

Bullying Behavior in Light of Behavioral Theory -An Analytical Study-

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Received date: 02-04-2025

Acceptance date:24-5-2025

Abstract:

Bullying behavior has become a widespread and serious issue today in schools and various social spaces, where research emphasizes the negative effects of such behavior on mental health in the long term. Victims of this behavior often hide their suffering from their families due to feelings of shame. Researchers from various psychological, social, and human disciplines have made efforts to present numerous theories and perspectives explaining this behavior, among which the behavioral theory stands out. This study focuses on this theory and what it has contributed to understanding bullying behavior.

Keywords: Bullying Behavior; Behavioral Theory; Punishment; Reward.

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Introduction:

Bullying is a serious problem faced by many societies around the world. What increases its danger is that the majority of those involved are children and young people, who represent a valuable resource for society. The World Health Organization (WHO) has confirmed that approximately one in six school-aged children worldwide suffer from cyberbullying. While bullying rates in schools have remained stable since 2018, the use of electronic platforms has doubled the incidents of cyberbullying, creating growing concern globally.

In Africa, bullying remains a significant challenge, especially in schools, where many countries face high rates due to factors such as poverty, conflicts, and limited access to educational resources. Although accurate data at the continental level is scarce, studies conducted in some countries indicate that bullying rates may exceed 30% in certain areas.

In this context, research in Algeria has indicated that bullying in schools remains an ongoing problem. A recent survey showed that 35% of students reported experiencing bullying at some point during their schooling, with verbal bullying being the most common form. Efforts to combat bullying in Algeria are focused on raising awareness and implementing policies to address bullying in schools.

Given the growing concern about violent crimes among children and adolescents resulting from bullying, especially the severe consequences it causes on multiple levels, the effects of bullying behavior are reflected in the following:

- Bullying can leave lasting long-term effects (low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, etc.) on victims.
- Some bullying victims may resort to dangerous behaviors, such as suicide, as a means of escape.
- Students who bully others are more likely to engage in antisocial behaviors such as vandalism, shoplifting, and illegal drug use. This antisocial behavior often continues into adulthood.
- Everyone in society is affected by bullying, even those who have not directly participated in the conflict. Bullying behavior can be contagious.

From this perspective, the importance of this study lies in our aim to address the knowledge gap on this topic. We hope that this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of bullying behavior, which is essential for formulating effective and detailed interventions. Furthermore, behavioral theory is crucial in providing us with such an understanding, which helps in fostering a safer and more supportive school environment.

1 .The Nature of Bullying Behavior:

Bullying is one of the most common forms of violence in peer contexts. Research on bullying began over forty years ago when bullying behaviors became a serious issue in schools. Despite the awareness surrounding this issue, there is still a lack of precise understanding of its dynamics, which hinders the development of effective interventions.

1.1. Historical Overview:

Dan Olweus was the first to introduce the term "bullying" in schools in 1978, studying the issues faced by bullies and their victims. His research focused on Scandinavian schools (Olweus, 1993). Since then, bullying has become a subject worthy of research and attention,

with studies on bullying behavior in schools conducted worldwide. In the United States, the first to discuss bullying behavior among students in schools was Dodge in 1990. In the UK, research and studies on the problem of bullying began in 1992, while in Australia, Rigby is considered a pioneer in bullying research, with his first study in 1991.

1.2. Definition of Bullying:

Bullying is a relatively modern term and refers to a common act usually occurring among children and adolescents, though it sometimes occurs among adults as well.

The English word "Bullying" differs from the term "Violence" in its known meaning, which refers to the use of extreme force, involving weapons of various kinds, threats, and violent consequences. Bullying, however, is less severe in terms of practice; it involves mild physical violence and significant verbal abuse, along with an exhibition of power, control, and the desire to dominate the actions of others, such as peers, colleagues, and classmates.

