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, collecting data from 142 respondents through surveys and interviews to analyze patterns of bullying behavior, gender differences, and the impact of family background. The findings indicate that verbal bullying is the most common form, with girls being more affected than boys. Furthermore, bullying experiences have long-lasting emotional impacts, including anxiety and depression. The study concludes with recommendations for bullying prevention through school policies, awareness campaigns, and support mechanisms for affected students, emphasizing the need for a structured anti-bullying framework in schools.

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Introduction

Bullying in schools is a widespread issue with profound consequences on students' mental health, academic performance, and social interactions (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Omoteso, 2010). It is a form of aggressive behavior that manifests in verbal, physical, and cyberbullying (Gladden et al., 2014). In Nepal, where bullying is often normalized as a part of school life, students may suffer in silence, leading to long-term psychological distress (Rana, 2006). The lack of effective anti-bullying policies and intervention strategies exacerbates the issue, making it imperative to examine the nature of bullying and its implications (Chambless, 2022). Sociological knowledge is crucial for identifying such underlying reasons and addressing the root causes (Ghimire, 2017).

This study focuses on secondary school students in Kathmandu, analyzing the factors contributing to bullying, its impact on victims, and the effectiveness of intervention strategies. It explores the socio-economic and psychological dimensions of bullying, investigating how gender, family structure, and school environment influence bullying behavior (Maa et al., 2009; Darmawan, 2010). Additionally, the study highlights gaps in school policies and the role of teachers, parents, and peers in either mitigating or perpetuating bullying (James, 2020). By identifying key challenges and proposing structured intervention strategies, this research emphasizes the urgency of creating a safer and more inclusive school environment.

The study further aims to raise awareness among educators, parents, and policymakers about the need for comprehensive anti-bullying frameworks that prioritize student well-being and mental health support (Aryal et al., 2017). It assesses the prevalence and common types of bullying, identifies demographic factors that influence such behavior, and analyzes its psychological and emotional impacts. It also examines students' responses and coping mechanisms and offers practical recommendations for effective prevention and intervention strategies within school settings.

Theoretical Review

This study is grounded in multiple sociological theories that provide a comprehensive understanding of peer bullying, particularly among adolescents in school settings. These theories help explain the underlying motivations, social processes, and consequences associated with bullying behavior.

Dominance Theory

Dominance Theory suggests that bullying is motivated by a desire for power and social status, shaped by both individual traits and group-based hierarchies. Social Dominance Theory (SDT) adds a group-based perspective, incorporating variables like gender, ethnicity, and age (Chambless, 2022). Bullies often use intimidation and humiliation to establish power within peer groups. Relational bullying—common among girls—exemplifies how social dominance is achieved through exclusion, gossip, and manipulation (Spinelli, 2018). Humiliation, distinct from shame, involves external degradation and leads to emotional distress, such as anger or depression (Phelan, Link, & Dovidio, 2008).

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Therefore, bullying serves as a mechanism to establish and maintain social hierarchies within schools.

Strain Theory

Strain Theory, particularly Agnew's General Strain Theory (GST), posits that individuals engage in deviant behavior when faced with severe or unjust strains (Agnew, cited in Ghimire, 2018). These strains include family conflict, financial hardship, and bullying itself. GST identifies three categories of strain: (1) failure to achieve goals, (2) removal of positive stimuli, and (3) exposure to negative stimuli. The likelihood of delinquent behavior increases when individuals perceive the strain as unjust and lack adequate coping resources (Omoteso, 2010; Maa et al., 2009). Research shows that bullying, especially when combined with weak social support, intensifies the probability of psychological problems or deviant responses (Rahey, 2007).

Labeling Theory

Labeling Theory examines how being labeled as a "bully" or a "problem student" can reinforce deviant behavior. Once labeled, individuals often internalize this identity, which may lead to the continuation or intensification of the behavior (James, 2020). The labeling process includes both formal (e.g., disciplinary actions) and informal mechanisms (e.g., peer reactions), contributing to stigmatization. This theory also emphasizes that marginalized groups are more likely to be labeled and punished, exacerbating social inequalities (Ghimire, 2018). Though initially critiqued for lack of clarity, recent studies reaffirm its value in explaining persistent deviant behavior among youth (Spinelli, 2018).

