

The 5S Responses of Obese Teenagers in Verbal Bullying

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Abstract—The present study aimed to know the role of verbal bullying in the lives of obese teenagers exposed to it. The study employed a qualitative design specifically the phenomenological approach that focuses on the obese teenagers' verbal bullying experiences. The study also used the social constructivism approach wherein it described the obese teenagers' verbal bullying experiences as they interact with the social world. Through purposive and referral sampling technique, the researchers were able to choose twelve (12) respondents from different schools around the City of Manila, enrolled in the School Year 2015-2016, ages 16-21 years old, has experienced verbal bullying for the last ten (10) years and with the Body Mass Index (BMI) of equal to or greater than 30. Upon the consent of the respondents, ethical considerations were ensured. In-depth one (1) hour interviews were guided by the researchers' aide memoir. The recorded interviews were transcribed into a field text and the responses were thoroughly analyzed through Thematic Analysis and Kelly's Repertory Grid. It was found that the role of verbal bullying in the lives of obese teenagers exposed to it is a process and is best described through a syringe, or the 5S Responses of Obese Teenagers in Bullying, with five conceptual themes which also signify the experiences and the process that obese teenagers have gone through after experiencing verbal bullying. The themes conceptualized were: Suffering, self-doubt, suppression, self-acceptance and sanguineness. This paper may serve as a basis for a counseling program to help the obese teenagers cope with their bullying experiences.

Keywords—Obesity, obese teenagers, bullying, experiences.

I. INTRODUCTION

BECOMING healthy and having a healthy weight is very important because it helps the prevention of serious health problems. Having a healthy lifestyle to most people means that both the physical and the mental health is in balance or functioning well together in a person [1]. For most people achieving a normal weight within their age bracket is difficult because of factors such as genetics, metabolism, environment, behavior, and culture [2]. Health professionals use BMI to categorize people into four weight categories namely: Underweight, normal weight, overweight, and obese. It is also used as a screening tool to detect possible weight problems and is calculated by taking the weight (in kilograms) and dividing it by the square of the height (in meters). One of the weight classes, which is obese, possesses one of the most serious health problems in the 21st century. People with a BMI of 30 kg/m² or greater is categorized as obese [3]. Obesity is a medical condition in which excess body fat has accumulated

to the extent that it produces harmful effects on one's health. It is the excessive accumulation of body fat which results in individuals being 20% heavier than the ideal body weight [4].

Nowadays, the increase in teenage obesity rate is prevalent not just in the Western countries but also in Asia. In the Philippines, the obesity rate has increased from 3% to 5% in the past 30 years. Filipinos love to eat, and the latest report from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) shows that it might be negatively impacting obesity and overweight rates [5]. Females are less prone to obesity than males early on, but this reverses as they become adults. However, both genders are just the same for the rate of obesity increases as they age. Childhood obesity results to social and psychological difficulties such as not being liked by peers, being rejected, and being victims of peer aggression.

Adolescence is a period of changes in appearance and body size, these physical changes are the main feature in this age period, and because of this they may be a focus of bullying behaviors [6]. Teenagers who are under the category of obese experience bullying from their friends and colleagues because of their weight. In a culture like Philippines, people are taught that being thin is beautiful while being fat is ugly. The perception of fat bodies is culturally represented as inferior, deficient, ugly and disgusting [7]. Obese teenagers are viewed as unattractive by society. This problem often occurs with social relationships [8] wherein individuals experience discrimination especially with peers [9]. Obesity related factors such as being the subject of verbal abuse or bullying may decrease self-esteem and promote depression [10]. Thus, these bullying experiences may hinder the social development of obese teenagers.

Some obese teenagers have to deal with more than just making themselves look good in the eyes of others and losing their excess weight. They are bullied and teased at school, outside their home, and even inside their house, often unmercifully, because of their obesity. The bullying experiences they have encountered can take an emotional toll that causes their self-esteem to be affected wherein low self-esteem can create overwhelming feelings of hopelessness in some overweight children [11]. The present study aimed to know and describe the possible impacts of verbal bullying in the lives of obese teenagers exposed to it. This study delved on their lived experiences and how they were able to cope with these experiences.

II. RESEARCH DESIGN

Social constructivism was utilized in this qualitative research. Social constructivism which holds assumption that

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individuals try to find understanding of the world in which they live and work, its goal is to rely as much as possible on the respondents' views of the condition being studied. The meanings that the participants give to a certain situation depend on their interaction with other people as well as the environment in which they live and work to understand their historical and cultural setting [12].

