

A Phenomenological Analysis of Filipino Students' Experiences of Bullying In State Universities and Colleges

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Abstract – *Bullying has been a global issue, posing concern not only to primary and secondary schools but also to tertiary schools, specifically state-owned, where its forms may differ, and goals might shift. This study aimed to understand bullying through the lived experiences of three students who became bully-targets in state universities and colleges (SUCs) using a socio-ecological perspective. A semi-structured interview was utilized to probe their experiences and understand bullying. Through a qualitative approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study further explored how their bullying experiences were enabled or constrained by socio-ecological factors. Five super-ordinate themes with associated subordinate themes were identified: the dynamics of the bully-target experience; the consequences of being a bully-target; coping mechanism against bullying; seeking an explanation for being a bully-target; and factors that affect the bullying experience. The experiences of the participants revealed that a culture of bullying within the school context is created by the interactions of peer relationship, structures of adult authority and school systems. Hence, effective bullying interventions must involve students, families, teachers and school administrators to create impact against bullying.*

Keywords - Socio-ecological Factors, SUCs, Bullying, Bully-target, Behavior

INTRODUCTION

Bullying has been a global issue posing concerns specifically to the workplace and the schools. Studies on bullying indicate its presence as a global problem affecting all schools, both public and private, large and small [1] [16]. Research has shown that bullying constitutes a substantial threat to the social-emotional development of both victims and bullies [13] [25]. Specifically, negative outcomes include depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and overall poor psychosocial adjustment of being either a bully or a victim [10] [12] [20]. Moreover, research suggests that bullying negatively affects witnessing peers [22]. These harmful effects of bullying can negatively affect interpersonal and work relationships both in the short term and later in life [5].

Much attention has been given to the phenomenon of bullying in the primary and middle school. Several studies were conducted to understand its occurrence, nature, and effects. For

instance, a research revealed that about 14% of students in the US aged 12 to 18 reported being bullied at school [6]. Two years later, a research revealed that this bullying percentage doubled to 28% for the same age group [7]. Other researchers focused on understanding the key elements of bullying among children in the school. There are two elements vital in understanding bullying complexity, first is its being a form of aggressive behavior imposed from a position of power and second being repeated over time [5].

While several researchers identified the occurrence of bullying in childhood in school, other scholars outside and beyond the formal educational context indicated that bullying is not only children's problem in school but also a serious issue among adults in campus, workplace and the community at large [19]. Bullying is not necessarily something that a person could outgrow, hence is not confined to children school and could still occur on college campuses. Hence,

it could also be present in a state university and college (SUC) in the Philippines.

Many SUCs in the country have always been a major issue mainly because of the poor quality of education, underdeveloped management, and financial systems and inequality of access [18]. The status of SUCs in turn creates pressure, even frustrations on the part of these SUCs' administrators, teachers, and students resulting in a culture of competition, incivility, and hostility among those within the institution. These conditions among others may increase the prevalence of bullying especially because resources become limited and competition to acquire them grows tighter [15].

In this light, the issue of bullying is different in a state university or college than in a children school, the forms may be different, and the goal for such act may also shift [2]. Bullying occurs less on an individual basis, from one person to another, and more between groups. With this, bullying is not simply a matter of few "bad individuals" attacking few "weak individuals". It grows and feeds into a social environment-dyadic relationship, systems of peer relations, structures of adult authority and school systems [28], hence could be understood in a socio-ecological context where it is situated.

A socio-ecological perspective on bullying assumes that varying spheres of influence impact bullying and victimization including factors such as (a) individual characteristics such as race/ethnicity, self-confidence or gender [11]; (b) local context such as school policies and context [8], peer ecologies [24] parental relationship and; (c) distal context such as societal attitudes toward violence, aggression, cultural expectations.

Although there are several researches which identified bullying in childhood environments such as schools and adulthood environment like workplace, few researches focus on bullying occurring in state universities and colleges. More so, there is paucity of research studies on the lived experiences of SUC students who had personally experienced bullying. The different interpretations and meanings of bullying, which could have been shaped by socio-ecological

factors, needs to be explored and understood since these meanings have important consequences on SUC students' behavior towards bullying.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The study examines the phenomenon through the lived experiences of SUC students. Given that bullying literature in the local context are limited to children and young adolescents' school context and do not attempt to use a socio-ecological framework, this present study is a step towards filling this gap.

Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions: What are the students' experiences of bullying in an SUC?; What are the different perceptions of SUC students on bullying? How is it manifested and by whom?; How are bullying processes enabled or constrained by socio-ecological factors (individual, peer, school context)?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

A qualitative approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used for this study considering bullying as both a personal and social experience subjected to different interpretations and meanings shaped by socio-ecological factors. Bullying experiences were explored using semi-structured interview, the most common form of data collection in IPA studies [3], probing on the forms of bullying, coping strategies and the meanings attached to their experience.

Three students, two females and one male who are enrolled in SUCs were recruited as participants for this study through purposive sampling. All of them were bully targets. The male participant is a 20-year old Information and Technology student. The other two female participants, 18 and 20 years old, respectively, are both engineering students. GA, the male participant, had been a bully-target of a group of classmates since he was a freshman until he was in the third year of his schooling. Meanwhile, Yna experienced being bullying for a semester by one his professors. Lastly, Kay had been bullied by her classmates and a college instructor.

Before the interview, the researcher asked the participants to sign a consent form which contains information on the purpose of the study, as well as notice to the participants that their interview will be recorded and will be used in the write-up. It also includes key assurances on their right for anonymity and right to withdraw anytime. Efforts were made to ensure confidentiality and to avoid any harm to the participants by ending on a positive note after the interview. The participants were interviewed individually using an interview guide. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to facilitate the analysis. A week after, the researcher met with the participants to check on their feedback and presented to them the transcripts of their interviews.

The analysis followed the IPA process which is an iterative and cyclical process involving initial identification of themes and continued clustering to develop a master table of themes [26]. To ensure that the themes generated were directly related to the experiences of the participants, the transcripts were revisited and emerging themes were discussed thoroughly among researchers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to understand bullying through the lived experiences of SUC students who were bully-targets. It sought to explore their perceptions of bullying and the meanings they ascribed to these experiences. It also attempted to determine how the bullying process is enabled or constrained by certain socio-ecological factors. Five super-ordinate themes emerged from the three participants. All these superordinate themes had various sub-ordinate themes presented in Table 1.

In what ways am I bullied? The Dynamics of Bully-target Experience

The first superordinate theme describes the nature of bullying experienced by the participants. It also pertains to how they saw the nature of the bully person which shaped their reactions towards the bullying behavior. The participants were asked to describe their experiences as a bully-target.

All the participants experienced in one way or another, manifestations of verbal bullying which includes teasing, insulting, name calling and cussing. GA experienced being teased by his classmate since freshman. It started with simple jokes about his surname which leads to name calling, even calling him “gay” every time his bullies saw him.

Table 1 Super-ordinate and Sub-ordinate Themes

Superordinate Themes	Sub-ordinate themes
In what way am I bullied? The dynamics of the bully-target experiences	Forms of bullying behaviors: Verbal Emotional/Relational bullying and Cyber bullying The person/s who bully
Consequences of being a bully-target	Emotional distress Resilience Movement in the bullying continuum
How do I face this? Coping mechanisms against bullying	Personal responses to bullying Help-seeking behavior
Why me? Seeking an explanation for being a bully target	Attribution to internal factors Attribution to external factors
Within and Beyond self: On factors that affect the bully-target experience	Personal factors Family values and orientation Peer networks School context

It's just natural for them to tease and call me names. First year, second year, until third year...the teasing gradually worsens...like Gay...maybe because I hang-out with girls more often.

Kay and Yna were also targets of verbal bullying. Kay was bullied when she was a sophomore. It began when she failed to join an educational tour due to financial constraints. A male professor had obliged the whole class to participate. Since then, her classmates bullied her for the rest of that semester. Kay recalled how she was cussed behind her back by her bully classmates when the professor was not around:

If we are in the classroom, I usually sit in front. They say, "your mother is a whore."

They also received intimidating remarks from their professors such as threats to drop them. Yna also experienced verbal intimidation in class while submitting an activity. She emphasized at times her works were being thrown away for no apparent reason.

Aside from verbal expressions, some bullying behaviors are relational or emotional in nature. Emotional bullying experienced by the participants includes exclusion, humiliation, and deliberate ignoring. Kay mentioned an incident when she felt excluded and ignored because of her failure to pay for the educational tour.

