

## Social Competence as Predictor of Bullying among Children and Adolescents

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The present study aimed at discerning the relationship between social competence and bullying among children and adolescents. The sample consists of 253 children and adolescents of public sector schools of Sargodha. Social competence and bullying were operationalized through Social Competence Scale and Illinois Bullying Scale. Multiple regression analyses demonstrated that self control and social skills were significant predictors of bullying. Self control, empathy and social skills turned out to be the negative predictors for fighting. Finally communication skills and prosocial behaviour also predicted victimization in negative direction. Current findings confirmed and substantially extended the research endeavor on the relationship between social competence and bullying behavior. From an educational point of view the findings suggest that training of social competence skills might be an important tool in decreasing bullying.

**Keywords:** Social competence, Self-control, bullying

The importance of social competence need not be argued. Successfully addressing social tasks has been an important part of life for virtually everyone especially in childhood and adolescent. School violence and bullying are serious societal problems. Many parents and school administrators recognize the problem of school bullying. However, only few are aware that children and adolescents may also overcome if serious attention is given to promote their social competence. The present study aims at expanding the understanding of the impact of social competence on bullying behavior during childhood and adolescence.

### **Social competence**

Social competence is an umbrella construct and research provides further support for the position that social competence is not unidimensional, rather it comprised several relatively independent dimensions. Social competence thus appears to be a compound trait (Hough & Schneider, 1996; Ozer & Reise, 1994; Schneider & Hough, 1995). Social competence is increasingly multidimensional during adolescence as adolescents encounter a variety of new social situations and can respond with a broad range of appropriate behaviors. However,

research on social competence has focused more on children than adolescents. The present study examined the impact of the components of social competence (e.g. empathy, self control, social skills, prosocial behavior and communication skills) on bullying behavior (e.g., bully, fight and victim) among school children and adolescents.

A considerable number of researchers have consensus that social competence is multidimensional (Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg & Reis, 1988; Riggio, 1986). However, the nature and number of the dimensions of social competence remain at issue. Social competence dimensions for current study were derived, from the study of Shujja and Malik (2011), and bullying was operationalized through Illinois Bullying Scale (Espelage & Holt, 2001).

The existing literature on personality suggests that several interpersonal traits correspond to social competence dimensions. Interpersonal circle theorists (e.g. Wiggins, 1991) have argued that interpersonal traits are organized in a circumplex formation with various labels, including control and affiliation (Kiesler, 1983), power and love, and assured-dominant and warm-agreeable (Wiggins, Trapnell & Phillips, 1988). Some investigators have identified basic social

skills relating to the sending and receiving of verbal and non-verbal signals (e.g. Riggio, Messamer & Throckmorton, 1991), whereas others have yielded concern with more applied social skills such as coaching, negotiating, and conflict management (e.g. Gilbert & Fleishman, 1992). For the present study we conceived social competence as socially effective behavior (i.e. empathy, self control, social skills, prosocial behavior and communication skills) that is instrumental in helping people achieve personal goals that are social in nature.

### **Bullying**

Bullying has generally been conceptualized as a distinct type of aggression characterized by a repeated and systematic abuse of power. In addition to acts of deliberate physical aggression (e.g., fight), bullying also includes verbal, relational and cyber-aggression, a new venue for inflicting harm in an increasingly electronic youth culture (Williams & Guerra, 2007). During the studies of bullying behavior, victim is naturally examined within the development process of bullying behavior and most studies categorize children as bully, victim or bully-victim. Bully is called to the person inflicting violent behaviors over others while victim defines the person who is directly exposed to such a behavior. Espelage and Holt (2001) examined that bullying differs in several ways from previous investigations of aggression during early adolescence. Bullying is often considered a subtype of aggression. They used analysis to identify groups of students who differ or those who are similar in their self-reported bullying, fighting, and victimization experiences. For current study bullying, fighting and victimization have been operationalized as scores on bullying scale developed by Espelage and Holt (2001).