Theory of Stigmatization:

Stigmatization refers to the social process whereby individuals are discredited due to perceived differences, resulting in a "spoiled" identity (Phelan et al., 2008). It involves recognition of differences, negative stereotyping, and social exclusion. Stigma functions at societal, interpersonal, and individual levels and is reinforced through public stigma, self-stigma, and structural forms of bias. In school contexts, bullying reinforces these dynamics by maintaining power asymmetries and enforcing conformity (Chambless, 2022). Students with perceived vulnerabilities—such as disabilities or poor academic performance—may be especially prone to stigma and peer rejection (Spinelli, 2018).

Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative techniques to provide a holistic understanding of peer bullying among adolescents in private schools in Kathmandu. A descriptive, cross-sectional research design was adopted to capture the nature, frequency, and impacts of bullying within a specific time frame. Primary data were collected through surveys, structured interviews, and direct observation of school environments, while secondary data were sourced from academic journals, books, and previous studies on bullying. Stratified random sampling was used to select 142 students from Kanjirowa National Secondary School and Hebron Public School, ensuring representation across age, gender, and socio-economic backgrounds. The sample was divided into three age groups (12–14, 15–17, and 18–20 years) to assess variations in bullying experiences across developmental stages.

Data collection tools included both closed- and open-ended survey questions to capture measurable trends and in-depth narratives. Structured interviews provided deeper insights into students' emotional and psychological experiences, while observation of school settings helped validate survey data and reveal social dynamics in real time. Data analysis combined frequency distribution to identify common types and occurrences of bullying, comparative analysis to explore variations across demographic factors, and thematic analysis of qualitative responses to uncover coping mechanisms and emotional impacts. Results were presented using tables, charts, and graphs to enhance clarity, ensuring that both statistical patterns and personal experiences were effectively communicated to inform actionable recommendations.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Age Distribution

The study was conducted among 142 students from grades eight, nine, and ten at Kanjirowa National Secondary School and Hebron Public School in Kathmandu. The findings indicate that 56% of the respondents belonged to the 15–17 age group, 41% were between 12–14 years, and only 6% fell within the 18–20 age bracket. This distribution suggests that the majority of the participants were in their mid-adolescence, a stage where peer interactions and bullying tendencies are more prevalent.

The analysis reveals that female respondents (61%) outnumbered male respondents (39%). Literature suggests that gender plays a significant role in the prevalence and nature of bullying. Research indicates that while boys are more likely to engage in physical bullying, girls are often subjected to and involved in relational bullying, such as exclusion, rumor-spreading, and social manipulation.

A total 56.33% of respondents were from the Janjati community, 18% were Brahmin, while both Chhetri and Dalit groups constituted 13% each. This indicates that the study sample had a higher representation of ethnic minorities, which may influence perspectives on bullying and social interactions, as cultural and societal norms differ across ethnic backgrounds.

Family Structure and Parental Status

Family Structure

The findings indicate that 54% of respondents lived in joint families, whereas 46% were from nuclear families. A joint family setting may provide a broader support system for adolescents, potentially impacting their experiences and coping mechanisms related to bullying. Conversely, students in nuclear families may have limited support networks, which could influence their responses to bullying incidents.

Parental Status

The data indicate that 94% of respondents' parents were living together, 4% were widowed, 2% were single, and none were divorced. Parental relationships significantly influence a child's emotional well-being, with stable family environments often fostering resilience against negative social experiences like bullying. Children from single-parent households may face additional emotional and social challenges, increasing their susceptibility to bullying.

Siblings and Home Environment

The presence and number of siblings can shape social skills, conflict resolution abilities, and overall attitudes toward peer interactions. The study finds that 54.22% of respondents had 1–2 siblings, 15.49% had 3–5 siblings, and 30% had no siblings. Children with siblings may develop stronger interpersonal skills, which can either help them resist bullying or, in some cases, encourage aggressive behaviors based on familial influences.

Perception and Experience of Peer Bullying

Assessment of Peer Bullying

The study assessed students' perceptions and experiences of peer bullying through various parameters. Results indicate that 54% perceived bullying as a form of abuse, 18% considered it a

normal part of student life, 15% viewed it as persistent unwelcome behavior, while 13% regarded it as a dominating and discriminatory act by peers. These varying perceptions highlight the need for awareness programs to redefine bullying as a serious issue rather than a normative student experience.

