

Violence Exposure and Self-esteem of School Going Adolescents in a Metropolitan City: A Preliminary Study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Violence exposure in light of peer victimization and witnessing peer victimization is a common phenomenon in schools across the globe. The present study conceptualizes exposure at three personal levels: a) as a victim, b) as a witness, and c) as a perpetrator. **Method & Materials:** A semi-structured interview schedule and Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale were used as study tools. **Results:** The findings of the study show that the entire sample had experienced violence in one form or the other in school and had witnessed the same as well. Few of the adolescents had committed violence to take revenge and settle the score for being bullied. Victimization and witnessing violence in school triggered feelings like hurt, helplessness, sadness, and anger, whereas on committing violent acts feelings of joy, fun, content and satisfaction in adolescents. Twenty per cent of adolescents had low levels of self-esteem and 80% had average levels of self-esteem. The results showcase the reasons for bullying for fun, to hurt, to oppress or dominate others, due to personal grievances, jealousy, and growing less tolerance. **Conclusion:** Violence exposure to adolescents at school needs intervention.


Keywords: Adolescents, violence exposure, bullying, self-esteem

INTRODUCTION

WHO defines adolescents as the group of individuals between 10 and 19 years.^[1] Adolescence is referred as a period of life with specific welfare and developmental needs and rights. It is a time to develop knowledge and skills, learn to manage emotions and relationships, and acquire attributes and abilities that will be important for enjoying the adolescent years and assuming adult roles. Adolescence is a stage of tremendous physical, cognitive, and psychosocial development. Adolescents are greatly affected by the opinions of others, especially of their peers. During adolescence, individuals speedily develop the self-concept and explore it. Self-esteem is related to self-concept and in adolescence greatly relies on their image as conceived by their peers. According to Andre and Lelord the main components of self-esteem are self-love, self-concept and self-confidence.^[2] In Muntean's view child's self-

esteem is influenced by external dimensions like age, gender, physical traits and adolescents have a fluctuant self-esteem due to hormonal changes which stabilizes in adolescence.^[2] The physical and emotional changes in adolescence, especially early adolescence, present new challenges to self-esteem. Adolescents with high self-esteem can smoothly handle conflicts, resist negative pressures, and make friends. Adolescents with low self-esteem have a difficulty in dealing with problems and can become passive, withdrawn, and depressed. They may have negative self-image and lack problem solving skills.

Interpersonal violence is the second most and self-harm is the third most leading cause of death for male adolescents and among females self-harm is the second most leading cause of death.^[3] Self-harm in adolescents can be traced

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by presence of depression in adolescents due to violence exposure. A study found that the high level of depression was related with high level of bullying.^[4] A report reveals that suicide and violence are the biggest cause of death among people of 15-39 age group with a share of 20.5% of the total deaths in Telangana, which is largely linked with stress, depression and mental illness.^[5]

Approximately two-fifth of children aged 17 years and younger reported being exposed to violence directly- as victim and indirectly- as witness.^[6] A study reported 53% bullying behaviour prevalence in the schools of India.^[7] Exposure to violence can lead the adolescent to suffer from problems like anxiety, reverse aggression, depression, mental health problems, poor academic performance, and conduct problems. Violence exposure of adolescents leads to poor school performance and adjustment.^[8] Violent behaviours in adolescents can include physical aggression, fighting, threats, hitting with a weapon, and damage to property of an individual or institution, and verbal abuse. Related to violence, bullying is seen as the use of power and aggression continuously over time which is projected to harm, cause distress or control another person.^[9] Consequences of victimization through bullying can be categorized into four types: (a) low psychological wellbeing, (b) poor social adjustment, (c) psychological distress, and (d) physical unwell state.^[10] A study reported that more the victimization of an individual, lower would be the self-esteem.^[11] This study aims to analyze the perspectives of the adolescents as victim, witness, and perpetrator of violence. So the current study had been intended to study the violence exposure among school going adolescents and to explore relationship between the violence exposure and the self-esteem of the adolescents.