There is an increase of the frequency of bullying behaviors among peers in schools in recent years. Violence between peers in schools has become widespread phenomenon that worries psychologists, teachers and families in many countries around the world (Gini, 2004; Schwartz, Gorman, Nakamoto, & Toblin, 2005). One of the most pervasive forms of school violence is bullying, which has been defined as a repeated aggressive behavior perpetrated by a bully, or a

group of bullies, who systematically victimizes a weaker peer (Olweus, 1993). Bullying also increases during the middle school period as children enter adolescence (Rios-Ellis, Bellamy, & Shoji, 2000). School bullying has received a great deal of attention in developmental psychopathology, educational and criminological studies over the past 20 years. The evidence indicates that school bullying has a variety of negative consequences for both bullies and victims.

### **Social Competences and Bullying**

However, by definition, bullying occurs in a social context where individuals are engaged in ongoing relationships. Without a social context, repeated aggressive acts toward others are not possible (Swearer & Doll, 2001). During high school education the social context of children and adolescents is broadened due to their paramount interaction with peers. It is therefore, social competence for current study was perceived to be well-built predictor of bullying behavior among them.

Empathy is seen one of the basic elements of helping relation. Empathy is generally defined as sharing another person's emotional state (Eisenberg, & Strayer, 1987). According to another definition, empathy is the process of putting oneself in the place of another person, seeing events from that person's point of view and understanding the feelings and ideas of that person correctly and expressing this situation (Dokmen, 1991). Endersen and Olweus (2001) examined the empathy and bullying specifically. Significant negative relationship was found between the two.

Whereas, the processes through which social knowledge and skills mediate the relationship between environmental influences and behavior are not fully understood, they clearly have rational and emotional elements (Orbio de Castro, Merk, Koops, Veerman, & Bosch, 2005; Pakaslahti, 2000). There is plethora of evidence that aggressive children, tend to be less adept both at managing their emotions and at processing social information (Bierman, 2004; Dodge, 2003; Musher-Eizenman et al., 2004). Existing research has also been witnessed to the fact that victims are shy and withdrawn and they

lack self control and interpretation of emotional expression (Hodges, Malone, & Perry, 1997). Aggression is the phenomenon in which individual also lacks self control and go around fighting with others. Bullying in general is contrary to social competence in terms behavior so on the basis of these aforementioned findings following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Empathy and social skills will predict bullying significantly and negatively.

H2: Self control, empathy, and social skills will predict fighting significantly and negatively.

Bradley (2007) found that African American students, especially boys, need movement, emotional expressiveness, and a preference for oral communication, spontaneity, practice and experimentation. They also need to see the total context of the information being studied. Positive communication skills help students to reduce bullying in school. During school time these children need to acquire the skills essential in developing positive social interactions (Gillies-Rezo & Bosacki, 2003). Victims are the children or adolescents who are incompetent in controlling their behavior and also because of poor communication skills they are virtually more prone to be victims of bullying behavior. An important component of happiness is feeling as if you have an acceptable level of control within your life. Findings of Hodges, Malone, and Perry (1997) revealed that victims lack self control so they are more prone to be victim. There are also considerable researchers who have attributed the acts of bullying to the underdevelopment of pro-social skills (Woods & Wolke, 2004; Larke & Beran, 2006). Moreover present study also hypothesized that:

H3: Communication skills, self control and prosocial behavior would negatively predict victimization among school.

In subcontinent traditional society composed of a distinct family system as compared to western societies. There are two noticeable types of family systems, i.e. nuclear and combined. Both contain different familial contexts which seemingly influence cognition, social learning and bullying behavior. Unfortunately no relevant research had been available in this context.

Current research, in addition intended to explore family system difference on social competence and bullying.

## Method

### Sample:

Purposive sampling technique was used to draw sample, which comprised ( $N = 253$ ) school children and adolescents. It included 123 and 130 male participants from joint and nuclear families respectively. Sample was approached through three high schools of public sector from Sargodha. The base line of academic qualification of the sample was 7th grade. The age range for sample was between 12 to 16 years ( $M = 14.25$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ).

### Instruments:

*Social Competence Scale for Children (SCSC)*: It was developed by Shujja and Malik (2011). The scale contained six sub-scales i.e. Self Control, Empathy, Social Skills, Anti Social Behavior, Assertiveness and Communication Skills. SCSC comprised 40 items anchored on four-point Likert format where 1 corresponded to *never* and 4 corresponded to *always*. The internal consistency (alpha) for full scale, as reported by authors, was .94 and for six subscales reliability coefficients ranged from .50 to .75. Construct validity was endorsed by correlation between SCSC and its subscales.

