

Identifying the Relationship between ITP Personality Constructs and Bullying Among Secondary Students

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Abstract - Identifying which constructs of a commonly used personality questionnaire are significant in bullying behaviour has the potential to prevent bullying by engaging potential bullies in preventive prosocial activities. This case study utilises secondary school students of a school in Malaysia as respondents to investigate the bullying phenomenon and its association with constructs in a personality questionnaire used for identifying career paths and unexpectedly found that the positive constructs of structure and resilience are significantly linked to bullying behaviours. More studies need to be done to confirm this finding and to understand why positive personality constructs can become predatory in nature.

Keywords – bullying behaviour, career search personality questionnaire, identification, personality constructs, prevention, structure, resilience



1 INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a common negative phenomenon involving repetitive acts of abuse by individuals or groups towards others who are physically and/or mentally vulnerable. This abuse can be in various forms; i.e., physical, psychological, social, verbal, etc [1]. Bullying can happen anywhere, is experienced by all age groups and is sometimes a serious discipline problem in schools where the victims and perpetrators comprise of adolescents and children.

Bullying mainly causes harm to victims, especially if continued over a prolonged period of time. The severity of harm depends on the type and intensity of the abuse [2], and can range from minor to fatal physical injuries [3], lowered confidence and self-esteem to emotional instability, heightened stress and anxiety levels to emergence of mental health disorders and the development of self-harming tendencies. A review in literature by Kim and Leventhal [4] however found that any form of participation in bullying increases suicidal ideation and behaviour.

Health and social problems from childhood bullying can extend into adulthood. Victims of bullying and interpersonal violence during childhood are susceptible to multiple risk factors and problems in adulthood such as physical inactivity and obesity [5], increased anxiety and higher susceptibility to depression [6], financial problems and poor social-relationship outcomes [7]. Perpetrators of bullying are noted to have a higher incidence of depression [8] and a tendency towards delinquency and criminality if this behaviour is left unchecked [9]. These negative

tendencies can seriously impact human resource development in the community and country.

1.1 Problem Statement

Although public awareness towards bullying and its consequences has increased in Malaysia and the education authorities have implemented a standard operating procedure to handle bullying cases, the prevalence of bullying still remains high although the number of incidences have decreased. Bullying frequently goes unreported and undetected in schools until late and severe when consequences are grave [10]. Is bullying therefore a common or uncommon social issue in schools? What is the prevalence of bullying in a public secondary school? If bullying is indeed rampant, how can school authorities stop it? Can we stop bullying by preventing it from occurring? Can school authorities identify the type of students who are more prone to become perpetrators of bullying and involve them in more prosocial activities so as to prevent them from ever becoming perpetrators?

Personality tests such as the Big Five Personality test have been used in studies to identify the personality traits of bullies and victims [11], [12], [13]. However, the core personality traits of bullies and victims have not been fully ascertained due to other possible contributing factors such as socioeconomic status, relationships with family members, connections with peers and other school-based factors [14]. In the Malaysian scene, one possible way to identify the personality traits of perpetrators is by making use of a personality trait questionnaire (Inventori Tret Personaliti / ITP) that is already routinely used in public schools for career planning. Are there any constructs in the

ITP that can be used to identify potential bullies? Does any of the constructs in the ITP correlate significantly with bullying behaviour? Which ITP constructs are significantly associated with bullies?

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This is a quantitative study which uses a cross-sectional survey design.

2.2 Sampling

This is a case study on a public secondary school in the state of Selangor. The sample consisted of students from a small secondary public school located within the Klang Valley and within easy reach of the researcher. The school where the study took place had less than a thousand students and 250 students who had free periods were recruited for this sample. Participants of this study were from Form 1 to 5 with ages ranging from 12 to 17 years old. Coincidentally, all the students in the sample were Malay, the predominant race of students in the school. Students who participated were provided with a small gift after returning the questionnaires.

2.3 Instruments used

The adolescent students' personality traits are the independent variables of this study. These are measured using the Personality Trait Inventory (Inventori Tret Personaliti / ITP). According to the Examination Board of The Ministry of Education [15], the ITP was introduced with the implementation of the school-based assessment system by the Examinations Board of the Malaysian Education Ministry as a psychometric test. The ITP is administered as a mass test in secondary schools and is regularly used for Form 1 and Form 4 students with the intention of expanding its use to other forms. The ITP is based on Frank Parson's Trait and Factor of Occupational Choice.