METHODOLOGY

The study is descriptive in nature. Qualitative method was adopted to bring out an in-depth understanding of the perspectives and issues of the adolescents. The research was conducted with 10 school going adolescents of New Delhi. The medium of instruction in the schools was Hindi and English. Sample was chosen by convenience sampling technique of

non-probability sampling design. The interviews were conducted by home visits. For the current study, violence exposure was conceptualized as violence experienced, witnessed and committed by the adolescents. The tool used was semi-structured interview schedule consisting of 31 questions covering the following eight types of threatening or violent incidents:^[12]

- a) Personal belongings damaged
- b) Personal belongings stolen
- c) Personal belongings taken by force or threat of force
- d) Verbally put down or bullied
- e) Threatened with hurt
- f) Slapped, punched, kicked or beaten up
- g) Threatened with a weapon,
- h) Attacked or beaten up by a group

Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (RSES)^[13] a ten item scale which assesses the state of self-esteem of an individual by asking the respondents to reflect on their current feelings about their self-concept was also used. It is a four points Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The total maximum score is 30. A person who scores less than 15 in the RSES has low self-esteem, score range of 15-25 has average self-esteem and score 25 above has high self-esteem.

Prior to the study, consent from participants and their parents for participation was obtained and rapport was built with the participants and they were explained the purpose and relevance of the study. The participants were assured about confidentiality and their personal details will only be utilized for the purpose of the study. They were asked to fill up the RSES according to the instructions written on top of it.

RESULTS

Socio-demographic profile of the adolescents: Among the participants there were 6 females and 4 males between 11-16 years of age. Seven were from government school and 3 from private school.

Violence Exposure of Adolescents

Non-Verbal Violence: The study shows that seven of the ten adolescents' personal belongings were damaged in the school. Most of the cases reported that their books, followed by pen, then water bottle and lunchbox, belt, skirt and shoes were damaged by classmates.

Participants felt bad and angry as their belongings were completely broken or damaged. One of the participants shared that she felt heartbroken; trust on friends got shattered and feels insecure. A participant felt hurt and narrated that the adolescents who commit these actions get satisfaction by doing it. Seven participants had witnessed damage being done to someone's personal belongings at school. They were bystanders when notebooks and bags were torn, damaged and cut using a scissors, spectacles were broken, money bills torn apart, football punctured, complaint box damaged, tennis racket and ball thrown in dirty swimming pool, and expensive items damaged or thrown in the dustbin. Most of the participants felt bad and one of them felt sad and helpless.

The personal belongings of seven participants had been stolen in the classroom, which included mostly money, books and notebooks; followed by lunchboxes, pencil box; then water bottle and socks. The victims felt very bad, weird, and two of the participants felt tensed, pressurized and suffocated as exams were round the corner and their notebooks were stolen. A 12 year old girl reported *"notebook was stolen...main reason is they want my failure in studies...they want to tell me that I am inferior to them in studies"*. All the participants had witnessed or heard incidents of personal belongings being stolen. Maximum cases of books and notebooks, and money being stolen were reported, and then the cases of stationary items and pencil box, project work, spectacles, and expensive items like cream and perfumes. Majority of the participants felt bad about the occurrence of these violent incidents and that these incidents should not happen as it hurts others. Others felt remorse and angry, while a participant felt stuck and confused whether to choose the friend (who had stolen the item) or tell the truth to everyone.

Verbal Violence: Personal belongings of half of the participants were taken by force or threat of force. Stationary items and food was snatched by classmates. On the ground the ball was taken by senior and slangs were used for some participants. All of the participants who experienced these intimidating incidents had a feeling of anger, hurt, helplessness and fear. Only one participant had informed the teacher about the violent experience faced. Six of the

ten participants had witnessed personal belongings of others being taken by force or threat of force. Food, water, money, notebooks and stationary items are generally snatched or taken by threats or hitting from the adolescents in the classroom, corridors, playground in school. The witnesses felt angry and helpless. A 12 year old girl, who had felt angry said, *"Why does this always happen with the weak, the weak is unable to do or say anything as he is not so strong and the majority also stays on the side of the strong and because of this the weak suffers through this problem"*.

Majority of the participants were verbally put down or bullied in their school by other adolescents. Intimidating or violent incidences of verbal bully included teasing by calling out names, abusing by using slangs, spreading of lies and rumours. Bullying happens on physical appearance and behaviour or habits of the person. Names like 'burj khalifa' for a very tall person, 'mote' ('fat') for a fat person, 'mendak' ('frog') due to big eyes. A 12 year old girl recalled, *"...call out on the basis of colour"*. Another participant felt powerless about the verbal bullying. These violent experiences left a mark on the emotions of the participants as they felt hurt, sad, angry, embarrassed and humiliated. A 12 years old female expressed her feelings and stated, *"...If publically someone insults you in the ground so it can be seen that the person's respect is being destroyed, I mean I am being embarrassed, being humiliated"*.

