

Views on gender differences in bullying in relation to language and gender role socialisation

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Abstract

The study sought to examine society's views on gender differences in bullying in relation to socialisation into gender roles. Fifty-two people were surveyed on their views regarding bullying. The results supported the hypotheses that women will have been bullied more than men; men will have bullied more than women; men will have been bullied more by males than by females; women will have primarily bullied and been bullied verbally and emotionally; and that people will believe that bullying decreases with age. The results did not support the hypotheses that women will have been bullied equally by males and females; and that men will have primarily bullied and been bullied physically. Instead it was found that women were mainly bullied by females, and that men primarily bully and are bullied verbally.

1. Introduction

The following paper aims to examine society's views on gender differences in bullying and how these differences relate to language and to socialisation into gender roles. Studying bullying, its causes and effects, is important as bullies and victims can develop psychological problems later in life. Farrington states that bullying has negative, long-term effects on the mental health of victims (1993: 328). Victims may develop low self esteem and suffer from related issues such as poor body image, self-mutilation and in extreme cases suicide. Bullies on the other hand may be showing the first signs of an aggressive and violent personality which can lead to criminal behaviour in adolescence and adulthood. Bullying has been shown to be related to crime, criminal violence, and other types of aggressive antisocial behaviour (Farrington 1993: 383). The prevalence and severity of bullying is on the rise, most prominently seen in recent cases of schoolyard shootings, large-scale violent attacks and increases in teenage suicides. Research into bullying can help increase our understanding and awareness of bullying, and can assist with developing strategies to combat bullying early.

2. Literature Review

The primary researcher in the field of bullying is Dan Olweus, who defines bullying as "when someone is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more others" (1978: 9; cited in Turkel 2007: 248).

Farrington states that while there is no universally accepted definition of bullying, many have agreed that it includes the following elements: “physical, verbal or psychological attack or intimidation that is intended to cause fear, distress or harm to the victim; an imbalance of power with the more powerful person oppressing the less powerful one; absence of provocation by the victim; and repeated incidents between the same people over a prolonged period of time” (1993: 384). Research has shown that bullies tend to have a low socio-economic status and be unsuccessful in school, whereas victims are often unpopular, are rejected by their peers, and have poor social skills (Farrington 1993: 383).

Many researchers have agreed that there are differences in the ways males and females bully, how they are bullied, and what they are bullied about. One common distinction is between physical bullying, such as hitting, kicking and punching, and verbal or psychological bullying, such as name calling, exclusion, gossip and rumour spreading. Farrington states that physical bullying is more common of males and psychological bullying more typical of females (1993: 385). Smith, Cowie, Olafsson and Liefoghe distinguish between direct (physical and verbal) aggression and indirect aggression, which has a secretive nature and includes such behaviours as gossiping, spreading rumours and social exclusion (2002: 1120). Besag investigates how females use strategies and language to control peer relations, and the covert nature of female aggression (2006: 153). Besag notes the prominent role of talk in girls’ play and suggests that the co-operative nature of girls’ games is related to their preferred use of indirect modes of aggression (2006: 153). Olweus has found that boys engage in more direct physical bullying than females; and that girls engage in more indirect bullying, such as spreading rumours and manipulation of friendship (1978; as cited in Turkel 2007: 248). Felix and McMahon state that males employ physical victimisation, harming others through violence; whereas females employ relational victimisation, harming others by damaging their relationships (2006: 708).

There appears to be a consensus between researchers that males predominantly bully physically and females predominantly bully verbally and psychologically. There are also other gender differences that exist in relation to bullying behaviour. Farrington has found that, in general, males bully more than females, that males are mainly bullied by males, and that females are equally bullied by males and females (1993: 396). Thorne (1993) has found that most often males are bullied about their sexuality, while females are mostly bullied about their apparent ‘loose morals’ (cited in Turkel 2007: 251). Eder (1997) supports this statement by finding that children predominantly use sexual putdowns towards girls, such as ‘whore’ or ‘slut’ (cited in Turkel 2007: 251). Turkel also notes that while males often bully strangers or acquaintances, females attack within networks of friends (2007: 253). Lastly Farrington states that the prevalence of female bullies declines steadily with age, but the prevalence of male bullies

remains roughly constant from the ages of eight to sixteen (1993: 393). In later adolescence bullying becomes more relational, culminating in adulthood in forms such as racial and sexual harassment (Turkel 2007: 244).

