

## **Bullying Behavior and Stress Levels: Does It Affect Students' Academic Performance?**

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### **Abstract**

The present study aimed to examine the effects of bullying behavior and stress levels on academic performance of students. A quasi-experimental pretest-posttest control-grouped design was used. The population consisted of all the students of Yazd University, out of which a sample of 86 students was selected using the convenience sampling method. 57 and 29 students were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups, respectively. After completing the performance evaluation instrument (Sudoku puzzle) as the pretest, the experimental group members underwent a 90-minute bullying behavior session. At the end of the session, the participants were asked to complete the parallel Sudoku puzzle and the Lakaev Academic Stress Response Scale (LASRS) (2009). The results of the study revealed that short-term bullying behavior has a positive effect on academic performance of students ( $p < 0.05$ ). No significant difference was found in students with different stress levels, indicating that stress plays no role in the effect of bullying behavior on academic performance of students ( $p > 0.05$ ). In general, the results revealed the positive effect of bullying behavior on academic performance of students. The insight from this study can be used in educational and occupational settings.

**Key Words:** stress, bullying behavior, academic performance of students.

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## **1. Introduction:**

In today's business world, managers are increasingly facing various complicated factors influencing organizational performance (Tajpour et al., 2022). Most importantly, managerial actions significantly influence organizational performance (Hosseini et al., 2020). Employee performance as a competitive advantage contributes to higher productivity and profitability, which are sought by all organizations for their survival (Tajpour, 2021). To increase profitability, organizations need efficient human resources as an invaluable capital. Therefore, organizations need to take some measures, for example by raising employee morale and creating a positive work environment, for efficient employee performance (Jackson, 2006).

Employee performance can be influenced by many factors, including counterproductive workplace behavior (CWB) (Sabokro et al., 2018). According to Spector and Fox (2004), CWB encompasses a spectrum of actions that harm employees or organizations. Such behaviors include aggression, deviance, retaliation, and revenge. Aggression is the most important one, which, in Anderson and Pearson's (1999) terms, include such behaviors as workplace incivility, violence, and bullying behavior.

There has been a growing interest in research on bullying behavior (Patchin & Hinduja, 2011). Bullying behavior is an aggressive behavior, marked by an imbalance of power, in which a person or a group of persons intentionally and repeatedly attack others, beat them, or show aggression toward those whom they consider as weaker than themselves (Schwartz et al., 2000). The concept of bullying behavior has been studied for more than 20 years; yet there is no consensus over its definition. Bullying behavior is generally understood as intentional and repeated harming of others as a result of an existing imbalance of power between bullies and victims. In this vein, bullying behavior is viewed by Sharp and Smith (1994) and Rigby (2002) as an abuse of power (Rigby, 2002; Sharp & Smith, 2002). Olweus (1993) considers bullying behavior in a school setting as inflicting harm on someone repeatedly and over time, during which a victim may be subjected to such behaviors as coercion, intimidation, and humiliation (Olweus, 1993). Bullying behavior can include physical injury or verbal abuse such as insulting, humiliating, spreading rumors, or intentional exclusion from a group (Monks et al., 2009). Such negative actions can be mental, physical, and sexual in nature.

In a workplace setting, bullying behavior can include specific activities, interactions or processes repeated over time and as a result of an existing imbalance of power between individuals (Baillien

& De Witte, 2009). To Einarsen and Rakness (1997), bullying behavior concerns repeated actions which are directed against one or more employees who do not want such behaviors. Such behaviors may be deliberate or unconscious, but cause humiliation, offence, distress, may interfere with job performance, or create an unpleasant work environment (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010).

