

**HOW TEENAGERS VIEW BULLYING: GENDER DIFFERENCES AND
PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

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Abstract. *The article describes psychological peculiarities and gender differences in how teenagers view the phenomenon of bullying; it delineates psychological implications and health impacts of bullying. The aim is to identify gender peculiarities of teenagers' perception of bullying and its psychological implications on their health. The main method of this empirical study was questionnaire. Teenage participants received the approbated questionnaire developed by the authors of this article. The research determines how teenagers understand the causes and consequences of bullying, ascertains how teenagers are involved in bullying including the role behaviour, and identifies psychological peculiarities of bullying in relation to gender identification of participants. Responses to the questionnaire demonstrate that two genders equally participate in bullying. Girls and boys communicate experiencing negative emotions of anger, hate, aggression, pity, anxiety, fear, and offense both during direct involvement in bullying and during observation of bullying from aside. Teenage girls tend to be more involved in psychological bullying while boys are more involved in physical bullying. Teenage involvement in bullying necessarily involves negative emotions regardless of the role in bullying or gender of the participants. Psychological implications of bullying correlate to its strength and duration; can be short term and/or long term and affect individual well-being of all immediate participants of bullying stretching its negative impacts on psychological health even to adulthood. Therefore, systemic approach to prevent and oppose teenage bullying is indisputably pertinent.*

Key words: *bullying; teenagers understanding of bullying; gender differences; psychological implications of bullying; mental health.*

Introduction. Aggression and interpersonal conflicts, self-perception and self-identification of teenagers in the context of bullying are increasingly growing areas of social concern for many national educational systems [1], which warrants development and implementation of strategic programs to prevent and oppose teenage bullying in educational institutions at national, regional, industry and institutional levels.

Subjective well-being of teenagers is a key factor of their current mental health,

as well as future mental health in adulthood. As per the World Health Organization (WHO), subjective well-being has an impact on health in its mental and social aspects and on life expectancy, especially resulting from lower suicide rates [2]. Simultaneously, mental health and subjective well-being are closely interconnected.

Bullying as a social and psychological phenomenon causes a material negative impact on the subjective well-being of teenagers. Psychological

consequences of bullying may appear immediately in the situation of bullying or be postponed in time. Expansion of bullying among teenagers in various countries [3] requires joint efforts of specialists and communities in the areas of education, public health care, preventative applied anti-bullying events, rehabilitation programs for bullying victims and participants, development of national strategies on bullying prevention and opposition. WHO assess bullying as teenage behaviour, which causes risks for health in social and mental contexts. Thus, the results of international research «Health Behaviour in School-aged Children» (HBSC) [3] prove the effectiveness of a number of measures to lower levels of bullying. Specifically, effective are thematic meetings and educational programs for parents, improving control over children playgrounds, enforcing discipline and rules of behaviour at school, establishing and enforcing anti-bullying policies at school, school conferences, informing parents and working in groups [4]. However, ensuring that teenagers understand social and psychological contents of bullying and its consequences to their well-being is the most important component of anti-bullying preventative measures.

Purpose. The aim of the article is to define gender peculiarities of teenagers' perception of bullying and its psychological implications on their health.

Methods. Bullying is defined as aggressive behaviour towards an individual or a group of individuals with the purpose of humiliation, demonstration of dominance, physical or mental superiority. It can be said, that bullying is abusing an individual (or a group of individuals) by an individual (or a group of individuals) which is characterized by misbalance of power between bullies and their victims [5]. Consequently, bullying is a negative social and mental phenomenon with tough consequences, which demands targeted preventative efforts in the psychological sphere.

Bullying may have various forms and manifest in different situations. In teenage environment, there are following from of bullying: *physical* (e.g. pushing, trip-ups, slapping, fighting, body scan, causing physical pain and damage) [6]; *economic* (e.g. stealing, damage or ruining of personal belongings, extortion, etc.) [6]; *psychological* (e.g. humiliation through looks, gestures, body movements, facial expressions, spreading offensive rumors, isolation, ignoring, threats, jokes, manipulation, blackmailing, etc.) [7]; *sexual* (gestures, body movements, nicknames of sexual nature, taking video in change rooms, spreading offensive rumors, sexual harassment, jokes, etc.); *cyberbullying* (humiliation through usage of mobile phones, internet, other electronic devices) [8].

