

Peer pressure and bullying among school going adolescents in the district of Kandy

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Abstract

Objectives

To determine the extent, common types and the impacts of negative peer pressure and bullying among adolescents within the school environment.

Methodology

A cross sectional study was carried out including Sinhalese adolescents in grades 9, 10 and 11 in the district of Kandy. Twelve schools were selected randomly to represent each category of schools namely 1AB, 1C and 2 and a class was considered as a cluster. Details on events and experiences as victims of negative peer pressure and bullying were collected using a self-administered questionnaire.

Results

The sample consisted of 896 students with a mean age of 15 years (SD= 0.86). Fifty two percent (n= 466) were boys. Peer pressure on substance use and of financial type was significantly more for boys. Peer pressure for sexual activities was reported by 14.6% of boys and 11.2% of girls. A significantly higher proportion of boys (78.1%), were victims of physical bullying than girls (26.5%) (p<0.001). More girls were victims of verbal bullying (82.1%) than boys (50%) (p<0.001). Of the sample, 53.3% were victims of relational bullying. Of the boys, 16.7%, 12.2% and 10.3% were compelled to smoke, use alcohol or use illegal abusive substances. Drop in school performance, staying away from school and extra-curricular activities, engaging in homo-sexual and hetero-sexual acts, feeling of hatred and suicidal thoughts were some of the undesirable impacts reported.

Conclusion

High prevalence and the harmful effects of negative peer pressure and bullying observed provide compelling reasons to initiate interventions.

Key words: peer pressure, adolescents, bullying

Introduction

Peer pressure refers to the influence exerted by a peer group to encourage a person to change his or her attitudes, values or behaviour in order to conform to the group. It has a great influence on adolescent behavior and reflects the desire to fit in to a group and be accepted by others. Peers can have both positive and negative influence on each other. Negative peer pressure among adolescents is identified as an important predictor of antisocial behaviours such as smoking, alcohol abuse, illicit drug use, sexual harassment and youth violence (1-5).

Bullying is usually defined as a specific form of aggression, which is intentional, repeated, and involves a disparity of power between the victims and perpetrators (6). Most common bullying acts are physical or verbal. Relational bullying is another form of bullying, which involves mainly spreading rumors and social exclusion (7). In developed countries, bullying using electronic means such as internet and mobile phones (cyber bullying) is aggravating the problem further (7). Though

bullying in schools has been viewed as a natural process over the years, the consequences of bullying on victims has led to concern (8, 9).

As research on peer pressure and bullying among adolescents is lacking in Sri Lanka and as the nature of both these problems can vary according to the culture and values of a society across countries, a study among Sri Lankan adolescents was important. The aim of this study was to determine the extent and the common types of negative peer pressure and bullying within the school environment, how they differ according to sex and other factors, and to find out the consequences of these on Sri Lankan adolescents. Since both peer pressure and bullying are inter-related and common to school going adolescents, both these aspects were studied together.

Methodology

A cross sectional study was carried out among adolescents in grades 9, 10 and 11 attending the Sinhala medium government schools in the Central

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Province, Kandy Zone, Gangawata Division. Out of 48 Sinhala medium schools having students in grades 9, 10 and 11 in Gangawata division, 12 schools were randomly selected to represent each category of schools namely 1AB (3 schools), 1C (4 schools) and 2 (5 schools). According to the categorization of schools by Ministry of Education, the category 1AB is considered the best having all subject streams while category 2 caters only up to ordinary level. A class was considered as a cluster and classes were selected randomly from all 3 grades. A design effect of 2 was considered to calculate the required sample size (n=908).

A pre-tested self administered questionnaire having both closed and open ended questions was used to collect data. The subjects were asked to report in detail all the events that they could recall as bully victims and their experiences under peer pressure from grade 6 to date. Information was gathered only about the acts of bullying by fellow students but not by teachers. Also, the data were specifically on bullying and peer pressure which took place only within the school environment, both during and after school.

Data analysis was carried out using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 17th version.

Since students reported various types of bullying and negative peer pressure, they were categorized under few main types for further analysis. The peer pressure for homosexual and heterosexual acts was considered under sexual peer pressure.

The ethical approval was obtained from the Committee on Research and Ethical Review, Faculty of Medicine, University of Peradeniya. The permission to carry out the study in selected schools was taken from the Provincial Department of Education, Central Province. Informed consent was obtained from parents.

