



Original Article

Alexithymia and bullying behavior in students

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ABSTRACT

Background: Bullying behavior among students has become a severe problem that affects their mental and physical well-being. The factors that cause bullying behavior are very complex and involve various aspects. One factor that is receiving increasing attention is alexithymia.

Purpose: This study explores the relationship between alexithymia and student bullying behavior.

Methods: The research used a quantitative design with a cross-sectional study approach. The research sample consisted of 120 class X students at Senior High School X in Bandung, selected using a total sampling technique. Data was collected by distributing online questionnaires, including the Toronto Alexithymia Scale-20 (TAS-20) to measure alexithymia and the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire for bullying behavior. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and the Spearman correlation test.

Results: The data obtained show that less than half of the respondents (36.7%) experienced high levels of alexithymia, 38.3% likely experienced possible alexithymia, and 25% did not experience alexithymia, while the majority of respondents exhibited high bullying behavior (43.5%). This study shows a positive relationship between alexithymia and student bullying behavior ($p < 0.0001$; $r: 0.309$).

Conclusion: Alexithymia can increase bullying behavior in school children. The higher the level of alexithymia, the greater the tendency to engage in bullying behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying behavior is a social phenomenon that has become a severe concern in various contexts, especially in educational environments.¹ Bullying can be defined as aggressive actions carried out repeatedly by a person or group of people against individuals who are physically, emotionally, or psychologically weaker. Forms of bullying behavior include verbal, physical, and psychological intimidation, as well as social exclusion.^{2,3} This often happens in the school environment and can both the victim and the perpetrator.⁴

Bullying is a pervasive and harmful phenomenon that has become a significant concern globally and in Indonesia. According to various sources, the prevalence of bullying is relatively high. For instance, a study by the Plan International Center For Research On Women (ICRW) in five

Asian countries, including Indonesia, found that 84% of students experienced bullying.⁵ Similarly, a survey reported that 47.45% of male students and 35.05% of female students had been bullied.⁶ Moreover, data showed that 24.1% of male students and 17.4% of female students had experienced bullying.⁷ In Indonesia, the Indonesian Child Protection Commission has documented a significant number of bullying cases, with a total of 2,355 cases reported from January to August 2020.⁸ The prevalence of bullying in Indonesia is particularly concerning, with bullying being a significant issue in schools and affecting students across various educational levels, including elementary, middle, and high school.⁹

The impact of bullying behavior cannot be ignored. For victims, the impact can include mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, and in extreme cases, can even lead to suicidal thoughts.¹⁰ Apart from that, victims of

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bullying are also vulnerable to experiencing decreased academic achievement and behavioral disorders.¹¹ Victims can experience stress, depression, anxiety, and even prolonged psychological trauma. Decreased academic achievement, social isolation, and even thoughts of committing suicide are also impacts that victims of bullying often experience.¹²

Bullying behavior not only has a detrimental impact on the victim but also on the perpetrator and witnesses involved in the situation. For perpetrators, engaging in bullying behavior can have serious long-term consequences.¹³ Offenders may experience decreased empathy and increased violence and aggressiveness in their future social relationships. Apart from that, bullying behavior can also be an indicator of deeper internal problems, such as an inability to manage emotions or unresolved internal conflicts. For witnesses, witnessing bullying behavior can also have a significant impact.¹⁴ They may feel afraid, anxious, or guilty because they were unable or did not dare to intervene to protect the victim. This can impact their emotional and psychological well-being, as well as create an unsafe and uncomfortable school environment.¹⁵

The factors that cause bullying are complex and involve various aspects, including individual, family, school, and community factors. One factor gaining increasing attention is alexithymia, which is difficulty in identifying and expressing emotions verbally.¹⁶ Individuals with alexithymia tend to have trouble understanding and responding to the feelings of others, which can impact their social interactions, including the ability to empathize and understand the negative impact of their behavior.¹⁷

Previous research has shown mixed results regarding the relationship between alexithymia and bullying behavior.¹⁸ Other studies have found a positive correlation between the two, indicating that individuals with higher levels of alexithymia are more likely to engage in bullying behavior.¹⁹ However, other research has not found a significant relationship, suggesting that other factors may be more dominant in bullying behavior.²⁰ This gap in the literature highlights the need for further investigation to clarify the relationship. This study offers novelty by focusing on high school students in Indonesia, a context that has been under-researched. The urgency of this research lies in understanding local dynamics and developing effective interventions based on empirical findings within a specific cultural context.