The following attributes differentiate bullying from conflicts and fights: regularity; bullying is always based on ill will; misbalance of power; no regrets experienced by offenders [9]. Furthermore, bullying never stops by its own, interference by third parties is required to provide help and protection of the victims, offenders, and witnesses [5].

Bullying negatively affects all participating parties. Bullies and victims have specific psychological characteristics. Bullies demonstrate different levels of tendency to manipulate other people, need to dominate, need of power, need for higher social status absence of moral values, lower social competences, inadequate understanding of leadership, rudeness, absence of empathy towards the victim, aggressiveness, higher emotional intellect, low level of self-control, anxiety, short temper, hyperactivity, inadequate self-esteem, problems with discipline, auto aggressive behaviour, etc. [10]. Victims of bullying are predominantly characterized by lower self-esteem, high level of anxiety, sad mood, depression, absence of friends in school, fears, low level of social realization, which may manifest through self-damage, e.g. bitten nails, self-cuts, broken personal

things, constant need for additional pocket money, etc. [5].

Witnesses of bullying, even if they do not immediately react to the situation, experience great psychological pressure which gradually leads to decreased levels of their ability to experience pity and eventually changes their norms of behaviour, makes them more cynical and pitiless towards victims of bullying and people in general [5].

The main method of this empirical study was questionnaire distributed to teenagers for self-evaluation during in-person group sessions. To identify gender-related characteristics of teenage views on bullying, the authors developed a questionnaire, which included ten open and seven closed questions. Responses to the questionnaire were collected during in-person micro-group meetings with 15-20 participants, as the sample size of the research is less than two hundred people. Teenagers of male and female genders could become respondents to the anonymous questionnaire on a voluntary basis. The questionnaire aimed to research teenage perceptions, views, and understandings of bullying, its specificities, and types. Analysis of responses established that teenagers view bullying as a social phenomenon, identified their views on causes and consequences of bullying, identified levels of involvement in bullying and specified behaviours of teenagers when participating in a bullying situation. Besides, we identified the psychological peculiarities of bullying participants in relation to gender. Responses to the questionnaire were subject to mathematical, statistical and qualitative analysis.

The research study was conducted in middle and high schools of the city of Kyiv and Kyiv region during 2020-2021. Research sampling included one hundred sixty-four students of eighth and ninth grades, aged between thirteen and fifteen years, eighty-five girls and seventy-nine boys.

Results. Main gender differences in teenage views on bullying were identified as following: girls associate bullying by decreasing priority with humiliation (91.3 %), harassment (80.4 %), violence (39.1 %), and offense (32.6 %). Only 19.5 % of girls associate bullying with inequality. Boys view bullying as humiliation (76.9 %), violence (46.1 %), offense and harassment (43.5 %), inequality (15.3 %). Thus, girls and boys predominantly associate bullying with humiliation (84.7 %). Girls associate bullying with harassment is in the second place, while boys name violence in the second place.

Qualitative results indicate that boys associate the word 'bullying' with violence, discrimination, intimidation of the more vulnerable, physical and mental harassment. Boys view victims of bullying as individuals with physical disabilities or drawbacks in their psychical appearance, individuals with non-mainstream views and values, children from poor families, and physically weaker individuals who are not capable of effectively fighting back. Bullying is viewed as the easiest way for offenders to feel in lead, as it does not require significant efforts. Such behaviour aims to assert a bully as a leader at other individuals cost. Boys believe that victims of bullying feel humiliation, shame, fear, despair, anger, and guilt. 20 % of boys indicated that they protected victims of bullying.

Responses provided by female participants allowed identifying categories girls associate with the word 'bullying'. In response to the question 'what are you thinking of when you hear the word 'bullying'?' girls named contempt, discrimination, insults, beating, shame, cruelty, harassment, mockery, deep negative emotions, aggression, psychological pressure. Respondents of male and female genders use words 'humiliation' and 'violence' most frequently, which is indeed one of the key characteristics of bullying.