Results

Though the response rate was 100%, data collected from few students had to be removed due to incompleteness or irrelevant information given. The final sample consisted of 896 students. The age ranged from 13 years and 4 months to 17 years with a mean of 15 years (SD = 0.86). Fifty two percent of them were males (n=466) and 91.5% of the study population were day scholars. Approximately equal sex distribution was observed in the total study sample and within the 3 categories of schools.

Of the study sample, 67.8% (95% CI= 63.6% - 72%) of the boys and 24.3% (95% CI= 20.3% - 28.3%) of

Table 1: Commonly reported acts of bullying according to sex

Act of Bullying	Girls (n = 430)		Boys (n = 466)		Total (n = 896)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Physical harassments using limbs	46	10.7	285	61.1	331	36.9
Being scolded in harsh language	174	40.5	62	13.3	236	26.3
Subjected to humiliation, use of nicknames and passing hints	157	36.5	47	10.1	204	22.7
Spreading rumours to harm good reputation	72	16.7	19	4.1	91	10.1
Subjected to verbal threat	13	3	48	10.3	61	6.8
Touching body without permission	43	10	15	3.2	58	6.4
Breaking friendship	42	9.8	1	0.2	43	4.8
Disturbing learning process	17	3.9	16	3.4	33	3.6
Physical harassment using other objects	21	4.8	10	2.1	31	3.4
Stealing money or destroying belongings	15	3.5	12	2.6	27	3
Isolation	24	5.6	8	1.7	32	3.5
Cutting hair/ Alteration of dress/ removal of shoes by force	25	5.5	1	0.2	26	2.9

Table 2: Commonly reported acts of negative peer pressure according to sex

Act of negative peer pressure	Girls (n = 430)		Boys (n = 466)		Total (n = 896)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Compelled to contribute money	83	19.3	311	66.7	394	43.9
Compelled for sexual activities	48	11.2	68	14.6	116	12.9
Forced to start a love affair	87	20.2	10	2.1	97	10.8
Forced to harass another person	5	1.1	54	11.6	59	6.6
Compelled to smoke	1	0.002	78	16.7	79	8.8
Compelled to use alcohol	0	0.00	57	12.2	57	6.4
Compelled to use illegal abusive substances	1	0.002	48	10.3	49	5.5
Forced to watch pornography	3	0.7	21	4.5	24	2.6
Forced to purchase food or other items for other students	11	2.6	14	3	25	2.7
Forced to kiss another	16	3.7	8	1.7	24	2.6

the girls have been subjected to one or more type of negative peer pressure. Sixty eight percent of boys (95% CI= 63.8% - 72.2%) and 51.2% (95% CI= 46.5% - 55.9%) of girls were victims of some kind of a bully act. Commonly reported acts of bullying and negative peer pressure are given in Tables 1 and 2 respectively. Sixty one percent of the boys have been subjected to physical harassment using limbs while 40.5% of the girls have been scolded with harsh language. Under physical type of bullying, 15 boys said that they were assaulted after covering their heads with a cloth which they referred to as 'boothayagaseema' (attacks by ghosts).

Nearly 67% of the boys have been compelled to contribute money for various purposes. The commonest type of negative peer pressure for girls

was the pressure exerted on them to start love affairs with opposite sex (20.2%). Of the boys, 16.7%, 12.2% and 10.3% were compelled to smoke, use alcohol or use illegal abusive substances respectively. Only 2 girls reported of substance abuse under peer pressure. The distribution of types of bullying and negative peer pressure according to socio-demographic characteristics of adolescents is shown in Table 3. A significantly higher proportion of boys were victims of physical bullying when compared with that of girls ($p < 0.001$). More girls were victims of verbal bullying than boys ($P < 0.001$). Peer pressures of financial type and on substance abuse were significantly more among boys (Table 3). Peer pressure for sexual activities was experienced by 14.6% of boys and 11.2% of girls.