Upon examining the translation of this term in most Arabic dictionaries, the words "التنمر" (Tanammur) or "الاستئساد" (Isti'saad) are considered appropriate translations of "Bullying." The term "استئساد" (Isti'saad) is derived from the word "أسد" (Asad), which means lion, a predatory animal, often referred to as the king of the jungle. Similarly, the word "التنمر" (Tanammur) is derived from "نمر" (Nimr), which means tiger, an animal that shares similar characteristics of aggression and danger (Mufrih, 2008).

Organized and systematic research on the concept of bullying requires standards to classify individuals as bullies, victims, or bystanders. The researcher must first determine when an individual is considered a bully. According to Olweus (1993), an individual is a bully or a victim when they are repeatedly exposed to negative events by one or more others.

Smith (1994) pointed out that bullying is a deliberate, intentional activity aimed at causing harm or instilling fear and terror through the threat of assault. Four elements must be present in bullying behavior, regardless of gender or age, which are:

- **Power imbalance:** The bully is either larger, stronger, or in a better position than the victim.
- **Intention to harm:** The bully is known to cause psychological or physical pain to the victim and takes pleasure in doing so.
- **Threat of further bullying:** There is a threat of future harm beyond the initial act of bullying.
- **Sustained fear:** The bullying is driven by arrogance, contempt, and disdain.

Espelage (2008, p.345) defined bullying as the repeated acts of unjust aggression that cause psychological or physical harm to the victim, where the power between the bully and the victim is unequal.

In another context, definitions have focused on the characteristics of bullies, who generally display aggressive desires and a lack of empathy for others. Huebner (2002) defined bullying as a way to control another person. It is physical or verbal harassment between two individuals with unequal strength, where the stronger person uses physical, psychological, emotional, and verbal methods to humiliate, embarrass, or overpower the other person.

However, most researchers tend to avoid fragmenting bullying behavior. Instead, they adopt a comprehensive view when defining bullying. This view can be summarized as follows:

- Psychological, verbal, and physical attacks or threats intended to cause fear, distress, or harm to the victim.
- Power imbalance.
- Behavior that is not provoked by the victim.
- Repetitive behavior by the same individuals over a prolonged period.

In general, if bullying behavior is described as harassment, there are several points that researchers emphasize when defining bullying, which include: a series of actions and behaviors performed by an individual or a group of individuals, using phrases, actions, and words such as repeatedly making mocking remarks about the victim's appearance (e.g., skin color, shape, weight, clothing, or manner of speaking), mocking or provoking them loudly so others can hear. It can also involve giving the victim derogatory labels, creating stories or situations to get the victim into trouble with others, encouraging others to avoid befriending the victim for various reasons, deliberately excluding the victim from activities, calling them derogatory names, threatening and intimidating them in several ways, physically harming or pushing them in school corridors, or spreading rumors about them through mobile phones or the internet, among other practices (Abu al-Diyar, 2012).

Based on all that has been mentioned, the concept of bullying can be defined through three criteria or classifications as follows:

- **First:** Concepts that focus on the harm or the extent of the damage caused.
- **Second:** Concepts that focus on the characteristics of the bullies and their victims.
- **Third:** The definition of bullying from an integrative perspective.

3.1. Forms of Bullying:

Bullying behavior comes in several forms and types, including physical bullying, direct and indirect verbal bullying, as well as sexual and emotional bullying, among other various forms.

- **Physical Bullying:** This includes any physical contact intended to harm the individual physically. It is less common among females compared to males. It involves actions like hitting, kicking, pushing, throwing someone to the ground, and damaging the victim's belongings.
- **Verbal Bullying:** This refers to an attack or threat aimed at causing harm through mocking, belittling others, harsh criticism, defamation, blackmail, false accusations, rumors, and using derogatory terms based on gender, race, religion, or disability.
- **Sexual Bullying:** This includes sending unwanted messages, such as jokes, pictures, and sarcastic comments, or starting sexual rumors. It can also involve physical behaviors like inappropriate touching.
- **Emotional Bullying:** Also known as emotional bullying, this type involves the bully aiming to undermine the victim's self-esteem and sense of self-worth, such as ignoring them, isolating them, separating them from their peers, staring at them aggressively, and using any form of aggressive body language. This form of bullying is driven by hatred and prejudice against an individual or group, including mockery or ridicule of a specific race, ethnicity, or nationality.