To cope or solve the problem two adolescents sought teacher's support and one involved parents which led to teacher's engagement in the issue. All the participants had witnessed verbal bullying in the school. They observed students being teased by name calling, comments or taunts on appearances and capability, abusing through slangs, and spreading rumours. Few participants reported that these incidences occur daily in classroom, corridors, ground, washrooms and busses. Some participants felt bad, sad, and scared on watching these violent events while few enjoyed and laughed along with the bully. A 13 year old boy articulated that he never felt like intervening in because then the bullies would abuse him as well and another 12 year old reported, *"If I would have said anything, so he would have beaten me outside the school as he was a senior"*.

Only four participants had experienced exposure through threats and at times threats led to hurt. Two male participants of a government school had received threats of being beaten up outside the school premises by their classmates. A girl participant had received threats on chits like 'welcome to haunted house' and 'I will kill you'. Another female participant of government school had received threats of throwing acid on her face outside the gate of the school by some boys of the same school. She involved a teacher immediately. The adolescents who had received threats felt scared but still majority of them demonstrated a problem solving step by involving their teachers to cope. All the participants had witnessed threats of hurt being pronounced to others. These threats were majorly given by boys and included threats of hitting outside the class or school and one of throwing acid on the face. Feeling of curiosity, fear, and sadness were generated in all the adolescents.

Physical Violence: Majority of the participants were victimized through slap, punch, kick, or beaten up by their peers. They felt anger, hurt, sadness and fear. A 14 years old boy didn't inform anyone because once a boy's parents had complained to teacher, after 1-2 days the seniors had beaten the boy severely and his bone also broke. Only two of the adolescents had informed about the issue to teachers or parents. Everyone had observed someone being slapped, punched, kicked and scratched, being beaten up, or hair pulled by peers. They felt bad, angry, scared and confused.

Only a 12 year old girl had been threatened twice and hit by volleyball and badminton racket. She was hurt, felt like vomiting and fainted. She stated, "There is no benefit of informing the teacher because she will scold the child and then the child will develop jealousy for me and then he would do bad to me and then I will do something and the chain will continue to get longer and then finally a huge fight will happened so that's why I think leave it". She also recalled thinking, "Why there is no humanity in humans?" Majority of the participants had witnessed their peers being initially threatened and being hit by a belt, steel scale, iron rod, knife, chain, bat, pen, wickets, shoes and lunchbox. All of them

felt bad and scared. Among the witnesses, four participants informed the teacher.

Four of the ten participants had been attacked or beaten up by a group. A 13 years old male recalled that he didn't like it and felt isolated, while the others felt bad and were scared. Boys from outside had come to the school gate to beat a boy. Participants experienced feelings of sadness, fear, and helplessness. None of them as a victim or witness informed the teacher these cases.

Violence Committed by Adolescents

Non-Verbal Violence: Three of the participants had damaged the personal belongings of their peers by tearing and throwing of notebooks, erasing notes from notebook, and breaking stationary items. One of them felt guilty; one felt happy; and one had mixed feelings of satisfaction for taking revenge, nervousness and fear of being caught and stated, "During a fight it happens, the other should not feel that he/she has won, even if he has won still he should feel hopeless from inside".

Verbal Violence: Three of the participants acknowledged taking personal belongings of others by force or threat of force. They had snatched stationary items, food, water and jersey of others. A participant had felt nice. A 12 year old girl had a feeling of taking revenge "...I have taken, I normally don't do this to someone but when people damage my things so I also don't leave them, because as he/she had done they should also get it back as a lot people do it in a painful manner...so have to explain them in this way". Half of the participants had verbally put down or bullied others by name calling, comments on others weaknesses, and shouting. After committing these violent incidents everyone felt good and enjoyed the process. Some of them later felt bad and guilty whereas a participant felt that scores were settled between her and the person whom she had bullied as a reaction of being bullied by the same person. Only two female participants accepted giving threats to hit others.