A. Respondents of the Study and Research Locale

The chosen respondents of the study were obese teenagers with ages ranging from 16-21 years old, experienced verbal bullying for the last ten (10) years. The respondents were currently enrolled in different colleges or universities around Manila. The respondents must have a BMI of at least 30 to be classified under the category of obese. There were twelve (12) respondents who are categorized as obese and have experienced verbal bullying. The study was conducted in the University Belt or "U-Belt" area where there is a high concentration or a cluster of colleges and universities in the city.

B. Procedure

The study utilized a survey questionnaire and a validated aide memoire. The survey questionnaire is used to identify the profile of the respondents. This includes their height and weight and if they have experienced verbal bullying. Another instrument used in gathering data is a validated aide memoire which serves as a guide in conducting the interview for the respondents. It is intended to serve as a guide to the researcher of what to ask in line with the research topic [13].

The researchers gave out survey sheets to potential respondents and also sent letters to schools to ask permission in conducting a survey to their students. Permission was sought from the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences of the University of the East-Manila as well as from the Guidance and Counseling office of San Sebastian College-Recoletos. Only two schools were given the letter of permission since the other respondents were chosen through referral from the researcher's friends and family. The survey sheet contains the height and weight of the respondents and if they have experienced verbal bullying wherein a survey questionnaire will be set as an instrument that is comprised of a set of questions to be asked to the respondents of the study [14]. The respondents included in the study will be subjected to the measurement of each of their BMI to identify if they are under the category of obese. The height and weight of the respondents will be acquired depending on the answers in the survey questionnaire. The weight of the respondents in kilograms (kg) is divided by the square of his/her height in meters (m). The respondents who are qualified with the given criteria will be given an informed consent that is validated by experts that will notify them about their participation in the study. A validated informed consent will include the capacity, disclosure, understanding, voluntariness, and permission regarding the research that will be conducted [15]. Upon the confirmation of the respondents, the researchers will conduct the interview based on the validated aide memoir.

The aide memoire serves as a broad guide to topic issues that might be covered in the interview, and notes to jog the memory - rather than a list of questions [16]. The interview consists of open-ended questions that will be used to describe the experiences of the obese teenagers and their experiences as to the bullying, specifically verbal bullying that affect their self-esteem. The maximum session for each participant is two (2) sessions and each session lasted for half an hour. The researchers informed the respondent of the use of a voice recorder to record the interview and assure them of the confidentiality of the interview.

C. Mode of Analysis

The gathered responses of the respondents were carefully analyzed through the use of thematic analysis wherein different themes were formed through the participant's responses as well as its similarities were identified. The themes reflected the role of bullying in the lives of obese teenagers. Thematic analysis enables the researchers to determine precisely the relationships between concepts and compare them with the replicated data. By using thematic analysis there is the possibility to link the various concepts and opinions of the learners and compare these with the data that has been gathered in different situation at different times during the project [17]. It can provide veracity and complexity and improve the meaning of the responses [18].

The repertory grid was utilized to elicit personal constructs especially with what the respondents think about the researcher's topic [19]. The researchers used cool analysis in identifying significant statements to form data categories, and warm analysis to determine the essence of phenomenon [20]. It was used to clearly show the whole meaning and the nature of the experience of respondents based on the data gathered. Through the use of repertory grid there were deepening of results that the qualitative investigation has utilized. The utilization of the analysis revealed two hundred sixty-one (261) significant statements from the respondents which were grouped into eleven (11) categories which and then simplified into five (5) interesting conceptual themes that describe the roles and effects of verbal bullying in the lives of obese teenagers.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The utilization of the cool, warm and the thematic analyses revealed eleven (11) categories which were then simplified into five (5) interesting conceptual themes that describe the role and effects of verbal bullying in the lives of obese teenagers. The five conceptual themes that were generated are: suffering, self-doubt, suppression, self-acceptance, and optimism. Suffering is a reaction where in there is a sense of loneliness, vulnerability, loss, fear, and hopelessness [21]; hence, as an obese teenager there is pain that represents the feeling whenever they experience bullying. In this model, the first theme: Suffering refers to the kind of reaction and the pain that is being felt every time the obese teenagers receive hurtful words from those people who are bullying them. It signifies how their bullying experiences caused them to be

damaged emotionally. It shows the affliction that they receive every time they hear hurtful words from other people. In support with this theme, a recent study stated that both depression and anxiety were significant mediators of the relationship between bullying victimization and pain problems among adolescents and that depression was also a significant mediator of the relationship between bullying perpetration and pain problems among adolescents [22]. In addition, different forms of bullying victimization were independently associated with psychological distress and reduced emotional wellbeing [23].