When asked to describe specific examples of bullying, girls and boys responded that besides physical violence,

there are frequent occasions of harassment, insults, humiliation, offensive words, mockery, being purposefully irritating. All these responses can be placed in a single category of physiological violence.

Both male and female respondents identified potential victims of bullying as 'quiet, not very open people', 'introverted individuals', 'top students', 'people with physical drawbacks', 'overweight people', 'poor people', 'egoists', 'people who are weak morally and physically', 'people who look messy', 'individuals who cannot fight back', 'people with low self-esteem'. No statistical differences between girls and boys noted. Most frequently, boys and girls identify victims of bullying attacks as individuals who are not capable of fighting back in response to violence.

When asked to portray a bull, teenagers mentioned the following characteristics: self-confidence, authority, overconfidence, egoism, bitchiness, insolence, rebelliousness, physical strength, high self-esteem. Also, there were instances when teenagers mentioned characteristics quite opposite to ones mentioned above, such as 'people who are morally weak', 'unconfident people' which indeed are quite hidden characteristics of a bully. Besides, most frequently mentioned characteristics were 'people who think they are better than others', 'people who want to be detached from others', 'people who seek to raise their self-esteem at the cost of others', 'students with bad marks'. As can be seen from the above, these characteristics mark socially unacceptable behaviours of the aggressor.

When asked to describe a social environment where bullying takes place, girls identified school (54.3 %), neighborhood, street (26.0 %), home (4.3 %) sports clubs, hobby clubs (2.1 %). Boys suffer from bullying mostly in school (53.8 %), neighborhood, street (41.0 %), sports clubs (17.9 %) home (10.2 %). Therefore, most of the respondents (54.1 %) believe school is the social environment where bullying takes place most frequently.

Analysis of the distribution of roles in

bullying did not indicate any differences by gender. Boys and girls take similar roles with similar frequencies: bullied other people (10.2 % girls, 10.2 % boys) were victims of bullying (28.2 % girls, 28.2 % boys), were observers (28.2 % girls, 28.2 % boys), both bullied and observed at the same time (15.3 % boys, 13.0 % girls), both were victims and observers at the same time (12.8 % boys, 10.8 % girls), were bullies and victims at the same time (25.6 % boys, 25.6 % girls).

When asked to reflect on their emotions and feeling which they had during observation of bullying or participation in it, teenagers mentioned worry, willingness to defend themselves, anger, anxiety, hate, aggression, indifference, pity, nervousness, fury, fear. Most frequently teenagers mentioned taking offense, which indicates that both bullies and their victims experience this emotion frequently enough, however for different reasons and with different ways of manifestation.

Teenagers were asked whether they seek help when dealing with a bullying situation. Most respondents (43.5 %) indicated that they never told anyone about bullying (41.3 % girls, 46.1 % boys). Girls tell their friends about participation in bullying (28.2 %), parents (27.7 %), teachers (10.8 %), peers (4.3 %). Boys tell their friends about participation in bullying (43.5 %), parents (15.3 %), peers (10.2 %), teachers (5.1 %), other adults (2.5 %). Teenagers did not call the anonymous psychological helpline and most of the respondents did not even know about such a possibility.

Most of the respondents (85.8 %) believe it is necessary to introduce preventative measures and develop school-based programs to reduce bullying (91.3 % girls, 79.4 % boys).

Teenagers were asked about gender identity if victims of bullying. 58.6 % of female respondents think that predominantly girls become victims of bullying. 48.7 % of male respondents, quite oppositely, say that victims of bullying are

predominantly male. 23.9 % of girls and 30.7 % of boys indicated that girls and boys can equally become victims of bullying regardless of their gender.

Teenagers tend to think that most bullies are (68.2 % of all respondents, 76.9 % boys). Girls (23.9 %) note that male and female individuals can equally be a bully regardless of their gender identity.