Exposure to Bullying

Findings reveal that 54% of respondents experienced bullying a few times a week, while 18% experienced it once a week. Meanwhile, 15% reported never having experienced bullying, whereas 13% encountered it multiple times a week. These statistics highlight the varying levels of bullying exposure among students, with some experiencing frequent victimization while others remain unaffected.

Emotional Reactions to Bullying

After experiencing bullying, 10% of respondents felt like avoiding school, and 3.33% even considered suicide. Meanwhile, 35% felt the urge to seek revenge, 15% developed self-pity, and 36.66% reported feeling indifferent to the experience. These findings emphasize the psychological impact of bullying, which ranges from mild emotional distress to severe consequences, including mental health issues and academic disengagement.

Coping Mechanisms and Reporting Bullying

Sharing Bullying Experiences

Among those who experienced bullying, 35% shared their experiences with friends, 14.16% confided in their siblings, and 12.5% did not share with anyone. Additionally, 15% reported the incidents to their parents, while 23.33% informed their teachers. These findings indicate that adolescents primarily rely on peer support, often avoiding parental or teacher involvement due to fear, shame, or the belief that adults may not effectively address their concerns.

Effects of Bullying on Daily Life

Only 9.16% of respondents reported significant changes in their daily lives due to bullying, while 6.66% stated that they noticed no changes. Furthermore, 21.66% observed slight changes, and 62.5% were uncertain about any impact. This suggests that while some students exhibit resilience, others may internalize the effects unconsciously, affecting their confidence, academic performance, and social interactions.

Participation in Bullying Activities

Engagement in Bullying

The study finds that 38.02% of respondents admitted to engaging in bullying activities, whereas 61.97% denied any involvement. Among those involved, 38.88% attributed their behavior to peer influence, while 61.11% stated that they did it for fun. These findings suggest that bullying is often driven by social dynamics, peer pressure, and a lack of awareness regarding its long-term consequences.

Emotional Response of Bullies

After engaging in bullying, 42.59% of perpetrators felt remorse, 37.03% experienced satisfaction, and 20.37% reported feeling indifferent. This variation in emotional responses highlights the psychological complexity of bullying behaviors, where some individuals recognize the harm they cause, while others find validation in their actions.

School Environment and Teacher Intervention

Teachers' Role in Addressing Bullying

Among the respondents, 62.67% stated that their teachers provided feedback after a bullying report, whereas 37.32% mentioned that their teachers did not intervene. When teachers took action, 31.46% attempted to convince students to stop,

20.22% scolded the bullies, 12.35% imposed direct punishments, and 29.21% issued warnings before applying disciplinary measures. These findings indicate varying levels of teacher involvement, suggesting the need for more structured anti-bullying policies within schools.

Locations Where Bullying Occurs

The findings reveal that 42.25% of students experienced bullying in their classrooms, 48.49% on school grounds, 3.52% in the library, and 5.63% in other locations such as outside the school or at home. These results indicate that bullying is most prevalent in unstructured environments where adult supervision is limited.

Target Groups and Forms of Bullying

Characteristics of Targeted Students

According to respondents, 40.14% of bullying victims were physically weak, 27.46% were new students, 18.30% were academically weak, 7.74% had disabilities, and 6.33% belonged to low-income families. These findings suggest that bullying is often directed at individuals perceived as socially or physically vulnerable.

Common Forms of Bullying

The study reveals that 33.09% of respondents identified verbal bullying (taunting, teasing, name-calling, and threats) as the most common form, followed by physical bullying (hitting and fighting) at 33.09%, and cyberbullying (text messages, emails, and phone calls) at 40.14%. These findings highlight the increasing role of digital platforms in bullying behaviors.

Psychological Impact and Parental Involvement

Psychological Consequences

Respondents reported various psychological effects of bullying, including depression and anxiety (23.23%), increased feelings of sadness (15.49%), loneliness (11.26%), sleep disturbances (19.01%), changes in eating patterns (11.97%), and loss of interest in activities (19.01%). These findings highlight the severe emotional consequences of bullying, emphasizing the need for mental health support in schools.

Parental Communication and Media Influence

The study finds that 46.47% of students shared their school experiences with parents, whereas 53.52% did not. Additionally, 65% of respondents believed that media plays a role in promoting bullying, while 35% disagreed. These findings underscore the importance of parental involvement and responsible media consumption in shaping students' attitudes toward bullying.