I really don't want to come to school anymore. No one seems to care. Sometimes they even shut the door at me.

She shared an instance where she was placed in a compromising and awkward situation. She thought the meeting in the faculty will settle out the issue. However, all her classmates and teachers interrogated her for not joining the tour. She said she felt awkward that time.

When I arrived, they were all there. I felt quite humiliated. And one of my

classmates told me "Hey, why will you not pay?"

On the hand, Yna also received emotional bullying from her teacher. She had felt this teacher already required illogical and unreasonable demands from the class that was taking a toll on her emotionally as a student.

It's like, things are already illogical. Things he's been doing. Why do I have to do that, what's the sense?

Kay also experienced cyber bullying. She shared that their class had a chat group intended for academic purposes. However, at the height of the bullying incident, she was removed from the chat group.

I'm not updated. Some members in the group were posting. They even kicked me out of the group chat.

The nature of the bully person, whether as a fellow student or someone of authority like a teacher, shaped how bullying behavior is carried out and its impact on the participants' meaning and interpretation of the behavior.

Consequences of Being a Bully-target

The second super-ordinate theme refers to the effects of the bullying behaviors on the participants. Based on their responses, three subordinate themes emerged. One is emotional distress such as fear, sadness, anxiety, exhaustion, and stress. This result is congruent to the study of [10] which indicated that bullying could lead to negative outcomes including depression, anxiety, and overall poor psychosocial adjustment for the bully target. For instance, Yna was refrained by her teacher from presenting their report without any valid reason causing her to feel so sad. She felt her teacher does not like her groupmates. Kay also shared the same sentiment of sadness. She felt tormented because she was not able to pay for the educational tour.

Like I am anguishing inside, just because I can't pay, they must treat like that (Crying)?

Furthermore, Kay became more anxious and worried that things could get worse.

If I'll enroll and they'll still be the same people I'll be with, it might get worse.

And as the emotional tension intensifies, anger and resentment set in. At one point, Yna was resentful on communicating with her professor since it was her responsibility as the class president.

All participants reported that they felt a sense of confusion which made them question why they were being singled out and bullied. GA, for instance, was wondering why he was always teased and made fun of.

I'm wondering why I am being singled out. Sometimes, I just let it pass.

Yna was also clueless why her teacher was always angry with her. This was also the sentiment of Kay when she questioned herself on whether she deserves the ill treatment.

I am wondering what I have done to her to deserve this. Maybe, she's just annoyed at me.

Another sub-ordinate theme emerged from the experiences is the resilience to life's challenges and misfortunes. A level of optimism and maturity made them feel better about themselves. Kay felt that the experience made her optimistic and braver which helped her to overcome what she called "the dark phase of her life."

Let's focus on the positive outcome, if the experience brought ill feelings, you should not dwell on them but rather on the result because of the experience.

Likewise, Yna found her strength to continue despite her situation. She reported that she learned to adjust to her teacher's "bullying behaviors." She learned to cope with the negative experiences by pressing on and doing her responsibility as a student amidst difficult situation.

It's like keep going... just do what he requires us to do, as long as you know that you are not lacking.

It is also crucial to highlight that their bullying experience assisted them to move along the bullying continuum. They did not remain as bully-targets because they developed the confidence and assertiveness to place themselves in a better condition. The sustained nature of the status of a bully-target should be of great concern because it seems that such persons, for some reason, do not seek or receive effective help [9]. However, movement in the continuum should also pose concern since it could also mean that a bully-target might also bully at times especially if the person wants to get even. For example, Kay said that she will no longer be bullied and alarmingly she mentioned that she is now seen by her classmates as a bully.

Coping Against Bullying

The third superordinate theme encompasses the coping mechanisms against the pressures of bullying. Two sub-ordinate themes emerged, personal responses of the bully-targets and help seeking behaviors.

Participants have implemented certain personal response strategies. One is by keeping silent and being passive on the bullying behavior manifested to them. Passivity and silence imply that the participants chose to disregard any bullying manifestations done to them in the hope that they will cease eventually.

Avoidance or escape behaviors were also conveyed by the participants to cope with bullying. When bullying against her became worse, Kay started to skip class to avoid those who hurt her. Later, without her parents' knowledge, she completely stopped attending

classes instead spent the day inside computer shop playing online games. Meanwhile, Yna chose to avoid doing things that could trigger the rage of her teacher, such as talking and laughing inside the classroom and do these outside where they cannot be seen. She believed that by doing this, her teacher's bullying tendencies will subside.