*Illinois Bullying Scale (IBS)*: It was originally developed by Espelage and Holt (2001). This is an 18 item questionnaire designed to assess bullying behavior. It was translated and validated in Urdu by Shujja and Atta (2011) for Pakistani population. Responses are anchored on four point rating: 1 = never to 4 = always. The IBS yields a total score and three construct scale scores i.e. Bullying, Fight, and Victim. The alpha coefficient for the IBS total score was .89 and satisfactory levels of alpha reliabilities for three construct scales were also reported (Bullying = .82, Fight = .81, Victim = .73).

## Results

Table 1 presents mean and SD of each variable of the present study. Furthermore, it elucidates alpha coefficients of internal consistency for various subscales of the measuring instruments. As evident from the table,

**Table 1. Means, SD, Alpha Reliabilities and Correlation Matrix for all the Variables Used in the Study (N = 253)**

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	$\hat{\alpha}$
1	22.12	3.56	—	.23**	.30**	.49**	.29**	-.26**	-.27**	-.19*	0.58
2	37.02	6.21	—	—	.68**	.20**	.23**	-.18**	-.40**	-.32**	0.73
3	23.97	3.63	—	—	—	.32**	.34**	-.35**	-.40**	-0.14	0.68
4	13.11	2.43	—	—	—	—	.28**	-.24**	-.21**	-.17**	0.51
5	14.98	2.93	—	—	—	—	—	-.16*	-0.14	-.24**	0.53
6	15.02	5.44	—	—	—	—	—	—	.71**	.37**	0.72
7	8.13	3.47	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.22**	0.78
8	7.56	3.15	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.66

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , 1 - self control, 2 - empathy, 3-social skills, 4-prosocial behavior, 5-communication skills, 6-bully, 7- fight, and 8- victim.

reliability estimates of all the subscales were greater than .50 indicating that the measurement instruments were internally consistent. The table also reveals a correlation matrix among the variables of the present study which indicates that all correlations were in the expected directions.

Table 1 also showed internal consistency index (alpha coefficient) for all the scales used in the study. Reliabilities ranged from .51 to .78 which indicated that all the scales achieved satisfactory alpha level. Social skills were found to be negatively correlated with bullying and fight and it originated negative but non significant correlation with victim. The results also showed that self control exhibited negative correlation with bullying, fighting, and victimization. Empathy has also shown significant inverse correlation with fight. It is further observed that communication skills have significant negative correlation with victim. Furthermore, results suggested prosocial behavior has negative and significant correlation with bully, fight, and victim as well.

To investigate contributions of components of social competence in bullying behavior (i.e. bullying, fighting and victimization), multiple regression analysis was carried out. Table 2 suggested that 16% of the variance in bullying can be explained by a model comprising constructs of social competence i.e. self control, empathy, social skills, anti social behavior, communication skills ( $R^2 = .16$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Overall the model was significant  $\{F(5, 184) = 7.19$ ,  $p < .001\}$  and among the predictors, self control ( $\hat{\alpha} = -.26$ ,  $t=3.67$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and social skills were significant negative predictor of bullying ( $\hat{\alpha} = -.18$ ,  $t = 1.89$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

Table also described the effect of constructs of social competence on fighting and explained that 21% of the variance was resulted by a model comprising; self control, empathy, social skills, anti social behavior, communication skills ( $R^2 = .21$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Overall the model was significant  $\{F(5, 184) = 10.03$ ,  $p < .01\}$  and among the predictors, self control ( $\hat{\alpha} = -.15$ ,  $t = 1.92$ ,  $p < .05$ ), empathy ( $\hat{\alpha} = -.23$ ,  $t = 2.58$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and social skills ( $\hat{\alpha} = -.20$ ,  $t=2.13$ ,  $p < .01$ ) were significant negative predictors of fighting. Finally, as illustrated in Table 2, our model explained the 9% of variance in victimization ( $R^2 = .09$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Among the predictors, communication skills ( $\hat{\alpha} = -.19$ ,  $t = 2.49$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and prosocial behavior negatively predicted ( $\hat{\alpha} = -.17$ ,  $t = 2.30$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Overall the model was significant  $\{F(5, 184) = 3.59$ ,  $p < .01\}$ .