The question then becomes, why the difference between genders? Turkel states that while boys are encouraged to kick and punch their negative feelings away, girls are taught to avoid direct confrontation (2007: 252). Girls are expected to be non-aggressive and to conform to the stereotype of being the kinder, gentler sex, so parents discourage direct physical aggression in girls (Turkel 2007: 252). Boys, however, have more freedom to express their anger in direct physical ways. Turkel states that because girls are not allowed to express their anger directly, it comes out in other ways (2007: 254). Examples of this include social ostracism, ignoring, and sabotaging another's relationship (Turkel 2007: 253). This indirect aggression allows the bully to avoid confronting their victim (Turkel 2007: 253). Boys, however, are taught to be more physically direct with their anger. This socialisation into gender roles could be an explanation for the gender differences in bullying behaviour which continues into adulthood.

In adulthood, bullying becomes more dangerous, with examples including sexual and racial harassment, assault and rape. Cortina, Lonsway, Magley, Freeman, Collinsworth, Hunter and Fitzgerald (2002) conducted a study on incivility between attorneys in the area of litigation. They found that 75% of women experienced some form of interpersonal mistreatment in the last five years, compared with 50% of men (2002: 244). Further, 8% of women had suffered unwanted sexual attention in the context of federal litigation, compared to less than 1% of men (Cortina et al. 2002: 244). Also, 4% of women reported unwanted physical or sexual touching, with only 0.5% of men reporting the same (Cortina et al. 2002: 247). Cortina et al. stated the reason for this difference: "women's social and occupational advances threaten the status quo of male domination and female subordination, inspiring hostility towards women as a means of maintaining control" (2002: 256). Therefore it appears that bullying does not decrease with age: it simply changes form, and continues to be directed at women more than at men.

This paper presents the following hypotheses:

1. Women will have been bullied more than men;
2. Men will have bullied more than women;
3. Men will have been bullied more by men than by women;
4. Women will have been bullied equally by men and women;
5. Women will have primarily bullied and been bullied verbally and emotionally;
6. Men will have primarily bullied and been bullied physically;
7. People will believe that bullying decreases with age.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The study surveyed 52 people: 14 men and 38 women, whose ages varied from 18 to 58. Participants were recruited among friends, family, acquaintances and random strangers. Participants were not rewarded for their participation.

3.2 Design

The study was a survey design. The variables were gender and types of bullying.

3.3 Materials

The only material used in this study was the survey, a copy of which has been included as an Appendix.

3.4 Procedure

The survey was written and distributed to the participants. Participants were able to fill out the survey completely confidentially, placing their completed survey in a plastic sleeve themselves so that I could not read their answers. The surveys were not read until they were all collected. The results were then found and analysed.

4. Results

The following results were gathered from participants' answers to questions 1 to 6, drawing on their personal experiences.

	Men	Women
Physically	20%	0%
Sexually	0%	0%
Verbally (name calling, teasing)	80%	45%
Emotionally (exclusion, bitching, gossip)	0%	55%
Workplace	0%	0%

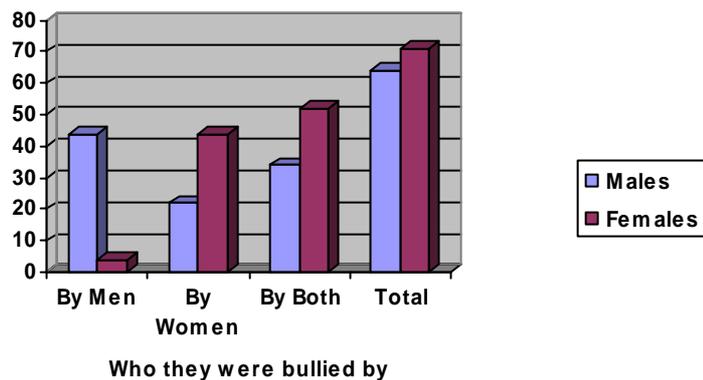
Table 1: The ways men and women bully others