Cyberbullying: With technological advancements, bullying has extended to the internet and various forms of electronic communication. Jerome and Segal (2003) pointed out that 27% of students were bullied through email, text messages, or in online chat rooms.

2. Analytical Context:

Many common assumptions about the causes of bullying receive little support when compared to empirical data. This is due to misconceptions, such as believing bullying is a result of overcrowded classrooms or schools, competition in classrooms, school failure, low self-esteem, and insecurity. Consequently, we must explore other factors to identify the root causes of the bullying problem. The existing literature on this phenomenon suggests that personality traits, reaction patterns, and physical strength or weakness, particularly in boys, are important factors in the emergence of bullying. At the same time, psychological factors, individual differences, and environmental influences contribute to the generation of bullying behavior.

In this regard, the behavioral theory is one of the most important theories that addressed human behavior, especially bullying behavior. Proponents of this theory argue that bullying behavior is a type of learned and productive response that becomes prevalent in the personalities of certain individuals (Barash, 2001). Some bullies exhibit aggression and impulsiveness toward their peers, and they also tend to be impulsive with a desire to display physical or psychological strength and dominate others.

Bandura's theory originated within the framework of behavioral learning, reflecting an emphasis on external observation. Through observing others, we develop an idea of how our behavior is formed and how information helps us guide or direct our actions (Jumaa, 2001). This means that Bandura's social learning theory posits that a significant amount of learning occurs through observation or by seeing someone else perform an action, which may be rewarded or punished. In other words, by observing someone else's responses or simply reading about or viewing images of them.

It is clear that a large number of human skills cannot be acquired or learned without this type of observational learning. These behaviors can be conditioned by observing the reactions of others to painful or pleasant experiences. This form of learning occurs through various methods, such as imitation, modeling, role-playing, learning by experience, or behavioral contagion.

From this perspective, abnormal or pathological behavior, according to Bandura, is the learning of maladaptive responses through observation. The social perspective in learning focuses on the interaction between behavioral traits and external stimuli, which helps explain the acquisition and continuation of abnormal responses (Adams & Haber, 1984).

Thus, the behavioral theory sees bullying as something that can be repeated if it is reinforced. For example, if a boy hits his sister and gets what he wants, he will repeat the behavior again to achieve his goal. Consequently, responses that become part of a person's behavior are those that have been reinforced, meaning those that were followed by positive outcomes. Responses that are followed by reinforcement tend to be strengthened and the individual is more likely to repeat them, whereas responses that are not followed by reinforcement tend to diminish. This principle is known as the law of effect in Skinner's operant learning theory, which asserts that behavior that is reinforced and leads to comfort and satisfaction is likely to be repeated.

Based on this, bullying behavior occurs as a result of the reinforcement process that the bully receives from their peers for such behavior. The bully may also receive this

reinforcement through the harm or damage they cause to the victim. For example, when the bully attacks the victim, and the victim tends to cry—especially in elementary school—this positively reinforces the bully's behavior, making them more likely to repeat it. However, if the victim responds and retaliates (which is rare), this would negatively reinforce the bully's behavior (Abd al-Azim, 2007).

According to this theory, most of what a person does in terms of behavior is learned. There are learning principles and specific laws for behavior, which do not occur randomly or by chance. One of the most important models of learning is Bandura's social learning model, which focuses on the importance of imitation and modeling in shaping behavior (Al-Khatib & Al-Hadidi, 2009).

It is important to note that Bandura not only emphasized the significance of learning in shaping behavior but also prioritized behavioral change through observation. Humans are capable of observing and interpreting the effects of their own behavior, and they learn from what others receive in terms of rewards and punishments for specific behaviors. As a result, we choose many of our behavioral patterns and shape them based on our expectations of rewards and the avoidance of potential pain.

Therefore, some have discussed bullying as a form of aggression in light of Bandura's theory (Bandura, 1986) on learning aggressive responses through alternative reinforcement and modeling (Modeling). It is possible to learn bullying or aggression through family models, peer models, or models portrayed by the media. Children who witness aggression from their parents in the family are more likely to become aggressive toward others.