Given the urgency and relevance of this topic, research regarding the relationship between alexithymia and bullying behavior in students is essential. By understanding the factors that underlie bullying behavior, it is hoped that more effective intervention approaches can be found to prevent and overcome this phenomenon. Therefore, this

study aims to investigate the relationship between alexithymia and student bullying behavior.

METHOD

Study Design

This observational analytic research uses a cross-sectional study design.

Setting and Respondent

This research was conducted in Senior High School X in Bandung in May 2023. All students in this school were the sample in this study, totaling 120 students. The sampling technique used is total sampling.

The Variable, Instrument, and Measurement

In this study, the level of alexithymia was the independent variable, and bullying behavior was the dependent variable. The questionnaires used were the Toronto Alexithymia Scale-20 (TAS-20) to measure the level of alexithymia and the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire to measure bullying behavior. Data was collected by distributing questionnaires online to respondents.²¹⁻²³

Data Analysis

The Spearman test evaluated the relationship between the alexithymia variable and bullying behavior.

Ethical Considerations

This research considers the principles of research ethics, including autonomy, justice, beneficence and maleficence, and confidentiality. This study followed the ethical principles approved by The Ethics Committee of The Health Research Ethics Committee Nursing School of Indonesian National Nurses Association, West Java (No. III/020/KEPK-SLE/STIKEP/PPNI/JABAR/VI/2022). Autonomy ensures that participants have the right to provide information voluntarily and give their informed consent. Equity ensures that the distribution of the benefits and burdens of research is fair to all participants. Beneficence and maleficence ensure that research benefits participants and does not cause unnecessary harm. Confidentiality is maintained by ensuring the data collected is de-identified and used only for research purposes.

RESULTS

The majority of respondents in this study were males aged between 15-17 years. Table 1 shows that less than half of the respondents (36.7%) experienced high levels of alexithymia, 38.3% probably experienced possible alexithymia, and a small portion of respondents (25%) did not experience alexithymia. The research results showed that the majority of respondents had high levels of bullying behavior (43.5%).

Table 1. Characteristic of Respondent (n=120)

Characteristic	Results
Sex	
Male	66 (55%)
Female	54(45%)
Age, yo	15-17
Alexithymia	
Not Alexithymia	30 (25%)
Possible Alexithymia	46 (38.3%)
High alexithymia	44 (36.7%)
Bullying Behavior	
Low	27 (21.3%)
Medium	39 (35.2%)
High	54 (43.5%)

Table 2 shown that students with low levels of alexithymia show the lowest levels of bullying behavior, while students with high levels of alexithymia show the highest levels of bullying behavior. The statistical analysis results show a significant relationship between alexithymia and student bullying behavior ($p < 0.0001$; $r: 0.309$). The relationship shows a positive direction, which means that the higher the level of alexithymia, the higher the potential for carrying out bullying behavior.

DISCUSSION

The research results paint an interesting demographic picture: most respondents are students between 15 and 16 years old, while most are boys. These findings provide an overview of the profile of the population involved in this study. Factors influencing this demographic distribution include the characteristics of the school population selected as research locations and the sample selection process.²⁴ In addition, gender and age play an essential role in the context of bullying behavior.²⁵ Previous research has shown that men have a higher tendency to engage in bullying behavior than women, although this may vary depending on the social and cultural context.²⁶ Likewise, age may also be a significant factor in the incidence of bullying behavior, where younger and older adolescents may have different risks of experiencing or engaging in bullying behavior.²⁷