He is bullying us when we feel happy in class. We try to go outside of the classroom, so he will not see us celebrating.

Another subordinate theme which surfaced is help-seeking which concern not only themselves, but also others whom they felt they can seek advice and help from. Being a target of bullying has grave consequences; hence, it is important to understand this help-seeking behavior by looking at the factors by which it is curbed or fostered among those involved. Help seeking is a frequently used strategy for coping with bullying [9]. However, the decision to seek help and support or not is influenced by certain factors and end goals which the bully-target considers before taking action.

All the participants primarily kept the issue of bullying and any associated distress to themselves. They decided not to disclose it even to family members thinking that it will just upset them, especially their mothers. However, Yna was able to tell her mother 5 months after the incident. Being the class president, she sought for advice from her trusted teachers. She even thought of bringing the case to the faculty association but advised and refrained by her teachers so as not to complicate things for them.

As the bullying worsened and became unbearable, the participants resorted to spiritual guidance. Yna was advised by her mother to pray about what she was experiencing. It went the same for Kay who confessed her struggles to her parish priest.

I confessed it to a priest because I might have committed a sin, but I was really

disgruntled then since there was no one I could turn into.

On the other hand, GA felt that there was no need to mention his bullying experience to anyone including his parents since he felt that it was not a problem to him, saying it was too shallow and trivial.

It's like it's nothing to me, too shallow, and as I have said it was nothing to worry about.

Why Me? Seeking Explanation for Being a Bully-target

The fourth super-ordinate theme pertains to finding meaning and understanding on why they were singled-out as targets for bullying. For such distressful experience, it is important for the participants to determine the reason behind their predicament. Their understanding of the situation, why it was happening shaped their reactions towards bullying. The three participants have attributed their experience of bullying to both internal and external factors. Internally, they saw that their individual characteristics could explain why they were bullied. GA for example, thought that he is just different or more mature for his age, hence, preserving some amount of self-respect.

My preference is different. I'm not one who joins in such nonsensical conversation. I don't just follow what's trending... I'm not into fashion.

However, one of the participants resorted to self-criticism, saying that she had a low self-confidence or was at fault, hence made her prone to bullying behavior.

No, I don't want to do it, I have low self-confidence. I don't talk that much.

Yna, on the other hand, questioned herself why she was being bullied by her teacher. She argued that in a way, she could also be partly

responsible for her predicament. She was thinking if she has certain attitudes that irritate her professor enough to bully her. This response demonstrates that bully-targets are often passive or submissive. Passive victims are characterized by being anxious, insecure, cautious, sensitive, and defenseless [23]. These victims also tend to have negative views of themselves and feel unattractive [4].

In contrast, responses made by the participants also signify that they recognized

Their inability to divulge or to face their bullying experience could have explained why their bullying experiences persisted for a considerable amount of time.

The subordinate theme family values and orientation refers to familial principles and perception that the participants have embodied which in turn influenced their character in facing the challenges of bullying. Kay shared that she was taught at home to keep silent even when scolded.

It's more of a habit at home. We just keep quiet when being scolded. I don't want to something that I don't want them to do to me.

Such upbringing, Kay mentioned, contributed to her vulnerability to bullying. She had considered it hard to assert herself because she admitted having low self-confidence.

This is how we were raised at home and I carry those values until now.

She decided not to disclose the bullying done to her out of concern for her mother's health who is a diabetic and is also raising them alone since her father left to work abroad. Kay felt that she had made a mistake of keeping this from her mother and wished she had done it differently.

What I did was wrong, not telling it to my parents. I know that they could have helped me overcome this bullying. I should have disclosed it to them.

Another subtheme which emerged, social network, pertains to the participant's presence or absence of friends within the SUC. This also refers to the bully person's circle of friends or supporters that had created an impact on the proliferation or impediment of the bullying process.

Both Kay and Yna had few friends during their few months in school. While Yna's friendship with her a few friends became stronger especially during the bullying incident done by their teacher, it was the exact opposite for Kay. Her friend became the same person who tormented her for months, who was later joined in by her "gang" in making it harder for Kay. GA also experienced more intense teasing and emotional bullying when his other classmates joined in.

