

# The Shades of Darkness: An Exploratory study on Participant Roles in School Bullying among Adolescents in Mysore City

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**Abstract**: Abstract: The power of Bystanders to shape the outcome of bullying has become a known fact yet in Indian context studies highlighting the nature and construction of Bystander character in School bullying are almost non-existent. This unique cross sectional exploratory study utilized PRQ (Participant Role Questionnaire) – a peer reported measure to understand the characteristics and composition of four participant roles (assistants, reinforcers, outsiders, and defenders) Indian adolescent students play as bystanders in School bullying. The study was set in Mysore City of India and screened a total of 265 students of Class 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> from five schools selected through convenient sampling based on permission from school authorities as the study was carried offline mode during post Covid-19. This study features as one of few studies to probe the distribution and patterns of roles bystanders play in Indian settings. The results indicated highest percentage of Bystanders were Outsiders (47.7%), followed by Reinforcers (20.3%) and Defenders (17.6%) while 14.4% acted as Assistant's when witnessing school bullying. Differences with respect to Age, Gender and Class of sample was observed the results with their implications are discussed briefly.

Keywords: Bullying, School Bullying, Bystanders, Participant Role Scale

# INTRODUCTION

School bullying has emerged as a global problem having serious academic and personal outcomes for students across countries (Oh, 2010). The serious consequences of bullying and peer victimization have generated considerable amount of attention from the media and the public, as well as from educators, school officials, researchers, practitioners, and law-maker in recent years (Phillips, 2007). School bullying can take different forms such as Traditional bullying (Physical, Verbal, Social Exclusion etc.,) and Cyber bullying where internet is primarily used to bully. Physical bullying refers to overt physical aggression such as slapping, pushing, kicking, and spitting. Verbal bullying, which refers to overt verbal aggression, includes name calling, teasing, insulting, and threatening speech. Social exclusion refers to damaging a target's peer relationships or social standing; tactics can include spreading rumors, ignoring the victim's presence, threatening others not to play with the victim, or directing threatening or intimidating stares towards the victim. It was not until some time ago that researchers shifted their attention from much focused victim and bully dichotomy to include the third important element in this equation, i.e., the

Bystanders. Usually, School Bullying has two directly involved parties (Bullies and Victims) but there is also a presence of "others" in Bullying most of the time (Craig et al., 2000). These others are known as "Bystanders" who may be discreetly watching the episode from a safe distance or may be around the scenario, the bystanders may choose to stay or leave but once they know about the event happening, they are a part of it despite the reaction they give (Padgett & Notar, 2013). Bystanders in bullying assume different roles. Salmivalli et al., (1996) did a series of landmark studies on *Participant Roles of Bystanders* in bullying episodes and since then bullying is studied not as an exchange between Bully and victim alone but one as involving various "others" or bystanders surrounding the scene of Bullying and thus being a part of the process all along. The different participant roles in bullying identified are - Assistants (e.g., following the bully), Reinforcers (e.g., laughing at what is happening), Defenders (e.g., being supportive of the victim) and Outsiders (e.g., staying away from the bullying situation altogether). Bystanders play an important role in reinforcing or preventing the bullying behavior by choosing to intervene or flee from the scene.

In Indian context research about School bullying is still unexplored with a lack of studies probing into the nature/ types/ roles bystanders assume in school bullying. The results from few studies in Indian Schools have shown name-calling as leading form of bullying among Indian adolescents followed by physical bullying (Krishisagar et al., 2007; Malhi et al., 2014), caste-based bullying, sexual harassment or eve-teasing (Skrzypiec et al., 2015). This study is a unique study focusing solely on composition of Bystanders in school bullying in Indian Settings.

# Methodology

A Cross sectional exploratory study was carried out to understand the nature of roles, factors associated with roles of Bystanders and underlying sociodemographic features of sample. This study features as one of few studies to probe the distribution and patterns of roles bystanders play in Indian settings.

**Population and Sample of Study:** The primary focus of the study was on students studying in selected five schools of Mysore city of Karnataka. In the first phase, a total of 265 students of Class 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> were screened to identify bullies, victims and Bystanders. The students who were identified as Bullies (n= 50) and Victims (n= 56) were excluded from the study. A total of 159 students were identified as Bystanders, six students were not available during final data collection thereby giving a final sample of 153 school students as bystanders.

**Measures:** Participant Role Questionnaire (PRQ) by Salmivalli et al., (2004) was used. It is a standardized tool consisting of fifteen items to screen bullies and participant roles of Bystanders. Bully survey by Swear and Carey, (2003) cited in the CDC in the Compendium of Assessment Tools (Hamburger et al., 2011) was used for identifying victims. Students were asked to rate each item based on their experience on a scale of 0 (Never happened) to 4 (Always happened). The range for each scale was 0-44. Higher scores indicated more frequent victimization.