Bullying behavior mostly involves verbal abuse, and physical contact is rare. A typology presented by Hoelt and Rayner (1997) consists of five types of bullying behavior: (1) threat to professional status (including, belittling opinions, public professional humiliation, and accusation regarding lack of effort), (2) threat to personal standing (including, name-calling, insulting, intimidation, and devaluing with reference to age), (3) isolation (including, preventing access to opportunities, physical or social isolation, and withholding of information), (4) overwork (including, working under pressure, setting impossible deadlines, and making unnecessary disruptions), and (5) destabilization (including, failure to give credit when due, allocation of meaningless tasks, removal of responsibility, repeated reminders of blunders, and setting the target up to fail). Research by the Workplace Bullying Institute in 2006 suggests the following most common workplace bullying tactics: falsely accusing someone of “errors” not actually made (71%), staring and nonverbally intimidating (68%), unjustly discounting the person’s thoughts or feelings in meetings (64%), disregarding satisfactory or exemplary quality of completed work despite evidence (discrediting) (58%), harshly and constantly criticizing and setting different standards for the target (57%), spreading destructive rumors about the target (56%), and encouraging people to turn against the target (55%) (Gholipour et al., 2009).

Many attempts have been made to determine the reasons for bullying. While some scholars believe that personality characteristics of bullies and victims contribute to bullying behavior, others focus on environmental factors. Nevertheless, many scholars have suggested that bullying and other aggressive behaviors at workplace are as a result of the interaction of individual and environmental factors, that is, both personality characteristics of bullies and victims and environmental factors contribute to bullying behavior. Environmental factors are considered as fundamental in creating bullying behavior. Many scholars believe that the external environment plays the main role in creating bullying behavior while personality traits of bullies and victims are viewed as unnecessary factors. In other words, personality traits of bullies and victims are seen as facilitating factors. From the broader perspective of organizational psychology, bullying is defined as a complicated interactive and escalating process in which work environment and organization, personality traits

of bullies and victims, and general characteristics of human interaction in the organization, all play important roles in workplace bullying (Einarsen, 2000; Hoel et al., 1999; Zapf, 1999).

Workplace bullying has negative effects on personal, psychological, cognitive, and physiological performance of employees (Leymann, 1990), on interpersonal communication and family relationships (Davenport et al., 1999), on professional performance, job satisfaction, job stability, and organizational citizenship behavior (Zellars et al., 2002), and on organizational productivity, reputation, and stability (Bassman, 1992). Generally, bullying behavior brings about harmful effects on bullying victims, observers of the bullying, and the organization (Keashly & Jagatic, 2000).

Brodsky (1976) believes that workplace harassment emanates from this perspective that, in the industrial society, those employees who are subjected to aggression or harassment would have a better performance. In this way, managers attempt to achieve acceptable productivity and performance (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010). On the other hand, bullying behavior is a conspiracy-related behavior which most of the time leads to a decrease in the performance of victims (Sutton, 2007). Contradictory results about the effects of bullying behavior on performance indicate the importance of the subject and also highlight the various factors involved.

Stress has been shown to affect the interplay of bullying and its consequences, including performance (McGrath, 2001). Stress is caused by reaction to any threatening event which limits an individual's coping ability (Khayyer et al., 2017). Such a threatening event can affect an individual's physical security in its entirety, self-esteem, reputation, or peace of mind (Norhayati et al., 2015). Rogers et al. (1993) presented the following coping strategies for stress:

- Detached coping strategy: It is used for unconsciously coping with stress itself rather than with its source.
- Avoidant coping strategy: It is used for unconsciously avoiding the source of stress, including avoiding thoughts of the stressful event or denying its existence in practice.
- Cognitive coping strategy: It is used for consciously coping with the source of stress and for problem solving.
- Emotional coping strategy: It is mainly influenced by different emotional states.

Problem-focused coping strategy focuses on the source of stress, attempts to systematically identify the problem, and involves different views or solutions for the problem (Afshani & Abbasi, 2014).

Effects of stress can be divided into four groups: physiological, cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Physiological effects include secretion of adrenaline and noradrenaline, impairment of gastrointestinal function, an increase in heart rate, breathing discomfort, and vasoconstriction. Cognitive effects include decreases in concentration and attention, a decrease in short-term memory, and an increase in agitation and absent-mindedness. Affective effects include anxiety and depression and increases in physical and psychological tensions. And behavioral effects include an increase in activity avoidance, disruption of sleep patterns, and impairment of academic, occupational, and social performance(Eysenck, 2000).