Table 3: Types of bullying and negative peer pressure according to socio – demographic characteristics of adolescents

		Bullying						Peer Pressure					
		Physical		Relational		Verbal		Financial		Sexual		Substance use	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Gender													
	Male (n = 466)	364	78.1	235	50.4	233	50	334	21.3	68	14.6	107	22.9
	Female (n = 430)	114	26.5	243	56.5	353	82.1	92	71.6	48	11.2	02	0.47
	*p value	< 0.001		0.07		< 0.001		< 0.001		0.13		< 0.001	
Category of School													
	1 AB (n = 266)	143	53.7	154	57.8	200	75.2	121	45.4	49	18.4	47	17.6
	1 C (n = 481)	238	49.4	243	50.5	301	62.6	245	50.9	46	9.5	46	9.6
	2 (n = 149)	97	65.1	81	54.3	85	57	60	40.2	21	14.1	16	10.7
	*p value	0.004		0.148		< 0.001		0.05		0.002		0.006	
Entry to School													
	At grade 1 (n = 521)	270	51.8	272	52.2	330	63.3	233	44.7	65	12.4	56	10.7
	Grade 2 – 5 (n = 108)	55	50.9	48	44.4	71	65.7	57	52.7	14	12.9	14	12.9
	At grade 6 or above (n = 260)	149	57.3	154	59.2	180	69.2	132	50.7	37	14.2	39	15.0
	Non responders (n = 9)												
	Total (n = 896)	478	53.3	478	53.3	586	64.5	426	47.5	116	12.9	109	12.2
	*p value	0.3		0.03		0.26		0.14		0.79		0.27	

* Chi – squared test

Category 1 AB schools had the highest percentages of students who were subjected to verbal bullying, relational bullying and peer pressures for substance abuse and sexual activities (Table 3). However, a significantly higher proportion of adolescents in category 2 schools were victims of physical bullying

(p = 0.004). When compared with others, a higher percentage of students who have entered the school at grade 6 or above (59.2%) were victims of relational bullying (p=0.03). Further, they were the victims of physical and verbal bullying and also who experienced negative peer pressure for substance

abuse and sexual encounters more frequently than others though the difference observed was not statistically significant (Table 3).

The impact of bullying and negative peer pressure on these adolescents is shown in table 4. Almost 63% of students reported that they had feelings of hatred

Table 4: Undesirable effects of bullying & negative peer pressure on adolescents, according to sex

Undesirable effects	Girls (n = 430)		Boys (n = 466)		Total (n = 896)		*p value
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
School absenteeism	92	21.4	112	24.0	204	22.8	0.35
Cutting school periods	37	8.6	76	16.3	113	12.6	0.001
Drop in school performance/ rank	120	27.9	131	28.1	251	28	0.95
Was disliked by teachers	65	15.1	35	7.5	200	22.3	< 0.001
Was disliked by parents	109	25.3	153	32.8	262	29.2	0.01
Was disliked by friends	93	21.6	179	38.4	272	30.4	< 0.001
Had feelings of hatred	279	64.8	285	61.1	564	62.9	0.25
Had to stop extracurricular activities	59	13.7	107	22.9	166	18.5	< 0.001
Reduction of performance in extracurricular activities	95	22.1	172	36.9	262	29.4	< 0.001
Stopped attending tuition classes	60	13.9	135	28.9	195	21.8	< 0.001
Had to change tuition classes	60	13.9	82	17.6	142	15.8	0.14
Had to change the school	07	1.6	27	5.7	34	3.7	0.01
Had to get medical advice/ treatment	18	4.2	65	13.9	83	9.3	< 0.001
Had feelings of worthlessness of life	81	18.8	106	22.7	187	20.9	0.15
Had suicidal ideas	34	7.9	67	14.3	101	11.3	0.002
Had suicidal attempts	6	1.3	30	6.4	36	4	< 0.001
Had to consume alcohol	0	-	57	12.2	57	6.4	< 0.001**
Had to smoke	1	0.002	78	16.7	79	8.8	< 0.001
Had to consume illicit drugs	1	0.002	48	10.3	49	5.5	< 0.001
Experienced homosexual acts	6	1.3	50	10.7	56	6.3	< 0.001
Had heterosexual acts	2	0.004	35	7.5	37	4.1	< 0.001
Had to start a love affair	64	14.9	10	2.1	74	8.3	< 0.001
Had an impact other than above	-	-	-	-	124	13.8	-

* Chi - Squared test

** Fisher's exact test

towards the bullies and the peers who exerted pressure on them (table 4). Nearly one fourth of both boys and girls has been absent from school and nearly one third of both sexes perceived a drop in school performance due to bullying or peer pressure. Almost 23% of boys had to stop extracurricular activities at school while 37% of boys thought their performance in extracurricular activities dropped due to peer pressure or bullying. Among boys, 10.7% and 7.5% have experienced homosexual acts and heterosexual acts respectively (table 4). Almost 15% of girls have started a love affair under these circumstances. A significantly higher percentage of boys had suicidal ideas and suicidal attempts than girls ($p < 0.001$).