The Participant roles of bystanders in school bullying were identified using Participant Role Questionnaire (PRQ) to identify roles namely- Assistants (Assistants or Sidekicks are bystanders who don't initiate the bullying but join ringleader bullies), Reinforcers (bystanders who aid the process of bullying by providing positive feedback to bullies e.g., by laughing, cheering or just by providing an audience), Defenders (who provide support of the victim directly or indirectly) and Outsiders (who choose to stay away, by fleeing from scenes). The name of each student in the class was printed on the questionnaire. Respondents were asked to determine on a 3- point scale of 0 (Never) to 2 (Often), how often each of their classmates behaved in ways described. Scores for this scale were computed by summing items ratings on each scale and dividing by the number of classmates present, which produced a continuous score from 0-2 for each student on each scale.

**Data Collection and Analysis:** Five schools were selected through convenient sampling based on permission from school authorities as the study was done offline mode during post Covid-19. Heads of all five schools were contacted and permission was sought to carry out data collection. The investigator administered the scales to students of Class 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> from a total of five schools that comes under the jurisdiction of Mysore City, Karnataka State. The investigator explained the scale and gave instructions

regarding filling of data. Data was collected from one class at one time, in the presence of class teacher. In the introduction, the researcher emphasized that the data would be treated anonymously. Further it was stressed that there were no right or wrong answers and that each participant should answer according to of his or her experiences. Collected data was entered into excel sheets followed by analysis using descriptive statistics in SPSS 16.0. The frequency and percentage distribution were calculated. Pearson's chi square was run to examine the association between the four roles and various sociodemographic variables of sample.

#### **Results and Discussion**

Table 1 Socio-demographic profile of the Sample

General Inform	Number	Percentage (%)	
	11 Years	75	49.0
Age	12 Years	78	51.0
	Mean age	11.51	S.D = 0.502
Gender	Girls	103	67.3
Genuel	Boys	50	32.7
Birth Order	1 <sup>st</sup> born	49	32.0
Dif til Of tel	2 <sup>nd</sup> or late born	104	68.0
Class	6 <sup>th</sup>	88	57.5
Class	7 <sup>th</sup>	65	42.5
Religion	Hindu	75	49.0
Kengion	Non-Hindu	78	51.0
Family Structure	Nuclear family	107	70.0
ranniy Structure	Joint family	46	30.0
Parents Education	Above Degree	69	45.0
Fathers' education	Below Degree	84	55.0
	Above Degree	72	47.0
Mothers' education	Below Degree	81	53.0
<b>Parents Occupation</b>	Non-Government sector	80	52.0
Fathers' occupation	Government Sector	73	48.0
	Homemakers	138	90.0
Mothers' occupation	Working mothers	15	10.0
Family Income	Above 50000	94	61.0
ranniy income	Below 50000	59	39.0

Table 1 describes the sociodemographic characteristics of sample. Of the adolescents aged 11- 12 years, the mean age was 11.51 yrs. The Gender composition of the sample consisted of 67.3% females and 32.6% males. In terms of birth order, 32.0% were first born while most of respondents (68%) were younger siblings (2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> born) in their family. Sample consisted of higher percentage of 6<sup>th</sup> class (57.0%) as compared to 7<sup>th</sup> class (42.5%). The sample had an almost equal distribution of Religion composition (Hindus =49%, Others = 50.6%). Majority of participants belonged to nuclear families (70%) while 30% belonged to joint families. A higher percentage of sample resided in families with an annual income of above 50000 (61.7%). Parents education level was below degree level for higher percentage (54%). Higher percentage of sample had fathers working in non-Government sectors (58%) while majority of sample had homemaker mothers (90%).

Fig. 1 Distribution of Participant Roles of Bystanders

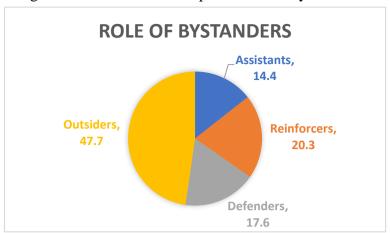


Fig 1. shows the sample distribution based on Participant Roles of Bystanders. Of the total sample (N=153), highest percentage were of Outsiders (47.7%), followed by Reinforcers (20.3%) and Defenders (17.6%). About 14.4% were Assistant's in school bullying. Though the typology of roles in this particular study followed a pattern quite similar to earlier studies done in other countries (Salmivalli et al.,1996; Salmivalli et al., 2004; Obermann, 2006), yet it's important to understand that this distribution can vary due to methodological differences of using peer versus self-report strategies as in a study by Nickerson and Taylor (2014), which used self-report BPRS (Bullying Participant Role Survey) and observed role distribution as: Defenders (51.5%), Victims (18.3%), Bullies (14.9%) and Outsiders (9.9%) which can be attributed to possible effects of social-desirability.