The relationship between alexithymia and bullying behavior among students can be explained through several psychological theories and hormonal perspectives. From a psychological standpoint, alexithymia, which is the inability to identify and express emotions, can lead to difficulties in managing stress and interpersonal conflicts. According to emotion regulation theory, individuals who cannot effectively regulate their emotions may seek alternative ways to release their frustration, which in some cases can manifest as aggressive behaviors such as bullying.²⁸ Additionally, from a social development perspective, adolescents with

alexithymia may struggle to form healthy social relationships, leading to dominance and aggression towards others as a form of compensation.²⁹

From a hormonal perspective, adolescents are at a developmental stage where hormones such as testosterone and cortisol play significant roles in their behavior. Research indicates that high levels of testosterone can be associated with aggressive behavior, while imbalances in cortisol can affect a person's stress response.³⁰ In individuals with alexithymia, the hormonal stress response may be more intense or dysregulated, potentially triggering aggressive behavior as a coping mechanism. The combination of an inability to manage emotions and an imbalanced hormonal response can explain why students with alexithymia are more prone to engaging in bullying behavior.³¹ Understanding these underlying mechanisms is crucial for developing targeted interventions to reduce bullying by addressing both emotional regulation and hormonal influences in adolescents.

The study's results showed the relationship between alexithymia and bullying behavior. This indicates that the higher a person's level of alexithymia, the more likely they are to engage in bullying behavior, although the effect is not as strong. Factors that may influence the tendency to alexithymia among students may include genetic factors, family environment, childhood experiences, and psychosocial stress. Alexithymia can result from a combination of these factors, where individuals may have difficulty identifying, understanding, and expressing their emotions appropriately.¹⁸ A lack of ability to interact emotionally can lead to an inability to resolve conflict constructively, which in turn can increase the risk of engaging in bullying behavior.¹⁹ These findings are consistent with several studies showing a link between alexithymia and aggressive behavior, including bullying behavior, among adolescents. However, it is essential to note that other factors, such as gender, school environment, and individual experiences, may also play a significant role in the relationship between alexithymia and bullying behavior.³²

Alexithymia is a significant psychological phenomenon in adolescents that can influence bullying behavior. Adolescents with alexithymia tend to have difficulty recognizing, understanding, and expressing their emotions appropriately.²⁰ These limitations in interacting with their emotions can affect their social interactions. The inability to manage emotions well can cause them to look for alternative ways to express themselves. In some cases, bullying behavior can be a way to vent emotions that are not well managed.³³ Additionally, individuals with alexithymia may be less sensitive to the feelings of others and less able to understand the negative impact of their behavior on others.³⁴ This can make them less skilled at navigating social interactions and responding to conflict healthily.³⁵

Table 2. Relationship Between Alexithymia and Bullying Behavior (n=120)

Alexithymia	Bullying Behavior			r	p-value
	Low	Medium	High		
Not Alexithymia	12 (10%)	10 (8.3%)	8 (6.7%)	0.309	0.0001
Possible Alexithymia	10 (8.3%)	18 (15%)	18 (15%)		
High Alexithymia	5 (4.2%)	11 (9.2%)	28 (23.3%)		

Bullying behavior is a complex social phenomenon and has a significant impact on teenagers. This often happens in the school environment, where students can be victims or perpetrators of these actions. Bullying behavior includes a variety of actions aimed at hurting, intimidating, or insulting others physically, verbally, or psychologically.³⁶ Adolescents who engage in bullying behavior experience severe consequences for their well-being. For victims, bullying behavior can cause stress, depression, anxiety, and even lasting psychological trauma.³⁷ Meanwhile, for the perpetrator, this behavior can decrease empathy, increase the risk of antisocial behavior in the future, and harm their social relationships.³⁸ The factors that influence bullying behavior in adolescents are very diverse, including individual factors such as emotional intelligence and level of social skills, as well as environmental factors such as school culture and peer group dynamics.³⁹

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

This study concluded that higher levels of alexithymia are associated with an increased likelihood of engaging in bullying behavior. This finding underscores the importance of addressing emotional regulation issues as part of interventions to mitigate bullying in schools. These findings imply the importance of paying attention to individual psychological aspects in preventing and overcoming bullying behavior in the school environment. Recommendations for future research are to explore the factors that influence levels of alexithymia in adolescents and expand this research to various school contexts and different student populations to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between alexithymia and bullying behavior.

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