### Discussion

The most widely used measure of scale is Cronbach alpha as an empirical index of extent to which the measurement error may be affecting the measure of variables. Current results indicated satisfactory indices of internal consistency for all the scales and assured the researcher that they were suitable for the measurement of the constructs. Means SDs, scale reliabilities and intercorrelations between all instruments used are reported in Table 1. The findings of the present study have prevailed theoretically meaningful relationship between constructs of social competence and bullying, which help comprehend the dynamics by which social competence influence children and adolescents' bullying behavior.

A correlation matrix was computed in order to see the initial relationship pattern between the

**Table 2. Regression Analysis for Predicting Bullying from Social Competence (N = 253)**

Variables	Bullying				Fight				Victim			
	B	SE	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	B	SE	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	B	SE	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>
Constant	33.32	3.19			20.75	1.97			14.74	1.93		
SC	-.39	.11	-.26**		-.14	.07	-.15*		-.08	.07	-.09	
Emp	-.13	.08	-.15	.16***	-.13	.05	-.23**	.21**	-.07	.05	-.14	.09**
SS	-.27	.15	-.18*		-.19	.09	-.20*		.06	.09	.07	
PSB	-.18	.18	-.08		-.04	.11	-.03		-.22	.10	-.17*	
CS	-.02	.14	-.01		-.03	.08	-.03		-.21	.08	-.19*	

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$  SC- self control, Emp- empathy, SS- social skills, PSB-prosocial behavior, CS-Communication skills.

constructs of social competence and bullying (see Table 1). Relationships among these variables were significant and in the desired direction which lined the bases for further hypotheses testing. In order to test the first hypothesis multiple regression analysis was implied. Results revealed that, among all the factors of social competence, empathy and social skills were the significant predictors of bullying (Table 2).

A logical explanation for current finding is that bullies are generally likely to be aggressive, angry and coercive. They are individuals with negative attitudes towards their peers and they illustrate positive attitude towards bullies who are academically unsuccessful, insecure and tend to solve their problems by using force. On the other hand social skills proposed that bullies have defects in social problem solving process (Gird, Albiero, Benelli & Altoe, 2007), and risk of turning into crime and alcoholism. Current findings are supported by Dodge (2003) who found that aggressive children seem to have a more limited range of non aggressive answers in social situations than the non aggressive ones and, for this reason, they are more inclined to choose and perform aggressive behaviors, especially in the case of interpersonal conflicts. Enhancement in social skills help out in reducing the bullying behavior, so it is quite justified that social skills must predict bullying negatively. Empathy an important component of social competence is an inborn skill which can be improved. According Dokmen (1991) empathy is the process of putting oneself in the place of another person, seeing events from that person's point of view and understanding the feelings and ideas of that person correctly and expressing this situation. Bullies lack in maintaining competence in empathy as

they are equipped with negative attitude towards others. Olweus (1993) defined bullying one of the most pervasive forms of school violence, which has been perceived as a repeated aggressive behavior perpetrated by a bully, or a group of bullies, who systematically victimizes a weaker peer. The above discussion lead to infer that empathy is a negative predictor of bullying and current findings also endorsed this pattern. Our findings are also in line with Endersen and Olweus (2001) who found negative correlations between the empathy and positive attitude towards bullying. In other words, children who reported high empathic concern did not possess a positive attitude toward bullying and did not bully others.

In the case of fighting the results further extended our knowledge that all of three variables i.e.self control, empathy, and social skills contributed as significant predictors (Table 2). Endersen and Olweus (2001) provide considerable evidence to current investigation that empathy is also negative predictor of fighting as well as bullying behavior. Attitude of students displaying fighting behavior, the ones exposed to and the ones that witness it in schools, can adjust to normal if they could improve their empathic skills.