Discussion. Bullying is a negative social phenomenon, which creates unfavourable conditions for growth and development of human personality. It is important to understand how bullying affects psychological health and well-being of the victim, the bully, and even observers [7].

As indicated by teenage respondents, they experienced worry, willingness to defend themselves, anger, anxiety, hate, aggression, indifference, pity, nervousness, fury and fear during observation of bullying and participation in it. Therefore, all participants of bullying, and foremost its victims, demonstrate signs of psychological suffering [5], which immediately negatively affect emotional sphere and will (easy frequent crying, irritation, anxiety, low self-confidence), motivational sphere (low or absent motivation), and cognitive sphere of human personality (low interest in cognitive activities).

Such conditions appear as a reaction to a stressful event and are of a temporary nature, and as a rule, disappear with appropriate help provided by friends and family [9]. However, bullying may cause trauma for longer terms [11]. Such negative consequences of bullying can be even stronger when systemic bullying at school goes on for long periods unnoticed by parents and teachers, while the victim feels insecure, unsafe and unprotected. Negative effects may include emotional destabilization and demoralization of a child.

Chronical distress resulting from bullying leads to weakening victim's real or potential competitive position in the school.

This can go as far as physical removal of the victim from the group, e.g. through getting sick, suicide, and change of school [6].

Most of the respondents noted that they never spoke with anyone about the bullying. At the same time, intentional hiding of bullying or attempts to ignore it facilitate development and fixation of psychological and behavioural characteristics, which are socially disadvantageous. Adolescence is a very sensitive period when personality and identity are being developed and formed, therefore negative interactions with peers may provoke *inadequate perception of self* (low self-esteem, inferiority complex), *inadequate perception of peers* (keeping distance in communication, feeling lonely), *inadequate perception of reality* (anxiety, fears, phobia, neuroses).

A typical situation of bullying includes lasting and systematic harassment and is very stressful for its participants. For these reasons, bullying causes significant social and psychological consequences, which extend far beyond the high school period. Accordingly, victims of long-lasting bullying at school are more prone to depression and mental disorders compared to their peers who did not experience bullying [11].

The research proves that bullying brings negative consequences not only for victims but also for bullies [10]. Bullies equally to their victims are prone to mental disorders and psychological problems. Most former bullies have problems with the law in their adulthood; receive compulsory psychiatric treatments, and their families experience home violence more often than average [10].

Bullying by its nature is a complex socio-psychological phenomenon and can be described as a specific social situation in a group, which builds on broken social relationships. Such situation encompasses all members of the group (directly or indirectly) and entails specific group dynamics, which is characterized by change of social roles, statuses, behavioural norms, and group values. Teenage bullying is aggressive and very unacceptable social

behaviour of one teenager (or a group of teenagers) towards another teenager (or a group of teenagers) which is accompanied by regular psychical violence and psychological pressure.

Teenagers views on bullying correlate with gender. Accordingly, girls mostly associate bullying with humiliation, harassment, and inequality. Boys most frequently associate bullying with violence and insults. Thus, girls tend to see bullying as psychological suffering while boys tend to view bullying as predominantly physical violence phenomenon.

In the context of gender-specific characteristics of bullying, we noted that boys and girls choose different bullying styles. Girls more often chose the psychological and economic bullying styles while boys more often used physical bullying. Both genders equally identify the school as a social environment where bullying manifestations are the most frequent.

Both genders equally participated in bullying, distribution of roles in bullying is equal and shows no correlation to gender. Both genders identify the following emotions they experienced during participation in bullying, including observation: worry, anxiety, willingness to defend themselves, anger, hate, indifference, pity, fear. In our opinion, it proves that bullies and their victims experience similar emotions in a situation of bullying, regardless of their roles in bullying. Teenage girls believe that victims of bullying are predominantly female while bullies are predominantly male. Teenage boys believe that both victims and bullies are predominantly male. Gender stereotypes of women being weaker and more emotionally unstable may contribute to such views. On the other hand, respondents portrayed a bully as confident, authoritarian, egoistic, bold, physically strong and with high self-esteem. All these qualities are stereotypically associated with male gender, which probably explains why most teenagers believe that bullies are mostly

men.