Students with higher levels of stress seem to have a lower academic performance in facing bullying behavior as a stressful event, which is one of the research hypotheses in this study. Given the negative consequences of bullying behavior for performance in the workplace and academic settings, this study will make an attempt to examine the effect of bullying behavior on academic performance of students by simulating work environment in the classroom. The simulation approach helps one to understand the dynamics of workplace and academic environment(Arabiun et al., 2023). It enables students to simulate the problem in a secure environment in which making mistakes entails no consequences and repeated attempts for problem solving has no cost. In this regard, Kofman and Senge (1993) pointed out that learning arises through performance and practice(Kofman & Senge, 1993).

Many scholars have suggested that, by learning in an experimental environment which focuses on professional learning, students can increase their performance in real life work environments(Klausmeier & Daresh, 1983). In this way, students become well-prepared for real life problem solving, for which they need to integrate their knowledge, skills, personal attitudes, and appropriate resources(Cairns, 1995).

By simulating work environment in classroom in an academic environment, students can formulate and test hypotheses, simulate their own behavioral patterns and those of others, make decisions, and observe the results, which can take weeks in real life work environment(Cairns, 1995). Moreover, students can experience necessary elements of workplace in classroom without taking potential risks and bearing potential costs(Nealy, 2009).

Since the role of bullying behavior has been almost neglected in the academic environment, this study seeks to examine the effect of bullying behavior among students. Students are an important

class in the society, in that they would be experts in different scientific, technical, or artistic fields and would play a part in the administration of the country in the future.

Regarding the role of environmental stress in the effect of bullying behavior on academic performance of students, this study attempts to answer this question that whether there is any difference in the effect of bullying behavior on academic performance of students based on different stress levels. Therefore, two research hypotheses are formulated as follows:

1. Bullying behavior affects academic performance of students.
2. There is a significant difference in the effect of bullying behavior on academic performance of students based on stress levels.

### Method:

First, the two-way kappa analysis method was used for the simulation of workplace in academic environment, which was approved by three management experts. The results are presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Results of the Two-way Kappa Analysis for the Simulation of Workplace in Academic Environment**

Variable	Comparison	Kappa Coefficient
Agreement on the similarity of academic environment to workplace	1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> management experts	68%
	1 <sup>st</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> management experts	81%
	2 <sup>nd</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> management experts	79%

According to Table 1, Kappa coefficients are in the good and excellent range.

This study is applied in terms of purpose and is of a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest control-grouped design type in terms of method. The effect of the independent variable (bullying behavior) on the dependent variable (academic performance of students) was examined in this study. The research design is illustrated by Table 2 below.

**Table 2. Research Design**

Number	Group	Random Selection	Random Assignment	Pretest	Independent Variable	Posttest
1	Experimental	*	R	T1	X	T2

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2	Control	*	R	T1	-	T2
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The statistical population consisted of all the students of Yazd University studying in the academic year 2016-2017. Initially a sample of 100 students was selected using the convenience sampling method, and finally 86 students participated in the study. 57 and 29 students were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups, respectively. After completing the performance evaluation tool (Sudoku puzzle) as the pretest, the experimental group members underwent a 90-minute bullying behavior session. Then, the participants were asked to complete the parallel Sudoku puzzle and the LASRS. During this period, the control group received no intervention.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

The easy level of Sudoku puzzle and the LASRS were used to evaluate the performance of students. These are discussed in some details below.

### **Lakaev Academic Stress Response Scale (LASRS)**

In order to analyze the stress level of students, the Lakaev Academic Stress Response Scale (LASRS) was used. The LASRS is a self-administered scale developed by Lakaev in 2009 that measures students' physiological, cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to academic stress. The scale is based on a 5-point Likert type scale with the anchors None of the Time (1), A Little of the Time (2), Some of the Time (3), Most of the Time (4), and All of the Time (5). The preliminary scale contained 27 items but by using exploratory factor analysis, 24 items were extracted for the four stress response subscales – physiological, cognitive, affective, and behavioral. The Cronbach's alpha for the scale was reported to be 0.894. The internal consistency of the scale for the physiological, cognitive, affective, and behavioral subscales were 0.271, 0.180, 0.451, and 0.317, respectively(Lakaev, 2006).