Key Findings

The study revealed critical insights into the demographics, perceptions, and impacts of bullying among adolescent students at Kanjirowa National Secondary School and Hebron Public School in Kathmandu. A majority of respondents (56%) were between the ages of 15 to 17, a stage of adolescence where peer influence is highly significant. Female students constituted a larger portion (61%) of the sample, and more than half (56.33%) identified as belonging to the Janjati community. Notably, 54% came from joint family settings, suggesting the presence of extended social support at home.

In terms of bullying prevalence, 54% of students experienced bullying a few times each week, and while most viewed it as a form of abuse, a concerning 18% regarded it as a normal part of school life. This normalization of bullying highlights a cultural tolerance that may hinder effective intervention. The psychological and emotional effects were severe, with 10% of students wanting to avoid school and 3.33% admitting to having

suicidal thoughts. Moreover, 35% of students reported feelings of revenge, while 15% internalized their trauma through self-pity. The study also noted gaps in support systems—only 23.33% of victims reported incidents to teachers, while 35% chose to confide in friends. Although 62.67% stated that teachers responded to reports, inconsistencies in responses were observed. Verbal and physical bullying were common (each reported by 33.09%), and cyberbullying (40.14%) emerged as a significant concern. Classrooms and school grounds were identified as high-risk areas for bullying incidents.

Overall Implications

These findings illustrate that bullying is a pervasive and deeply rooted issue in school environments, affecting students' emotional well-being, academic engagement, and social development. The normalization of bullying among a segment of students, coupled with underreporting to teachers and parents, suggests a lack of trust in institutional mechanisms and the need for cultural transformation within school settings. The presence of cyberbullying further indicates that bullying now transcends physical boundaries, requiring both digital literacy and parental vigilance. Additionally, the emotional responses—ranging from avoidance to suicidal ideation—underscore the urgency of psychological interventions and safe, supportive environments for affected students. The study highlights the need for systemic and multi-level responses involving school administrators, teachers, parents, and peer networks.

Conclusion

This study explored the demographic profile, family structures, perceptions, experiences, and psychological impacts of peer bullying among students from Kanjirowa National Secondary School and Hebron Public School in Kathmandu. The findings underscore that bullying is a widespread and deeply rooted issue that significantly affects students' emotional well-being, social development, and academic performance. Bullying manifests in multiple forms—verbal, physical, and increasingly cyber-related—occurring primarily within school premises. While some students recognize bullying as abuse, a concerning proportion perceive it as a normal part of school life, suggesting the persistence of harmful social norms.

The study also highlights alarming emotional consequences, including school avoidance, suicidal thoughts, and feelings of revenge or self-pity among victims. Despite these impacts, the rate of reporting incidents to teachers or parents remains low, indicating a lack of trust in school-level interventions and insufficient communication at home. Moreover, inconsistencies in teacher response and limited parental engagement further weaken the support system for affected students. These findings call for a comprehensive and systemic response to address the issue of bullying, not only as an educational challenge but also as a public mental health concern requiring urgent and sustained attention.

Way Forward

To effectively prevent and respond to bullying in schools, it is essential to strengthen institutional frameworks and promote a culture of safety and inclusion. Schools should develop and enforce clear anti-bullying policies, supported by regular teacher training on prevention and intervention strategies. Establishing systems for documenting and following up on bullying cases will promote accountability. In parallel, integrating anti-bullying education into the curriculum and organizing awareness campaigns can foster empathy, emotional intelligence, and non-violent conflict resolution. Encouraging student-led initiatives such as peer mediation and anti-bullying clubs can further cultivate a positive and inclusive school culture.

Equally important is the engagement of parents and the broader school community. Schools should organize regular workshops and meetings with parents to build awareness and provide guidance on identifying and addressing bullying-related issues at home. Creating safe spaces such as counseling rooms and increasing adult supervision in high-risk areas will contribute to a more supportive environment. To address emerging challenges like cyberbullying, schools must provide digital literacy education and establish reporting mechanisms in collaboration with online platforms and local authorities. Ensuring access to mental health support, promoting confidence-building extracurricular activities, and offering anonymous reporting channels are also crucial steps to enhance the psychological well-being of all students.

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