An important component of social competence is feeling as if one has an acceptable level of control within ones life. Children and adolescents having high self control are more committed to maintaining a comfortable working environment, for all students, teachers, and peers. They treat each other with respect is a high priority, which takes effort on everyone's part. Therefore, they are less prone to physical aggression or fight behaviors. Our findings also endorsed that self control predict bullying and fight negatively. Fighting or aggressive behavior has

been the subject of interest for researchers and previously several authors studied how the social information processing strategies used by children and the way in which they interpret situational cues and use their previous experiences can influence their aggressive conduct (Huesmann & Guerra, 1997). As low information processing is sign of poor social skills that eventually result in aggression or fight among school students. This argument supports our investigation that social skills are negative predictor of fighting behavior among children and adolescents.

During the studies of bullying behavior, victim is naturally examined within the development process of bullying behavior. Bully is the person inflicting violent behaviors over others while victim defines the person who is directly exposed to such a behavior. Victims of bullying often suffer various psychological problems, including loneliness, poor self-esteem, psychosomatic complaints, risk of suicidal ideation and depression (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Rigby & Slee, 1999).

For current study it was also hypothesized that communication skills, self control and prosocial behavior would negatively predict victimization. Multiple regression analysis revealed that, among all other factors of social competence, communication skills and prosocial behavior were the significant predictors of victimization (see Table 2) whereas, self control was not found to be the significant predictor of victimization. A plausible explanation can be the random response on scales which truly can not be exempted while using self report measures. Despite the fact that correlation between self control and victimization was significant and in expected direction the results should be seen with caution.

As defined by Larke and Beran (2006) communication skill is the ability to interact and facilitate successful relationships with others is arguably one of the most significant developmental achievements throughout childhood. Positive communication skills help students to interact effectively with their peers, class fellows and teachers, which reduces chances of being victim of bullying behavior in school. Gillies-Rezo and

Bosacki (2003) examined that during school time these children need to acquire the skills essential in developing positive social interactions. Victims are the children or adolescents who are incompetent in controlling their behavior and also because of poor communication skills they are virtually more prone to be victims of bullying behavior. Current study spawned the findings that communication skills predict victim negatively which are in line with the above discussion.

Existing research showed that two key components of social competence during childhood include soci-ability, or the ability to initiate and maintain social interactions, and prosocial behavior, or attempts to help, cooperate and care for another person (Rigby & Slee, 1993). On the other hand the typical victim is one who is likely to demonstrate internalizing symptoms; engage in externalizing behavior; lack adequate social skills; possess negative self-related cognitions; experience difficulties in solving social problems; and be noticeably rejected and isolated by peers. A plausible explanation for current finding is that an individual with internalized behavior is less likely to entail prosocial behavior which requires very effective interaction with others.

Prosocial behavior is important construct of social competence which boosts the probability of problem solving in social situations, social and emotional health, (Bardly, 2004), and high academic achievement as compare to victim. We can therefore, think of prosocial behavior and victimization relationships must turned to be negative. Sharp (1995) found that fear of being bullied can result in victims dropping out of school setting. Both victims and those possessing deficit in prosocial behavior are at high risk of leaving the school and this fact also adhere our finding that prosocial behavior predicts victim in opposite direction.

The last objective of the study was to explore family system differences on social competence and bullying behavior. For that purpose *t*-test was applied on all the variables of current study and results showed non significant differences on all the variables. No existing research was available to have an empirical insight on results. One

possible reason for these findings might be that all the children and adolescents belonged to public schools with relatively low and same socio economic status whether living in nuclear or combined families. Family structure did not matter much to them as compare to those with diverse socio economic status.

### Limitations and Suggestions

This study has some serious limitations that can be conceived into recommendations. Keeping in view the current issues, it is recommended that, to overcome the issue of method variance, future researcher should use multiple sources for data collection along with self-report measures. The sample size used in the present research was not large enough ( $N = 253$ ). The sufficient psychometric properties for the scales used in the present research were determined but still a lot of analysis can be computed to find out the psychometric soundness of the scales.

### Conclusion

The study makes a number of contributions with respect to matters both of theoretical and practical concern. It has certain implications for School principals who can place an emphasis on anti-bullying in the children and adolescents, which may negate the need for anti-harassment and anti-bullying initiatives in the intermediate grades. More specifically, the findings confirmed the importance of implementing social competence training in anti-bullying programs.

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