### **Procedure**

Having been randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups, the participants in both groups completed the performance evaluation instrument (Sudoku puzzle) as the pretest. Then, the experimental group members underwent a 90-minute bullying behavior session. But the control

group received no intervention. Then, both groups were asked to complete the parallel Sudoku puzzle and the LASRS as the posttest. The bullying behavior session included the following behaviors: verbal and nonverbal intimidation, sarcastic or annoying jokes, interruption of speech, insulting, treating others in a way that as if they are ignored, negative nonverbal behaviors (including contemptuous looks, frowning or showing a disapproving expression in responding to the opinion of others), sarcastic comments, ambiguous answers to questions, actions leading to impaired ability to perform tasks, complaining about personal behaviors, name-calling, raising one's voice, threatening, and devaluing the opinion of others. To analyze the data, descriptive and inferential statistics were used. For the descriptive statistics, mean and standard deviation were used. And in the case of inferential statistics, the covariance analysis was not used because the normality assumption was not met, and the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was used instead.

## **Results**

According to the results, 66.3% and 33.7% of the sample were assigned to the experimental and control groups, respectively. 74.4% were women, and 25.6% were men. In the experimental group, 68.4% were women; and in the control group, 86.2% were men. 67.7% of the experimental group had no previous experience of solving the Sudoku puzzle while 33.3% had previous experience in this regard. In the control group, 3.4% had such a previous experience while 96.6% did not. Table 3 presents the mean and standard deviation of the scores related to stress and academic performance of the experimental and control group members in the posttest stage. According to the table, stress and academic performance levels in the control group are lower than those of the experimental group.

**Table 3. Comparison of the Mean and Standard Deviation of the Research Variables for the Control and Experimental Groups**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Research Group</b>	<b>Statistics</b>	
		<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
<b>Stress</b>	Experimental	50.35	9.62
	Control	44.20	14.41
<b>Academic Performance</b>	Experimental	-7.65	23.05



Control	-11.30	19.00
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The Levene test revealed that the equality of variances of the scores related to academic performance at the pretest and posttest stages was met ( $p > 0.05$ ). However, the results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test revealed that the normality of the scores related to academic performance in the control and experimental groups was not met ( $p < 0.05$ ). Since the covariance analysis could not be used, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was used instead. Table 4 presents the results of the Mann-Whitney U test for the analysis of hypothesis 1.

**Table 4. Results of the Mann-Whitney U Test for the Analysis of differences in Academic Performance of the Experimental and Control Groups at the Posttest Stage**

Variable	Research Group	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Significance Level
<b>Academic Performance</b>	Experimental	-7.65	10.05	465.500	1235.5	-	0.012
	Control	-11.30	19.00			0.238	

According to Table 4, there is a significant difference in the variable academic performance between the two groups at the posttest stage ( $p < 0.05$ ). In other words, the experimental group undergoing bullying behavior had a better performance than the control group. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was approved. Table 5 presents the results of the Mann-Whitney U test for the analysis of hypothesis 2.

**Table 5. Results of the Mann-Whitney U Test for the Analysis of differences in Academic Performance of the Experimental Group based on Stress Levels**

Variable	Stress Level	Mean	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Significance Level
<b>Academic Performance</b>	Low	-7.408	29.41	1441.00	176.00	212.00	-0.461	0.645
	High	-10.05	26.50	212.00				

According to Table 5, there is no significant difference in the variable academic performance of the experimental group at the posttest stage ( $p > 0.05$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was rejected.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study aimed to examine the effects of bullying behavior and stress levels on academic performance of students. The findings revealed that bullying behavior contributes to the improvement of academic performance. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, so far no study has ever examined the effect of bullying behavior on academic performance of students based on stress levels, indicating the novelty of this research. This finding that bullying behavior contributes to an improvement of academic performance is justified by the fact that bullying behavior can entail positive consequences in the short run, despite being viewed by many scholars as a negative construct. In other words, a negative unpleasant work environment as a result of bullying behavior would contribute to degradation of morality, lack of employee motivation and concentration, and loss of quality products/services, and in such an environment those employees who are subjected to bullying behavior are obsessed with defending themselves rather than consider performance improvement and innovation. Therefore, such an environment would entail negative consequences for competent employees who can play an important part in the success of their organization. Such individuals would shun their responsibilities due to the fear of being subjected to bullying behavior, would not be willing to overwork and perform voluntary tasks, and sometimes may even consider retaliation. In such an environment individual may tend to retire early, which would negatively affect the productivity of the organization. Nevertheless, the findings revealed that intimidation as a bullying behavior had an immediate positive effect on the improvement of employee performance; according to the literature, at first victims try to overcome bullying behavior, and then they try to be more loyal to their organization by working harder. But, later on they would tend to make more mistakes, contribute to a decrease in the quality of products/services, and entail the anger and hopelessness of their colleagues in the workplace due to mental fatigue, lack of concentration and alertness. In other words, in the short run the bullying victims tend to avoid bullying behavior and hence show loyalty to bullies and improve their performance accordingly. This finding can also be justified on other grounds. For example, Hoel and Cooper (1996) claimed that not only the victims suffer from bullying behavior, observers of bullying are also affected, who compare their own behaviors with those of victims and try to avoid