	Men	Women
Physically (being punched, having pins stuck into them)	33%	7%
Sexually	11%	0%
Verbally (name calling, taunting, teasing)	89%	60%
Emotionally (exclusion, constantly criticising)	0%	22%
Workplace (do things not in job description)	0%	11%

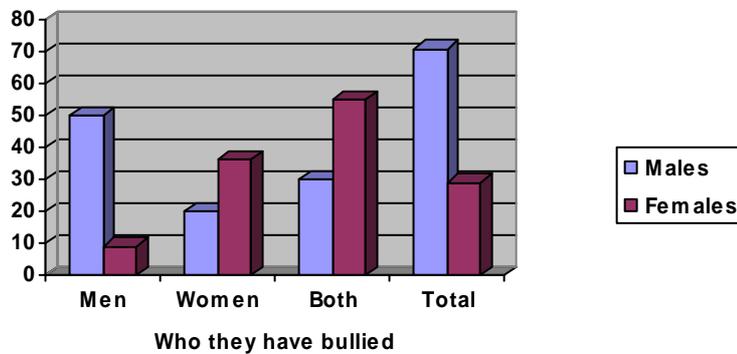
Table 2: The ways men and women are bullied

Note: some participants listed more than one way in which they had been bullied.

Males and Females who have been bullied



Males and Females who have bullied



Some other interesting results were that 100% of men and 84% of women believed bullying decreases with age. Also, 43% of participants thought that men bully more, 37% thought women bully more, and 20% thought men and women bully equally; 30% of participants thought men are bullied more, 56% thought women are bullied more, and 14% thought men and women are bullied equally. This demonstrates a societal view that men bully and women are bullied.

Another interesting result was that 13% of participants believe women bully alone, 58% believe women bully in a group and 27% thought women bully both alone and in groups. 30% of participants believed men bully alone, 37% believed men bully in groups, and 33% thought men bully both alone and in groups. This shows that across both genders bullying is viewed as primarily a group activity, but more so with women than with men.

5. Discussion

The study achieved its aim, which was to examine society's views on gender differences in bullying. The results support the hypothesis that women will have been bullied more than men, with 71% of women having been bullied compared to 64% of men. However this was not as large a difference as may have been expected. The results also support the hypothesis that men will have bullied more than women, with 71% of men having bullied someone compared to 29% of women. The largest difference can be seen in the amount men bully men and are bullied by men.

The hypothesis that men will have been bullied more by males than by females is supported, with 44% of men having been bullied by males only, compared to 22% of men who have been bullied by females only and 34% who have been bullied by males and females. The hypothesis that women will have been equally bullied by males and females is not supported, with 52% of women reporting being bullied by males and females. As this is only marginally over half it could not be said to support the hypothesis. 4% were bullied solely by males and 44% solely by females, indicating that women are bullied more by females than by males.

The hypothesis that women will have primarily bullied and been bullied verbally and emotionally was supported, with 100% of women who reported having bullied someone doing so verbally and emotionally, and 82% of women having been bullied emotionally and verbally. The hypothesis that men will have primarily bullied and been bullied physically was not supported, with only 20% of men reporting they had bullied another person physically, compared to 80% who had bullied others verbally. 33% reported they had been bullied physically, compared to 89% who had been bullied verbally. The hypothesis that people will think that bullying decreases with age was supported.

As it was difficult to place the results of the differences in how people thought men and women bully in a table, I thought it easier to discuss the

differences here. There was a general consensus that men bully physically and verbally; and women bully emotionally, mentally and psychologically. Some examples that participants gave of how men bully men included beating them up, physical violence, strength, power, size, physical threats, aggression, intimidation and fighting. Some examples participants gave of how men bully women were intimidation, sexual harassment, lewd comments, power, control, demeaning comments, domestic violence, money, peer pressure, patronisation and belittlement. Participants generally saw men as bullying men physically; and bullying women physically, verbally and emotionally.