As we see, the views on bullying among modern teenagers are not well informed and undifferentiated which, in our opinion, is explainable with the fact that most teenagers never participated in anti-bullying programs or information sessions. Lack of information may lead to situations where teenagers being involved in bullying will not be able to identify it, which is a key first step to prevent and stop bullying.

Conclusions. The empirical research allows for the following conclusions. Representatives of male and female genders associate bullying with negative emotions for all participants including observers. Girls associate bullying predominantly with psychological suffering while boys believe physical violence forms the basis of bullying. Most teenagers of both male and female genders prefer not to discuss real-life problems related to bullying. However, when they choose to discuss, boys will share with friends while girls prefer to discuss bullying with their parents. Majority of teenagers identify the school as the social environment where bullying takes place. We identified gender differences in how teenagers view bullies and their victim from a gender perspective. Female respondents believe that victims of bullying are predominantly female while bullies are predominantly male. Male respondents believe that both victims and bullies are predominantly male. At that, teenagers point out the necessity of having school-based programs to reduce bullying, as well as similar programs in other institutions.

Bullying is continuous in time, accompanied by negative emotions and is of a collective nature. As such, bullying has situational short-term negative impact on subjective well-being of all its participants. Psychological consequences of bullying may manifest at the later life stages, in proportion to the level of stress and time of exposure to psychologically traumatic events. Psychological traumas experienced by children and teenagers because of

school bullying negatively affect physical and mental health even in their adult age. Therefore, systemic efforts directed at prevention of bullying at schools are unarguably relevant and required at institutional and state levels.

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ЯК ПІДЛІТКИ СТАВЛЯТЬСЯ ДО БУЛІНГУ: ГЕНДЕРНІ ВІДМІННОСТІ ТА ПСИХОЛОГІЧНІ НАСЛІДКИ

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Анотація. Стаття присвячена психологічним особливостям та гендерним відмінностям розуміння підлітками явища булінгу, його психологічним наслідкам та впливу на здоров'я. Мета полягала у визначенні гендерних особливостей уявлень підлітків про булінг та психологічні наслідки для їх здоров'я. Основним методом емпіричного дослідження стало анкетування підлітків за допомогою авторської анкети. Анкетування здійснювалося за умови добровільної участі підлітків обох статей. Було досліджено уявлення і знання сучасних підлітків про булінг, його особливості; розуміння підлітками причин та наслідків булінгу; їх залученість та рольова поведінка в булінгу; психологічні особливості учасників булінгу за гендерною ознакою. Результати опитування піддавалися математичному статистичному та якісному аналізу. Результати анкетування 164 підлітків (85 дівчат, 79 хлопців) свідчать про те, що участь у булінгу однаково брали обидва гендери. І дівчата, і хлопці відзначають переживання негативних емоцій злості, ненависті, агресії, жалості, тривоги, страху, образи як за прямої

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участі в булінгу, так і при його спостереганні. Дівчатам більше притаманний психологічний та економічний булінг, хлопцям – фізичний. Респонденти обох статей називають школу найрозповсюдженішим соціальним середовищем для проявів булінгу і вважають за необхідне проведення заходів з профілактики та протидії булінгу. Підлітки стикаються з проявами булінгу з приблизно однаковою частотою незалежно від гендеру. Рольовий статус в булінгу та стать учасників не впливають на їх залученість до булінгу, який обов'язково супроводжується негативними переживаннями. Сила і тривалість булінгу в підлітковому середовищі викликає певні психологічні наслідки. Вони можуть бути короткотермінові та/або довгострокові й позначатися на суб'єктивному благополуччі всіх учасників безпосередньої ситуації цькування, негативно впливаючи на їх психічне здоров'я навіть у дорослості. Відтак беззаперечною виявляється актуальність системних заходів щодо профілактики і протидії булінгу серед підлітків.

Ключові слова: булінг; уявлення підлітків про булінг; гендерні відмінності; психологічні наслідки булінгу; *mental health*.