The ITP has 15 constructs with 10 questions each. 14 constructs measure the students' existing personality traits. The 14 personality trait constructs are as follows:

1. 'Autonomi' or autonomous (Autonomy)
2. 'Kreatif' or creative (Creativity)
3. 'Agresif' or aggressive (Aggressiveness/Aggression)
4. 'Ekstrovert' or extrovert (Extraversion)
5. 'Pencapaian' or achievement
6. 'Kepelbagaian' or diverse (Diversity/Variety)
7. 'Intelektual' or intellectual (Intellectuality)
8. 'Kepimpinan' or leadership
9. 'Struktur' or structure (Orderliness)
10. 'Resilien' or resilience

11. 'Menolong' or altruism (Helpfulness)
12. 'Analitikal' or analytical (Analyticity)
13. 'Kritik diri' or self-critical (Self-criticism)
14. 'Wawasan' or visionary

The last construct acts as a dishonesty scale ('ketelusan' or 'transparency') which indicates the students' level of honesty when answering the inventory and helps serve as a measure to either include or exclude a participant's response in the study data. The ITP has gone through rigorous testing by the Malaysian Education Ministry and is found reliable with a Cronbach $\alpha > 0.8$.

The prevalence of bullying and the different types of bullying are the dependent variables of the study, and they are measured using the Adolescent Peer Relations Instrument [16]. The instrument has two parts: Section A and Section B with 18 items for each section. Section A consists of three bullying subsets (physical bullying (6 items), social bullying (6 items) and verbal bullying (6 items)). Section B consists of three victimization subsets (physical victimization, social victimization and verbal victimization) also with 6 items for each subset. The questions are answered based on a Likert Scale of 1 – 6; with '1' denoting 'never' to '6' denoting 'everyday'. The Adolescent Peer Relations Instrument is found to have good internal consistency. The Cronbach α for the bully scale is 0.93, for the victim scale 0.95, and for the subscales 0.83 – 0.92 [17]. The instrument has also been found to be suitable for assessing upper primary school students [18]. Since the ITP is in Malay, a Malay translation of the Adolescent Peer Relations Assessment is provided so as to generalize the main language used in the instruments into Malay and to help students who may not understand English well. Provision of a Malay translation can also improve accuracy of responses to the questionnaire since Malaysian students are targeted in this study. 30 randomly chosen questionnaires from the overall sample were used to test the reliability of the translation, and the Cronbach α of the bully scale was found to be high at 0.88. The two instruments and a set of demographic questions were presented together as a one-time questionnaire. 250 copies of the questionnaire were used for the study, but only 145 were used for data analysis due to participants not answering honestly and/or leaving parts of the questionnaire uncompleted.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

The 145 respondents consisted of 86 males (59.3%) and 59 females (40.7%). 85 out of 86 (98.8%) males answered positively for bullying and all 59 females (100%) answered

positively for bullying. The prevalence of bullying is therefore slightly higher in females. From the 144 bullies, all (100%) were involved in verbal bullying. 120 out of 144 bullies (83.3%); 75 out of 85 male bullies (88.24%) and 45 out of 59 female bullies (76.27%) use social bullying. 130 out of 144 (90.27%) consisting of all male bullies (100%) and 45 of 59 female bullies (76.27%) were involved in physical bullying. Of the 144 respondents involved in bullying, 4 were pure bullies and 140 were bully-victims. 2 pure bullies and 83 bully-victims were male while the other two pure bullies and remaining 57 bully-victims were female. 2 of the 4 pure bullies (50%) used physical and verbal bullying, 1 (25%) used verbal and social bullying and 1 (20%) used physical, verbal and social bullying. Among the 140 bully-victims; 4 (2.86%) were involved in verbal bullying only, 9(6.43%) were involved in verbal and social bullying, 18 (12.86%) were involved in physical and verbal bullying, and 109 (77.86%) were involved in all three forms of bullying i.e., physical, verbal and social bullying.

Among the male bullies, 10 out of the 85 male bullies in the sample (11.77%) were involved in physical and verbal bullying while the remaining 75 (88.23%) were involved in all three subsets of physical, verbal and social bullying. There were no other combination of bullying subsets among males. Out of the 59 female bullies, 4 (6.78%) were involved only in verbal bullying, 10 (16.95%) were involved in physical and verbal bullying only, 10 (16.95%) were involved in verbal and social bullying only and the remaining 35 (59.32%) were involved in all three forms of physical, verbal and social bullying. Females therefore engage in higher variations of bullying than males.