Additional inputs from participants were stated as: From the response of DG, "My classmates, sometimes my friends. They think that it's a joke but deep inside I feel hurt. And those guys who bully me in the classroom. The typical bully boy. For them it's just for fun, but for me being fat is very personal." Added by SG., "Yeah, of course! I've experienced it before. They usually call me fat, pig, crispy legs, tabachoy, and different kinds of names pertaining to fat people. Wherein I try to show other people that it's fine with me, but deep inside I'm hurting. In my school, outside the house, and in my family. In my school some of my classmates would call me names and even would talk behind my back. They always make me feel that since I'm a finicky type of girl, I don't have the right to be that kind of girl because I'm fat. They made me feel ugly and it seems like I don't have the right to be beautiful because I'm fat. Just because I talk like I sound classy, they think that I'm a feeler. Outside the house, I can hear children and even teenagers calling me nasty names. And there were times that I pass through them and I can hear them saying that I'm very fat and I have huge legs. My family would always try to tell me that I'm very very fat and I should lose weight. There was a time that they told me that I'm very ugly and very big. I was damaged emotionally and I felt so ugly. I never feel confident because of them..... I try to ignore them, but at the end of the day I will just cry inside my room. I try to express the pain that I'm feeling without other people knowing. I try to keep it to myself and then I try to pray for them and ask God to make them stop from bullying me."

Aside from being hurt and emotionally damaged, bullied obese teenagers experience getting low grades. Their academic performance suffers because of experiencing real pain that interferes with their social and emotional development. There were also feelings of isolation from other people. In response to the verbal bullying they receive, they tend to isolate themselves because of being hurt. They only hang out with the people they trust, and they do not go out of the house. Isolation can also be used by the respondents to cope with the bullying they receive.

In connection with the first theme, which is suffering, the next thing that can possibly happen to individual is to have low self-esteem and having insecurities with regards to the way they see themselves due to their experience in verbal bullying. The model proposed that the second possible theme may be *Self-doubt*. Self-Doubt refers to being not secured with the qualities that you have and as well as questioning if you are worthy enough to be described in a positive manner. With

much emotions AC stated, "At first it's like there's a lowering of self-esteem, it's like I feel that I'm ugly. It just happened during 4th year high school after my graduation, it was summer, before my enrollment for college, I told my mom that I want to get drunk, and they allowed me. And then during the time when I and my aunts were drinking, when I was quite drunk, I became emotional. My insecurities came out, because my mommy is thin and she's very beautiful. There were lots of guys who like her. And then I realized that I'm feeling degraded. Because of what they say, I feel very ugly, and I don't have the looks". Added by SG, "You feel like you need the approval of the society in order for you to be beautiful". These statements demonstrated how deep their insecurity is with regards to their physical appearance. It shows how their self-esteem is much affected by the negative words that they receive from other people. They felt degraded and unworthy to be labelled as good looking. Based on their experiences in bullying, they felt ugly in the sight of the society. Thus, the impact of bullying resulted to having difficulties in perceiving one's self in a positive manner. This results to being unable to recognize one's good qualities and leads to having low self-esteem and low self-worth.

Being a victim of bullying for obese teenagers is not acceptable for them especially when they are surrounded by their friends. And as a result of this, they try to conceal what they really feel and they try to show others that they are not affected with the negative words that they are receiving. Because of this the third possible theme is *Suppression*. Suppression refers to the act of deliberately trying to rid the mind of unwanted thoughts. The effects of these concealing of feelings may serve and reveal short-term interpersonal goals (e.g., avoiding conflict and not hurting other's feelings), research has shown that habitual using of suppressing one's feelings to influence emotional expression in everyday life can lead and result to various adverse social consequences such as less social support from other people, lower satisfaction in socializing, and less closeness in engaging with relationships to others [24]. From the response of DG, "Uhm.. For example, sometimes during high school, they were the ones who will bully me. Uhm..every time that I'm being bullied.. I try to smile, but deep inside it's very painful. I don't say it to my friends because I'm shy of saying those kinds of things". Added by ZD, "Oh my gosh! It's very painful. I don't know but every time that they bully me, I have something to say against them like, 'So what?'. It's like a defense mechanism, but deep inside it's painful and I go to the C.R. to cry, because I'm very good at laughing. I can pretend that I'm laughing at your jokes but deep inside I hate you, Oh my God, I hate you".