Physical Violence: Half of the participants had slapped, punched, kicked, twisted arm, or stepped on shoes of their peers. Participants shared having felt good, powerful and normal. One of them in anger slapped the peer while

two of them had hit the person to take revenge. A 12 years old participant stated, *“It felt like I also have power, I can also do it”*. All of them had boasted about the entire incident to their friends or cousins. One of the participants had threatened her peers with tennis racket, basketball and football. She reiterated feeling frustrated for losing a game and had taken revenge by hitting captain with football. A 12 years female participant with her friends had verbally attacked a girl. The participant shared feeling powerful as the other girl was scared of her in that moment.

Reasons for bullying

As per the responses from the participants a trend can be noticed in bullying (in forms of verbal abuse, snatching of items through force or threats) that the weak person is always bullied as they are unable to answer back with an argument or fight. The greed of a person leads to snatching of money or other items from their peers. Most adolescents called out ‘funny names’ just to have fun and enjoy at the cost of others humiliation. As identified by the participants the most common reason which leads to violent incidents among adolescents is jealousy or personal grudges against their peers. A prime reason that appears is the want of the bullies to be dominant, superior to others, to appear strong, and showcase their power. A 14 years male participant added to this list the desire of the bullies to oppress their peers and reported, *“To spread their fear, to have their order in place and give orders to others”*. This study analyses taking revenge from an individual due to some personal grievances and using aggression as a counteraction of past bullying experience from that individual. The study by Lai found that more violence an individual (as a victim or witness) has been exposed to more violence he/she will commit^[12] which substantiates the argument placed by the present study of more likeness to committing violence as a counteraction to violence exposure. Growing less tolerance is also a cause of bullying, as the adolescents develop feeling of hatred towards individual gaining better marks than them, close to teacher or their friends, etc. For example if a peer by mistake pushes an adolescent then they start fighting and abuse or beat up.

Academic performance v/s Violence exposure

In line with the previous studies that suggest that bullying affects academics, and the present study also establishes a link between violence exposure and academic performance. A study reported that 95% of the bullied adolescents performed poorly in academics and achieved 3rd division.^[11] The victimization of an adolescent by peer leads to loss in confidence level which affects studies and sport performance. The thoughts of victimization events keep reoccurring in the mind and the individual is unable to concentrate on studies and might also feel depressed. When an individual is bullied, the will of that person to study, to go to school and attain good marks also decreases and is replaced by a fear to attend school and being exposed to violent incidents. A 13 years old participant shared a narrative of her friend who was bullied and had a downfall in academics and stated, *“...I don’t feel like coming to school. I will sit in the class and those kids will again trouble me and my mind will be diverted there only”*. The self-esteem of that individual decreases as they feel they have no worth. A study reported more an individual is bullied lower will be his/her self-esteem.^[11] The entire violence exposure process also affects the adolescent perpetuating it. They are always involved in planning and plotting of how to hurt the peer, or stay busy in fights during the school hours; and this has negative effects on their academic performance. The adolescents who engage in bullying others exhibit delinquent behavior, poor academic performance, school drop-out, carrying weapon to school.^[14]

Violence exposure and Self Esteem of adolescents

Table 1: Self Esteem of the Adolescents

S. No.	Gender	Grade	Age (years)	Any form of Violence Exposure	RSES score
1	Male	10	16	Yes	10
2	Female	8	13	Yes	11
3	Male	9	13	Yes	15
4	Female	8	12	Yes	17
5	Male	6	14	Yes	17
6	Female	11	16	Yes	18
7	Male	7	12	Yes	19
8	Female	8	13	Yes	19
9	Female	7	12	Yes	20
10	Female	6	11	Yes	25

The results suggest that two of the participants have low self-esteem and eight of them have average self-esteem. All the participants have been exposed to violence in the school setting and this has impacted their self-esteem in a negative way. Lai reported that adolescents who experiences or witnesses violence have more problems of self-esteem, depression and psychiatric symptoms.^[12]