Table 2 Distribution of participant roles of bystanders based on Sociodemographic variables

		Assistants		Reinforcers		Defenders		Outs	siders	Chi-Square χ <sup>2</sup> (df) Sig		
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	Ü		
Age	11yrs (n <sub>1</sub> =75)	7	9.3	14	18.7	17	22.7	37	49.3	4.971 (3)		
	12yrs (n <sub>2</sub> =78)	15	19.2	17	21.8	10	12.8	36	46.2	0.174		
Gender	Male (n <sub>1</sub> =50)	5	10.0	11	22.0	6	12.0	28	56	3.513 (3)		
	Female (n <sub>2</sub> =103)	17	16.5	20	19.5	21	20.4	45	43.6	0.319		
Birth Order	1 <sup>st</sup> (n <sub>1</sub> =49)	9	18.4	10	20.4	8	16.3	22	44.9	2.77 (6)		
Order	2 <sup>nd</sup> & 3 <sup>rd</sup> (n <sub>2</sub> =104)	13	12.5	21	20.2	19	18.3	51	49.0	0.887		
Class	6 <sup>th</sup> (n=88)	10	11.4	16	18.2	20	22.7	42	47.7	4.781 (3)		
	7 <sup>th</sup> (n=65)	12	18.5	15	23.0	7	10.8	31	47.7	0.189		
D.P.	Hindu (n <sub>1</sub> =75)	9	12.0	18	24.0	13	17.3	35	46.7	8.45		
Religion	Others (n <sub>2</sub> =78)	13	16.6	13	16.6	14	17.8	38	49	(3) 0.27		

The Table 2 describes the distribution of sample based on participant roles of bystanders with respect to various sociodemographic variables. In terms of age, highest percentage of Outsiders were present, both in 11yrs (49.3%) and 12yrs (46.2%) age group. Sample in the age-group of 11yrs had higher percentage (22.7%) of Defenders and lower percentage of Assistants (9.3%) than those aged 12 yrs. (12.8% and 19.2%) respectively. Whereas nearly equal percentage of Reinforcers were found in both in 11 yrs. (18.7%) and 12 yrs. (21.8%) age-group.

In terms of gender, Outsiders formed the largest group in both boys (56.0%) and girls (43.6%). Girls constituted of higher group of Defenders (20.4%) as compared to boys (12.0%), whereas higher percentage of Reinforcers (22.0%) were present in boys as compared to girls (19.5%). Girls also had higher percentage of Assistants (16.5%) as compared to boys (10.0%). In previous studies across countries gender differences within Outsider role have often favored girls (Gossens et al., 2006; Pronk et al., 2016; Pouwels et al., 2016). Similarly, in a series of studies by (Burleson and Gilstrap, 2002; Gini et al., 2008; Pöyhönen et al., 2010; Espelage et al., 2011; Pozzoli et al., 2012; Coelho and Sousa, 2018; Demaray et al.,2014; Levasseur et al., 2017; Lambe et al., 2019) it was found that boys are more engaged in Reinforcer behaviors than girls, whereas girls show more defender behaviors, a reason for this may be due to differences in personality orientations and the capability of girls to adopt for constructive resolution by choosing assertive and prosocial strategies than boys (Ickes and Graham, 2000; Camodeca and Goossens, 2005).

Birth order of sample had no difference on the role distribution of Reinforcers for 1<sup>st</sup> born (20.4%) and those born later (20.3%). Higher percentage of Assistants were present in 1<sup>st</sup> born (18.4%) as compared to late born (12.5%) and a high percentage of Defenders (18.3%) and Outsiders (49.0%) were present in late born.

With respect to class, equal proportion of Outsiders were present in 6<sup>th</sup> (47.7%) and 7<sup>th</sup> class (47.7%). A higher percentage of Reinforcers (23.0%) and Assistants (18.5%) was found in Class 7<sup>th</sup> as compared to Class 6<sup>th</sup> (18.2% and 11.4%). Defenders were higher in percentage for class 6<sup>th</sup> (22.7%) than in class 7<sup>th</sup> (10.8%). Trach et al., (2010) did a study on a sample of 9397 students from class 4 to 11, it was found that younger students and girls were more likely to report taking positive action (defenders) than older students and boys.

Such differences across age, sex and class in bystander role has been found in earlier studies across different countries (Salmivalli and Voeten, 2004; Cravita et al., 2012; Pöyhönen et al., 2010; Huang et al., 2016; Pouwels et al., 2016).

In terms of Religion, higher percentage of Outsiders (49.0%) and Assistants (16.6%) were present among non-Hindu groups than in Hindu group (46.7% and 12.0%). Reinforcers (24.0%) formed a major portion among Hindu group than non-Hindu groups (16.6%). However, a similar percentage of Defenders were present in both Hindu group (17.3%) and non-Hindu groups (17.8%) respectively.