The statements expressed by the respondents show how they are trying to suppress their feelings every time that they are being bullied. They try to show the people that being teased does not affect them. They wear masks that they think people will see them as happy individuals regardless of being judged by their appearance. They use suppression as a defense mechanism to let people see that being an obese is not a problem in the way they see themselves. However, even if the

respondents have experienced negative moments in their lives, they were able to see how they should accept themselves. This suggests that, the next theme will be *Self-acceptance*. Self-acceptance is an individual's satisfaction or happiness with himself, and is thought to be necessary for good mental health. Even though they have received pessimistic words about them, this only shows the obese teenagers learned to accept themselves despite the bullying the experience. They became capable of accepting themselves by learning to embrace not just their positive side but also their negative side. Their friends were also able to accept them and see what they can contribute behind their unacceptable weight in the sight of the society. As added by LG, "My appearance or my weight is not an issue to them. They still treat me as equal. Like I can still do this task, they don't think that I can't do it". Based on their statements, they feel that they are accepted by their friends and the people around them. Their friends appreciate what they do and do not judge them based on their weight or their physical appearance.

The positive effect of experiencing events such as being a victim of bullying is at the end which an individual can learn from. The best way to improve yourself is to use these experiences as a lesson to do better and to improve oneself in order for him or her not to become stagnant. This only shows the final theme, *Sanguineness*. Sanguineness is an ability of an individual to have an optimistic view of himself or herself regardless of what the society is him or her them. It is one's ability to have enough motivation in improving one's self in order for him or her to have a better life. With full of motivation LG stated, "At first I feel annoyed, but it makes me think that I need to lose more weight. I'm not that super depressed, but more on getting annoyed and being determined to lose weight". Added by NB, "Every time I think of those people who are bullying me, I try to think that I should be determined to lose weight, but after that I won't even do it. I try to think about it the following day but now I'm already doing it." These statements clearly show that those times that they were hearing negative descriptions about them; they try to motivate themselves to have improvement in their physical aspect. Their experiences in bullying show that there is a determination in order for them to look good in the eyes of the society and also to prepare themselves for a brighter future ahead of them.

The participants perceived their experiences as challenges and motivation. It was a challenge because going through bullying was difficult and painful. It was a great motivation for them because they know that it will help them to improve themselves and it will mold them to become better individuals. Moreover, the participants used their experiences to motivate themselves to become the best that they can be.

The study considered the fourth and fifth themes as positive effects of the negative stigma that they have experienced for they were able to have a sense of acceptance and great determination to look forward in setting and reaching new goals to achieve for one's betterment.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The study aimed to know the role of verbal bullying in the lives of obese teenagers. The respondents' answers described how their emotions and feelings were whenever they experience verbal bullying from other people and the effects of their experiences in their daily lives and in different aspects as well. The respondents provided answers which included their feelings and thoughts regarding bullying because of being an obese teenager. All of the participants experienced bullying because of their appearance and admitted that they were hurt in their life and expressed how it affected them.

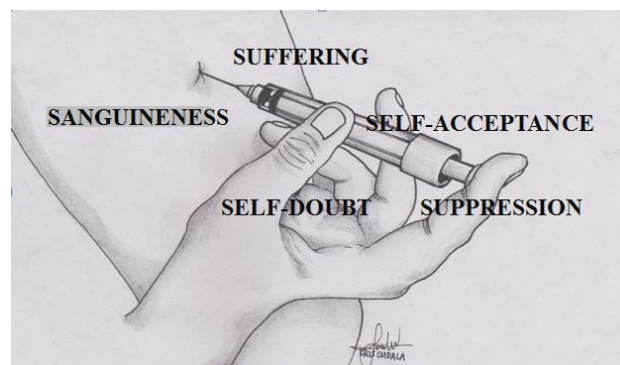


Fig. 1 The 5S Responses of Obese Teenagers in Bullying
By: Kris Cudala- Student from the University of the East, Manila

Surprisingly, the researchers came up with a hand holding a syringe which symbolized the different themes gathered using the information given by the respondents through the interviews conducted. A hand holding a syringe symbolized a person injecting a substance to another person.