DISCUSSION

The natural tendency of humans is to attain power and use their authority to dominate on other. To attain and maintain the power they often show themselves as superior and dominate the others, and also use violent means to sustain the power positions. Similarly in adolescent's case, they are exposed to violence in school. The adolescents, who are powerful or in powerful positions, exploit their weaker peers and always want to dominate. A study revealed that the bully can adopt aggressive behavior to make the victim feel powerless.^[9] "The power imbalance between the perpetrator and victim distinguishes bullying from conflict."^[15] A study on adolescents' view on violence reported that violence is a form of 'power and authority' and it further stated that "adolescents highlighted instances where violence is used at school by people who wield a form of power or authority over another person, or where violence is used for the purpose of punishment, discipline or protection".^[16] Previous studies in the area have shown that violence exposure to school going adolescents is tremendously growing over the globe.^[6,7,8,9,12] The present study reveals that adolescents are exposed to violence either as victim or witness, and also inflict violence on others. This has serious negative effects on their mental health.^[4,10,11] The study brings out the voices of the adolescents which speak about their feelings and emotions related to the violence exposure. The feelings of helplessness, anger, sadness, and self-doubt affect the psychological health and the self-esteem through constant exposure of violence. Studies reported that exposure to violence and bullying results into low self-esteem, depression, psychological distress, low wellbeing, and poor social adjustment.^[11,12,4,9,10] The academic performance also suffered of both the victim and the perpetrator as a result of continuous

engagement in violence exposure; experiencing it and creating it. This finding corresponds to previous studies that reported bullied adolescents perform poorly in academics and those who engage in bullying others reflect delinquent behavior, poor academic performance, school drop-out, carrying weapon to school.^[11,14] The findings of the study highlight few key issues of non-verbal, verbal, and physical violence. Threats of being beaten up outside the school and anonymous threats in paper chits (like I will kill you) were highlighted as a major reason for fear among the adolescents. Anger outbursts of the adolescents which led to violence were reflected as a common trend. Low tolerance levels among the adolescents leads to anger outbursts and taking revenge for trivial things (like being accidentally pushed by someone); also the adolescents get satisfaction feeling on taking revenge from others which aligns to the studies stating reactive aggression observed by the victim.^[12,17] Teasing experiences by name calling based on the physical characteristics and psychological levels happens on a daily basis in the school. Physical violence can be seen in light of the frequent physical fights and use of weapons like iron rod, chains, knife etc. Another study also reveals adolescents who bully, carry weapon to school.^[14] The findings also demonstrate a devastating impact of violence on the academic performance of the adolescents as both the victims and perpetrators. A study reported similar finding that bullied adolescents performed poorly in academics.^[11] The present study reveals that a common notion is prevalent among the adolescents of not involving the teachers in any act of violence as they just scold the perpetrator and this aggravates the problems between the adolescents. The low self-esteem scores of adolescents are in alignment with harmful effects of violence exposure on the concept of self, self-love and self-confidence of the adolescents. In the present study a significant theme emerges that violence exposure leads to low self-esteem but there can be other contributing factors affecting the self-esteem which have not be covered. A study reported similar finding that violence exposure in the form of bullying, negatively affects the self-esteem of the adolescents.^[11] A 16 year boy who scored 10 on the RSES had been exposed to violence as a witness and had

witnessed fights between two groups in which weapons like knife, iron rod and chains were used. He was also exposed to teasing by name calling based on his physical appearance and he felt offended. At the age of 16 the self-esteem is gradually increasing and should be at the higher end but in this case the adolescent has a low self-esteem due to violence exposure in the school. There might be other causes like family background, friend circle, or other experiences which might contribute to self-esteem construction and destruction which have not been explored in the present study. An 11 year female scored 25 which is an average score on the RSES scale. The adolescent had been exposed to teasing by name calling by friends. For the time being she felt bad but as they were her friends it didn't bother the adolescent much. Thus, the scores reflect rightly that her self-confidence and self-love are average. The average self-esteem in this case is a result of less violence exposure to the adolescent.

Limitations of the Study: The sample size was limited and the study only covered areas in the Jamia Nagar neighborhood. Equal numbers of students were not taken from each grade. Thus, the sample was not representative enough so the study the findings cannot be generalized. The data was collected from the adolescents only. Information from the teachers and parents would have enhanced the scope of the study. The findings that show low self-esteem as a result of violence exposure could also be associated with other reasons which were not identified in the present study.

CONCLUSION

The study observed that adolescents were exposed to violence in the form of non-verbal, verbal, and physical violence in the school. They experienced items being stolen, threats, force, hurt, verbally put down or bullying, and hurt by a weapon. According to the participants the reason behinds these acts of violence was to be powerful and dominate on others. The adolescents also experienced low academic performance due to continuous stress or threat of experiencing violent experiences. In the present study a significant theme emerged that violence exposure leads to low self-esteem but there can be other contributing factors affecting the self-esteem which have not be covered. Violence exposure to adolescents at school impacts their

psychological health and self-esteem, thus requires intervention from the school administration and teachers. Involvement of parents is also crucial to mitigate the problem.

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