Table 3 Distribution of participant roles of Bystanders based on socio-economic variables

S.n o		Assista	Reinf	forcers	Defenders		<b>Outsiders</b>		Chi square χ <sup>2</sup>		
			No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	(df) Sig
1	Family Structure	Nuclear Family (n <sub>1</sub> =107)	15	14	22	20.5	18	17	52	48.5	.244
		Joint Family (n <sub>2</sub> =46)	7	15	9	19.5	9	19.5	21	46	.970

	Parents Education (Mothers Education)	Above Degree (n <sub>1</sub> =72)	11	15	14	19	12	17	35	49	
2		Below Degree (n <sub>2</sub> =81)	11	14	17	21	15	18	38	47	.218
2	(Fathers	Above Degree (n <sub>1</sub> =69)	12	17.3	12	17.3	12	17.3	33	48.1	(3) .975
	Education)	Below Degree (n <sub>2</sub> =84)	10	12	19	22.6	15	17.8	40	47.6	
	Parents Occupation (Fathers Occupation)  (Mothers Occupation)	Non- Government sector (n <sub>1</sub> =80)	9	11.2	19	23.8	17	21.3	35	43.7	3.93 (3) .269
3		Government sector (n <sub>2</sub> =73)	13	17.8	12	16.4	10	13.7	38	52.1	.20)
		Homemaker (n <sub>1</sub> =138)	20	14.6	29	21.0	26	18.8	63	45.6	2.79 (3)
		Working (n <sub>2</sub> = 15)	2	13.3	2	13.3	1	6.7	10	66.7	.429
4.	Family Income	Above 50000 (n <sub>1</sub> =94)	12	12.8	17	18.1	18	19.1	47	50	1.309
		Below 50000 (n <sub>2</sub> =59)	10	16.9	14	23.7	9	15.3	26	44.1	(3) .727

Table 3 indicates the distribution of participant roles in sample with respect to Socio-economic variables (SES).

With respect to bystander roles children from nuclear families formed a higher percentage of Outsiders (48.5%) in school bullying than those from joint families (46%). A higher percentage of Defenders (19.5%) and lower percentage of Reinforcers (19.5%) were present in sample from joint families with as compared to those belonging to nuclear families (17% and 20.5%) respectively. Majority of children with working mothers acted as Outsiders (66.7%) when witnessing bullying. Children of fathers working in Government sectors showed higher percentage of being Outsiders (52.1%) and Assistants (17.8%) in school bullying whereas a higher percentage of Defenders (21.3%) and Reinforcers (23.8%) were present among sample whose father work in non-Government sectors.

Table 4 Distribution of Participant roles of bystanders and Living conditions

S.no			Assistants No. %		Rein	forcers	Defe	nders	Outs	siders	Chi Square
					No. %		No.	%	No.	%	χ2 (df) Sig
1	Living Condition	Rented House (n <sub>1</sub> =65)	6	9.2	14	21.5	11	17	34	52.3	12.24
		Leased House (n <sub>2</sub> =46)	5	10.9	11	23.9	5	10.9	25	54.3	(6) .057

		Own House (n <sub>3</sub> =42)	11	26.2	6	14.3	11	26.2	14	33.3	
2	Children in Family	Less than two (n <sub>1</sub> =106)	14	13.2	25	23.6	18	17	49	46.2	2.457 (3)
		More than two (n <sub>2</sub> =47)	8	17.0	6	12.8	9	19.1	24	51.1	.483

The table 4 describes distribution of participant role in sample on the basis of living conditions. Outsiders consisted of major group and its distribution in terms of percentage was found highest for those living in Leased homes (54%) followed by those in Rented homes (52.3%) and Owned Homes (34%). Those living in owned homes also had highest percentage of Defenders (26.2%) and Assistants (26.2%) with a least percentage of Reinforcers (14.3%) as compared to others. Outsiders formed a major group in sample with more than two siblings (51.1%) while as Reinforcers were higher in percentage for sample with less than two siblings (23.6%).

#### Conclusion

School bullying and peer victimization are major social problems affecting children and adolescents in all parts of the world. In school bullying bystanders often form the majority of participants. The fact that bystanders witnessing this violent interaction usually outnumber victims & bullies makes it an important point to study various Roles of bystanders in School Bullying as they have the potential to change power dynamics & approval for any behavior in a particular group. Lastly, construction of any course of action is rather incomplete when bystanders are overlooked during planning policies to tackle the menace of school bullying. By understanding the nature of patterns and distribution of participant roles of students as bystanders in school bullying effective plans can be devised to carry out suitable intervention specific to Indian settings.

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All other authors declare there were no conflicting interests.

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