Children observe and learn comprehensively from the models they interact with, but they are selective in displaying behaviors. They express behaviors that are appropriate to their gender (Bandura, 1986, p. 83). This principle applies to learning bullying, and these findings have helped explain bullying behavior among individuals who observed bullying between their parents or other forms of violence during their childhood (Okun, 1986, p. 83).

Children also learn bullying methods by attempting to imitate bullies at school or at home. It is believed that children who grow up in a threatening environment tend to imitate others, regardless of the type or form of behavior (Smoskowski & Kopasz, 2005).

To further clarify, Bandura's social learning theory based on observation introduced several of its own concepts and terminology. According to Bandura, social learning is the acquisition or learning of new responses or behavioral patterns through observing models in a social context or setting. Some of these concepts include:

Observational Learning or Modeling: This refers to learning new responses or behavioral patterns by observing the behaviors of others or by observing models. In this case, it is called learning through imitation of the model.

This is what Ghassiri (2023) clarified, as the individual learns aggression (and in this case, bullying behavior) by observing others engaging in aggression, thus receiving a material or moral reward when they engage in aggression.

- **Self-Regulation:** This refers to an individual's ability to regulate or control their behavior in relation to environmental variables in a given situation. In other words, it

is the mutual and interactive adjustment of behavior, cognitive structure, cognitive processes, and environmental variables.

- **Cognitive Processes:** Bandura's cognitive processes take the form of symbolic representation of thoughts and mental images, as well as attention and retention processes, which control an individual's behavior in interaction with the environment, and are also governed by these processes.
- **Reciprocal Determinism:** This refers to the mutual interaction between the individual and the environment as two interdependent and interactive causes that produce behavior (Jaber, 1994).

Modeling is not only from watching and imitating parents, but it can also occur through following films, TV shows, and cartoons, which play a role in developing bullying tendencies among children. Studies have shown that 39% of juvenile delinquents have acquired criminal and violent behaviors from violent movies and programs. For instance, Rodrik's study (1978) indicated that individuals who watch a high percentage of violent programs tend to exhibit violent behavior in their actions and personalities.

Furthermore, a study by Mansi and Bayoumi (1988) conducted in elementary schools in Madinah confirmed that the media is one of the influencing factors in the development of disruptive behaviors among students. Other studies also highlight the importance of aggression and its patterns, with television playing a significant role in learning aggressive behavior, as confirmed by Feldman (1999), who focused on the impact of violent films, particularly cartoons, on increasing aggressive and bullying behaviors in children.

The strength of aggressive responses in this theory is determined by four variables: bullying triggers, the history of bullying, social facilitation, and temperament (Hegazi, 2000, p. 50).

Thus, based on the behavioral theory, the bully's behavior is reinforced by the individuals around them, such as peers and friends, and achieving a level of "popularity" among their classmates makes them feel different and distinguished. Additionally, the bully's success in achieving their goals serves as positive reinforcement, motivating them to create and build bullying situations through attacks on those around them.

Conclusion:

From what has been presented regarding the behavioral theory, we find that Bandura, through his theory, emphasized that the image of humans, as outlined in psychological theories and scientific research, largely depends on employing a system of mutual influence between the individual and the world or environment they live in. Environmental advocates explain how environmental factors change behavior, while personality advocates clarify how an individual's behavior determines their environment. Social learning theorists, on the other hand, grant equal importance to both the personal and environmental aspects in their relationship.

Based on this, we can provide some recommendations to address bullying behavior, especially in educational institutions, the most notable of which are as follows:

- School administrations in various educational institutions should regularly encourage school principals to monitor bullying rates and identify at-risk students through distributing questionnaires that measure this behavior.
- Teachers should maintain regular communication through parent-teacher meetings with parents/guardians and monitor students' friendship patterns, investigating the reasons why some children may be absent or appear to have no friends, as they might be victims of bullying.

All schools should be encouraged to establish peer support systems, possibly with the help of educators, parents, school psychologists, and other professionals.

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