Discussion

Most published literature on adolescent peer pressure discuss on substance use or sexual abuse. When the questionnaire was pre-tested in the present study, adolescents came out with their concern on peer pressure to contribute money for various reasons which led the researchers' concern on financial type of peer pressure. Although not a single study has recognized this problem as a negative peer pressure on adolescents, the present study identified that 71.6% of boys and 21.3% of girls were subjected to this financial type of peer pressure.

As events such as substance use and sexual encounters are not easily forgotten, the recall bias on these would have been minimal. Though under reporting would have occurred when recalling the bullying incidents, over 50% of both boys and girls have reported their experiences as bully victims.

As the present study did not evaluate the reasons for substance use but highlighted only the proportions of adolescents using substance due to peer pressure, the figures are not quite comparable with prior research. Nevertheless, in a study carried out on substance use among 13 – 18 year old adolescents in Colombo, Sri Lanka ($n=3196$), the life time use of cigarettes, alcohol and Marijuana was 5.5%, 10% and 1.6% among boys and 0.6%, 3.6% and 0.4% among girls respectively (10). Though the objective of this study was not to assess the influence of peer pressure on substance use, the findings highlighted that the source of first use was friends. Therefore, we can assume that the use of substance was mainly due to peer influence in this Colombo study too. However, the prevalence of substance use was much less among boys in the Colombo study when compared with the present study conducted in Kandy. Though overall prevalence of substance use among girls was very low in both these studies, alcohol use at least once in life time was reported by 3.6% of girls in Colombo while not a single girl in the present study

admitted of having alcohol.

Peer pressure for sexual activities was reported by 12.9% of the adolescents with no significant difference in prevalence between boys and girls. Nevertheless, significantly higher proportions of boys have got involved with both homosexual and heterosexual activities than girls which highlight a better capacity among girls to resist peer pressure. A survey carried out in Nigeria has found out that the peer pressure exerted 61.2% of the influence on sexual practices of adolescents (11). Further, a research in South Africa showed that the peer pressure on both boys and girls increased the high risk sexual behavior (5). Hence, peer pressure on sexual activities is an important issue to address in reproductive health of adolescents.

Both the peer pressures for sexual activities and substance use was highest in type AB schools which are considered as better schools in our country. These schools will need more attention when implementing activities to reduce the negative peer pressure.

According to literature, the prevalence and nature of bullying varies across countries. Similar to the findings in previous studies, more boys were victims of physical bullying than girls (7, 12). Victimization of relational bullying was consistent with previous studies showing no significant variation with sex. However, contrary to findings in previous research, significantly higher proportion of girls in the current study was victims of verbal bullying (7, 12). The findings highlight how bullying could vary in different cultural settings.

Effort should be made to prevent high occurrence of bullying in smaller schools of category 2 and specially some of the bully acts observed such as 'Boothayagaseema' which can lead to serious injuries.

The students entering a school in grade 6 or later were subjected to almost all types of bullying and negative peer pressure more often than the fellow students. Most of these students were grade 5 scholarship winners. Both teachers and the parents should be made aware of this problem to minimize such incidences to help these students to adjust to the new environment.

It was difficult to identify the negative impacts of peer pressure and bullying separately as both problems led to some common negative impacts on adolescents. Even in prior research, bullied students have also reported higher rates of substance use and sexual intercourse highlighting the overlapping nature of the two problems (9).

A drop in school performance, staying away from school and suicidal thoughts has been reported by bully victims in previous studies too (8, 13, 14). Bringing great concern, 4% and 11.3% of the study population reported that they tried to commit suicide or had suicidal ideas respectively. Though it is not possible to discuss each and every undesirable effect experienced by victims of bullying and negative peer pressure highlighted in results, most need to be paid attention. Overall, significantly higher proportions of boys were found to have undesirable impacts. Hence, intervention programs should target specially the boys to prevent this problem and to develop the capacity to resist negative peer pressure and bullying.

In conclusion, the high prevalence and the harmful effects of negative peer pressure and bullying observed deserve special attention by educators and parents to initiate interventions.

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