Intensity and frequency of bullying is indicated by the mean scores of the Adolescent Peer Relations on bullying behaviour for respondents who responded positively to bullying. Higher mean values indicate higher frequency and intensity of bullying. The total bullying score mean as well as the means for all subsets of bullying is higher in males than in females.

Table 1: Mean bullying scores across categories of gender

Bullying Score Means (M)	Gender	
	Male Bullies	Female Bullies
Total Bully	41.44	29.89
Verbal Bully	17.41	12.56
Social Bully	11.14	8.32
Physical Bully	12.88	9.01

3.2 Inferential Statistics

A normality test was conducted to see if the collected data is normally distributed. Descriptive statistics showed that the skewness (1.094) and kurtosis (.885) values are between -1.96 to 1.96, thus both values are within normal distribution range. However, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilks tests results showed that the tests are significant (Sig. value = .000, p-value < .05), thus the data was not normally distributed and as a consequence, non-parametric tests were used.

3.2.1 Mann-Whitney U Tests

Independent samples Mann-Whitney U tests conducted found significant differences in the distribution of total bullying, verbal bullying, social bullying and physical bullying scores across categories of gender. Based on test statistics, for gender and total bullying, the significance value for both 1-tailed and 2-tailed tests is .000 (p-value < .05); for gender and verbal bullying, the significance value for both 1-tailed and 2-tailed tests was .000 (p-value < .05). The same significance values were also found for gender and social bullying, and gender and physical bullying as well. Independent samples Mann-Whitney U tests for bullying across categories of age did not show any significant differences.

3.2.2 Kruskal-Wallis Tests

Independent sample Kruskal-Wallis tests were conducted to determine whether if there are any significant differences in the distribution of total bullying, verbal bullying, social bullying and physical bullying scores across categories of different personality constructs.

Table 2

Significance values from Kruskal-Wallis tests based on bullying type and type of personality construct. (p-value = 0.05)

Personality Type	Significance Values (Sig.) Based on Bullying Type			
	Total Bullying	Verbal Bullying	Social Bullying	Phys. Bullying
Autonomy	.239	.255	.45	.401
Creativity	.446	.795	.415	.104
Aggressiveness	.279	.322	.657	.293
Extraversion	.745	.789	.929	.595
Achievement	.657	.882	.655	.61
Variety	.537	.73	.423	.495
Intellectual	.219	.198	.483	.35
Leadership	.616	.778	.78	.521
Structure	.007*	.015*	.064	.031*
Resilience	.043*	.459	.013*	.045*
Helpfulness	.193	.573	.203	.144
Analytical	.805	.887	.622	.402
Self-critical	.068	.268	.06	.027*
Vision	.836	.657	.866	.562

The findings that are significant are:

a) There are significant differences in the distribution of total bullying (Sig. = .007), verbal bullying (Sig. = .015) and

physical bullying (Sig. = .031) scores across the personality construct Structure. However, there are no significant differences in the distribution of social bullying scores (Sig. = .064; p -value > .05) for this construct.

b) There are significant differences in the distribution of total bullying (Sig. = .043), social bullying (Sig. = .013) and physical bullying (Sig. = .045) scores across categories of personality construct Resilience. However, there are no significant differences in the distribution of verbal bullying scores (Sig. = .459; p -value > .05) for this construct.

c) There are significant differences in the distribution of physical bullying (Sig. = .027) scores across categories of personality construct Self-critical. However, there are no significant differences in the distribution of total bullying (Sig. = .068), verbal bullying (Sig. = .268) and social bullying (Sig. = .060) scores for this constructs (p -values > .05).

There are no other significant differences in the distribution of all four types of bullying scores across categories of personality constructs Autonomy, Creativity, Aggressiveness, Extraversion, Achievement, Variety, Intellectual, Leadership, Helpfulness, Analytical and Vision.