In relation to the study, the hand holding a syringe with a blood at the end represents the bullying experiences that obese teenagers received. No person deserves to endure pain coming from other people, and not only physical pain, but also emotional, spiritual and psychological pain. The field text was transcribed and summarized into five (5) themes namely suffering, self-doubt, suppression, self-acceptance, and sanguineness.

The Suffering as symbolized by the needle of the syringe represents the physical pain that people feel whenever they receive injection from doctors or medical technologists. The pain represents the feeling whenever obese teenagers receive bullying, specifically verbal bullying. It signifies how their bullying experiences caused them to be damaged emotionally. It shows the affliction that they receive every time they hear hurtful words from other people. In support with this theme, a study recent study stated that both depression and anxiety were significant mediators of the relationship between bullying victimization and pain problems among adolescents and that depression was also a significant mediator of the relationship between bullying perpetration and pain problems among adolescents [22]. In addition, different forms of bullying victimization were independently associated with psychological distress and reduced emotional wellbeing [23].

The Self-Doubt is symbolized by two of the fingers holding the end of the barrel near the plunger. The two fingers holding the barrel represents the hurtful words that the obese teenagers receive that cause them to feel insecure and unworthy to be described as someone who looks pleasing in the eye of the society. They are having self-doubt wherein it affects the way they see themselves. Their perception about themselves is influenced by the people who inflict different kinds of negative words that pertain to their appearance. They tend to feel that they are not beautiful enough because of society's definition of beauty. In relation to this theme, Thornberg stated that receiving negative labels from classmates results to having a sense of not fitting in, self-doubting, self-blaming and resignation [25].

The Suppression is represented by a hand pushing the plunger. Literally, suppression is when people push their emotions or feelings to the point where they try to hide the pain they feel due to bullying experiences. This signifies that most of them try to show other people that receiving hurtful words do not affect them, but the inside feels otherwise like a deep sense of agony and pain. They want to show the people that being bullied is fine because they are afraid that if they will show their vulnerability, they might feel rejected and receive more judgments from other people. A study by Thornberg [25] suggested that social isolation and avoiding bullies, trying not to be noticed in social contexts and trying to conceal negative emotional reactions when being bullied are perceived as useful coping strategies among victims of school bullying [26].

The Self-Acceptance is symbolized by the substance inside the syringe. The substance before it is injected represents the self-acceptance of the obese teenagers which later results to a better perspective of themselves. This shows that they are able to accept themselves even though they are surrounded by negative words and they experienced rejection by the people around them. Their self-acceptance only proves that what matters most for them is about knowing who they really are. As the respondents have a good evaluation of their well-being, a study found out that higher levels of mindfulness were significantly associated with more self-acceptance and higher levels of subjective well-being [27].

The Sanguineness is represented by the substance injected in the skin. The substance that comes out of the self-acceptance represents the optimism of the obese teenagers and the hope for a better and brighter life ahead of them despite their bullying experiences. It results to having positive perspectives toward their future regardless of what they have experienced before. There is a motivation and great determination just to prove people that they are more than just "fat," "pig," and different kinds of naming. It's also for them to have a better perspective about seeing who they really are. Through that substance it helps and nourishes the victims to strive for a better future and have self-actualization. This kind of optimism helps the obese teenagers to cope with the negative bullying experiences they receive and as a support, a coping model emerges from a study that includes the primary categories of problem-focused coping and emotion-focused

coping, and eight subcategories, self-defense, stand up to the bully, seeking social support, distancing, internalizing, tension-reduction/externalizing, focus on the positive, and self-blame [28].

The impact of bullying among teenagers in having positive perception towards oneself is a process. The first process was experiencing suffering from the negativities that the victim has received, and then a formation of self-doubt where it includes one's insecurities and not being able to feel worthy. This was followed by suppression of feelings and trying to conceal one's pain. But although there are lots of negativities, the sense of self-acceptance and learning to love oneself follows. Through all the hardships and pains, Sanguineness arises to motivate and make an individual become the better person that he or she can be.

This study can help the guidance and counselors to become aware of the different feelings that the obese teenagers encounter whenever they are being exposed to bullying. This can serve as an addition and a guide in determining how bullying affects an obese teenager. It can also help them to have a wider understanding with the negative effects of bullying with regards to the person's emotional state, psychological state, and as well as his or her academic performances. It will help the guidance counselors to easily know what type of counseling strategy that they can use for the obese teenager who experienced bullying.

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