The sub-ordinate theme "school context" pertains to the SUC as a venue for student bullying. It encompasses the school climate, school policies and the role of teachers and school authorities that can either impede or enhance bullying as perceived by the students who are bully-targets.

The school is accountable not only to provide academic distinction among students but also by the indicators of student's social competence and psychological well-being [14]. However, certain school characteristics may impede or facilitate bullying. For instance, Kay mentioned that she was very careful in confronting her bully out of fear to be reprimanded by the Office of Student Affairs.

Yna, on the other hand, emphasized that the teacher should be concerned about creating an environment of support and harmonious relationship among students and teachers and should have manifested professionalism, empathy and concern in the conduct of their profession.

They should not embarrass their students. As professionals, such acts are totally uneducated. Teachers should be second parents.

While participants had suggestions on how school context should ideally be, participants were also vocal on their perceptions of the school's policy on bullying.

Maybe? However, few will speak out even there's a policy and only few has the courage to step up.

The SUCs under study is still inadequate in fostering a supportive and harmonious environment; hence, it may operate to encourage a bullying culture.

The responses of the participants have shown that socio-ecological factors influence their engagement and non-engagement in the bullying behaviors. Furthermore, the interaction between individual characteristics, peers, teachers and families within the SUC context could also influence the strategies employed in coping up with the consequences of being a bully-target.

Moreover, these socio-ecological factors shaped the participants help-seeking behaviors, most especially in their decision on whether to seek help and support or not. Students seek help to accomplish certain goals such as re-establishment of control, the termination or resolution of the conflict, getting the bully into trouble, maintaining harmony, getting back at the bully, and avoiding trouble [21]. In this perspective, the participants had to reflect on their socio-ecological networks before taking on a certain action. Hence, when seeking for help, a bully-target had to consider the impact to them and to those they value. Primarily, they perceived that it will affect their love ones negatively and the consequences it might result.

The decision of the female participants to withhold themselves from sharing their plight with their parents did not deter the bullying process, rather increased their emotional distress and exhausted them to the core.

Meanwhile, the choice to seek help was beneficial to the participants as they tried to understand their situation. Their attempts to discuss their problems with a trusted teacher for instance kept them from giving up, rather carry

on with their lives as students. However, it was evident that teachers' whom the students sought advice from did not attempt to intervene in the bullying that involved another faculty member. This implies that addressing a bullying behavior is still influenced by certain SUC dynamics such as existing policies against bullying and the extent of observed academic freedom within the institution involved. These experiences illustrate that a culture of bullying within the school context is created by the interactions of a peer relationship, structures of adult authority and school systems [28].

CONCLUSIONS

The result of the study illustrates that bullying is a personal experience which can be influenced by certain socio-ecological factors. These factors not only affect the bully-targets' engagement and non-engagement in the bullying behaviors but also influence their strategies in coping up with the experience. Likewise, these factors could shape their help-seeking behaviors by taking into consideration the result of these actions to their socio-ecological networks.

This in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of students who were bully-targets could provide a deeper understanding on the dynamics of bullying present in the SUCs. This knowledge could benefit the SUCs' decision-making bodies by providing a clearer vantage point of the various forms of bullying that could be present in the classrooms; it could serve as valuable input in assessing the social environment that SUCs offer to its students.

Likewise, considering the socio-ecological perspective and the consequences of being a bully-target, the study raises awareness on the complexity of the bullying experience. Hence, it could aid in developing interventions that address the complexity of the bullying shaped by the interactions of various socio-ecological systems.

Another implication of this research is that effective bullying interventions must involve the families, teachers and school administrators to create impact against bullying. Adopting a research-based approach using socio-ecological

perspective in designing anti-bullying programs and intervention could help in attaining a safer school environment for the students.

The results could represent a partial account of the participants' lived experiences of bullying in terms of what they want to convey during the interview considering the participants could have concealed certain hurtful or humiliating events. Likewise, the small sample size could also pose limitations to the research, although IPA is more concerned with depth and not breadth. Given these limitations, it is recommended for future research to utilize other data gathering methods that could be used to triangulate results. Likewise, considering bullying as a social experience, a study that focuses on other actors, such as the bully, bystander, parents, teachers and school administrators could provide more texture and nuances in exploring bullying experiences.

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