4 CONCLUSION

4.1 Summary of Findings and Conclusion

Descriptive statistics showed that the number of bullies is very high in this sample ($n=145$: 144 (99.3%) = bullies and 1 = uninvolved, and that both male and female students are highly involved in bullying. The frequency and intensity of bullying is found to be significantly higher in males but the prevalence of bullying is found to be marginally higher in females. Males are found to be involved in 2 forms of bullying: a combination of physical and verbal bullying and a combination of all three forms, physical, verbal and social bullying. On the other hand, females are found to have more varied styles of bullying: verbal bullying only, physical and verbal bullying only, verbal and social bullying only and a combination of physical, verbal and social bullying. Inferential statistics results indicated significant differences in the distribution of bullying scores across categories of gender.

For the 14 ITP personality constructs, inferential statistics show that there are specific yet significant differences in the distribution of bullying scores across personality constructs Structure, Resilience and Self-criticism. The Structure personality trait construct was significant for total bullying, verbal bullying and physical bullying. The Resilience construct was significant for total bullying, social bullying and physical bullying. Further tests on these constructs

however were hampered by the lack of normality in the data.

4.2 Discussion

The descriptive statistics have revealed a different trend for gender and bullying. Past research studies [19], [20], indicated that bullies are often males rather than females and that male bullies are more likely to engage in physical bullying while female bullies are more likely to use social/relational and verbal bullying. In this sample, there is a marginally lower percentage of male bullies (98.8%) than female bullies (100%). All (100%) of the male bullies used physical bullying and verbal bullying and a high percentage (88.24%) also used social bullying. On the other hand, 100% of female bullies used verbal bullying 76.3% used physical bullying and 76.3% also used social bullying. Therefore, the most common form of bullying used is verbal bullying (100% for both males and females). This is followed by physical bullying (100% for males and 76.27% for females) with social bullying the last (88.24% for males and 76.27% for females). Male bullies in the sample on average scored higher in terms of frequency than females in all forms of bullying, but the female bullies engaged in higher variations of bullying compared to the male bullies. The majority of respondents involved in bullying were found to be bully-victims. Bully-victims are known to be more susceptible to negative physical and mental health outcomes compared to pure bullies.

The inferential statistics revealed some unexpected findings on Structure and Resilience being significant personality traits in bullying, although the finding on Self-Criticism, which is analogous to Neuroticism, seemed similar to other results from past research studies that used variations of the Big Five Personality Test. It is also surprising to note that the personality trait construct Aggression was not significant at all for bullying scores in all forms, especially since past studies have found that Aggression (or Aggressiveness) is positively associated with bullying [21]. Structure and Resilience are personality constructs that are traditionally positive and usually linked more towards discipline and hardiness respectively. The eastern cultures of collectivism in Malaysia emphasizes conformity, discipline and hierarchy. Thus the question now is whether individuals who are more disciplined and hardy, more punitive in the actions and if so, why. Do resilient individuals who prefer 'structure' bully because they want to impose 'structure' on others? Are these individuals so disciplined that they have become less adaptive, less flexible and likewise have less empathy? Does this study's findings have any connection to the findings of another

research which found that altruism and religiousness is negatively associated [22]? The answers are still unclear and more research needs to be done.

4.3 Limitations of the Study

The first limitation of this research study is that it is difficult to find an appropriate school sample that mirrors Malaysia's multi-ethnic demography. The location of a school usually determines the demography of the entire student population. This can lead to sample skewness because people who tend to stay in areas or communities that are more comfortable for them. These areas are usually ethnically and socioeconomically homogenous, e.g. schools located in poorer/rural areas would cater to predominantly poor students, and schools located in a Malay village would have a predominantly Malay student population. This school is located in a poorer urban area and caters to predominantly Malay students from the surrounding areas. Bullying happens in almost all age groups. However, this study is only focused on bullying in adolescents thus the results cannot be generalized to the entire population. Also, since this research is a cross-sectional case study of a single school, the results cannot be generalized and cannot be used to ascertain causation. This study obtained results from self-report questionnaires, thus there is no guarantee that the students answered honestly.

4.4 Recommendations for Future Study

To ascertain whether the results of this study is applicable to another school setting, a replication of this study should be done. Future studies can also be done in schools and colleges with different ethnic demography and socioeconomic status to see if these same results are replicable in other settings and environmental conditions. This study shows that there is a possibility that the ITP can be used in the Malaysian context in place of the Big Five to screen for potential bullies. Longitudinal studies can be also conducted using the ITP to observe any changes in students' personalities and bullying behaviour over time.

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