bullying behavior(Hoel & Cooper, 2000). Therefore, it can be concluded that charismatic leaders can target those low-performing employees by strategic bullying and hence improve their performance. Such employees would try to improve their performance as a result of the bullying behavior. But it should be noted that adoption of bullying behavior in the long term would cause such employees to leave the organization, which calls for proper supervision.

According to the literature, such findings are also true for the academic environment and students. Some university lecturers may resort to bullying behavior such as intimidation to improve academic performance of their students. Sometimes, they may target those low-performing students by strategic bullying so that observers of such a bullying behavior may avoid it by improving their performance. Again, such measures may be helpful in the short term but after a while they entail such negative consequences as lack of student motivation, a decrease in academic performance, academic failure, or university dropout. Since bullying behavior was adopted in only one session, the experimental group members were subjected to bullying behavior for a short time, their improved academic performance can be justified accordingly.

The findings of the study also revealed that there was no significant difference in academic performance of the experimental group based on the two low and high stress levels at the posttest stage. That is, stress played no role in the effect of bullying behavior on academic performance of students. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, so far no study has been conducted on the role of stress in the effect of bullying behavior on academic performance to make comparisons of the findings, indicating novelty of the research.

This finding can be justified by the fact that stress plays a significant role in performance, and the effect of this construct depends on the motivation level of individuals. In this vein, Scott (1996) claimed that an optimum level of stress may lead to the improvement of performance while stress lasting for longer periods or aggravated stress levels may lead to opposite outcomes. One of the negative outcomes of bullying behavior is high stress levels. It was assumed that there would be high stress levels as a result of bullying behavior but the results showed no difference in academic performance based on stress levels. That is, short term adoption of bullying behavior would lead to the improvement of academic performance regardless of stress levels. This finding can be justified by the fact that the students with low or high stress levels used the efficient problem-focused coping strategy in facing bullying behavior, as was expected. And if the students had used other inefficient stress coping strategies such as affective or avoidant coping strategies, they might

have produced outcomes other than improved performance. Therefore, the adoption of other inefficient coping strategies would seem to produce negative effects on performance in the long term, which calls for further research.

Given the important role of human resources, one of the main institutions that plays a significant part in preparing the future workforce is the university. There has been a growing interest in the quality of the relationships of university lecturers and students in the literature. To prepare students to tackle the problems of workplace in the future, and to examine the effect of bullying behavior on academic performance of students, the present study attempted to simulate the workplace in classroom in an academic environment. In such a simulated environment, students can formulate and test hypotheses, simulate their own behavioral patterns and those of others, make decisions, and observe the results, which can take weeks in real life work environment. Moreover, they can experience necessary elements of workplace in classroom without taking potential risks and bearing potential costs.

The limitations of the study should be taken into account in generalizing the results. The participants all volunteered. And they were selected from one university, Yazd University. Therefore, the findings should be cautiously generalized to other similar samples. It is suggested that other studies be conducted in other cities to form a basis for comparison. Since the research used a quasi-experimental design, it faced some limitations in adopting bullying behavior for the experimental group. Some benefits can be considered for those individuals who participate in such research studies to remove these limitations. In conclusion, some important measures can be taken by understanding the effect of bullying behavior on academic performance of students, identifying the factors influencing the interplay of bullying behavior and performance, meeting the proper conditions for improvement of performance, and providing training to students in this area.

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