With regards to women, some examples participants gave of how women bully women included exclusion from a group, bitchiness, secrets, teasing, ganging up on someone, spreading rumours, backstabbing, derogatory comments, withholding friendship, manipulation and forming groups. Participants' examples of how women bully men included put-downs, emotional blackmail, threats of no sex, hurting their feelings, teasing, nagging, questioning their sexuality and denting their ego. Women's bullying therefore is seen as a more passive and indirect form of aggression than male bullying, which is much more active and direct. This reflects a wider societal stereotype, which generalises men as active, physical and dominant; and women as passive, submissive and weak.

The results support the findings, previously outlined, of Smith et al. regarding the differences between direct and indirect aggression (2002: 1120). The results show that males bully verbally, which is direct aggression, whereas females primarily bully emotionally, which is indirect aggression. This finding validates the distinction made by Smith et al. The findings of Turkel (2007), that the gender differences in bullying arise from socialisation into gender roles, are relevant here. The fact that males were found to bully more directly than females supports the statement of Turkel (2007) that boys are socialised to be more aggressive than girls.

The results do not support the general view, expressed by Farrington (1993) and Olweus (1978), that males predominantly bully physically. There could be several reasons for this. Firstly the sample size of males was quite small; if it had been larger the results may possibly have been different. Also, men may have been reluctant to report that they had bullied another physically, for fear of retribution; or that they had been bullied physically, for fear of embarrassment. Also, Olweus wrote in 1978 and Farrington in 1993: it is possible that things have changed since then. One recent view is that girls are becoming more physical in their bullying; however, the study does not support this.

The study had some limitations. Firstly the sample size was quite small, and skewed in the direction of women. This could have biased the results more to women's experiences and beliefs. Also, the survey was very subjective, based solely on people's experiences, attitudes and memories. This could have distorted the results, especially for the older people who perhaps had not been

bullied since school. Despite the fact that participants were able to fill out the survey completely confidentially, some participants, especially family and friends, may not have answered totally truthfully in fear of what I would think when I read the surveys. Also the very subject of bullying is a sensitive one. Some participants, especially men, may have been too embarrassed to report that they had been bullied or the ways in which they had been bullied. Some participants, especially women, may have felt too guilty to admit they had bullied others, in view of the stereotype of women being the gentler, fairer sex.

Future research in the area should not only examine society's views, but should also observe men and women in their natural environments to provide more insight into adult bullying. Most of the current research relates to bullying among school children, and there is the perception, proven in the study, that bullying decreases with age. However I would propose that bullying does not decrease with age; it simply changes form and can become more harmful. Therefore future research should concentrate on observing the forms and differences in adult bullying, as 11% of women in the study reported workplace bullying. Also, the findings of Cortina et al. (2002) suggest that bullying is prevalent in what would be considered a professional adult environment: federal litigation. As adult bullying can be more harmful than schoolyard bullying, it is important that it be studied and analysed to increase awareness and to help prevent its occurrence in the future.

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Appendix 1: Survey

Gender: Male	Female	Age:
Q1.	Have you ever been bullied?	Yes/No
Q2.	If yes – was it by a male, female or both?	Male/Female/Both
Q3.	How did they bully you?	
Q4.	Have you ever bullied anyone?	Yes/No
Q5.	If yes- were they male, female or both?	Male/Female/Both
Q6.	How did you bully them?	
Q7.	Who do you think bullies more, men or women?	Men/Women
Q8.	Who do you think is bullied more, men or women?	Men/Women
Q9.	How do men bully men?	
Q10.	How do men bully women?	
Q11.	How do women bully women?	
Q12.	How do women bully men?	
Q13.	Do women bully alone or in a group?	Alone/in a group
Q14.	Do men bully alone or in a group?	Alone/in a group
Q15.	Do you think bullying increases or decreases with age?	Increases/Decreases