Through the Eyes of a Target: An Auto Ethnographic Account of Bullying in University

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Abstract: *This autoethnography examines my personal experiences with bullying as a university student, both as a target and a bystander. Through critical reflection on vignettes from my memories, I identify key themes related to the dynamics, impacts, and systemic factors surrounding bullying in this setting. Findings reveal diverse manifestations of bullying, from overt harassment to microaggressions. Victims are targeted for perceived differences, leading to profound psychological impacts. Bystanders often fail to intervene due to discomfort with confrontation or fear of social repercussions, implicitly enabling bullying. University climate and leadership also play a key role in either inhibiting or perpetuating bullying behaviours. The study illuminates the need for multilayered interventions encompassing culture change, education, policy reform, and youth activism. While limited to one perspective, this account provides an evocative, nuanced look into the lived experience of bullying.*

Introduction

Bullying in educational settings has received significant scholarly attention in recent decades, yet it remains a pervasive issue affecting students worldwide (Jackson, 2020; Jimerson, Swearer, & Espelage, 2010). Extensive research quantifies bullying's adverse impacts on victims, including increased risk for mental health problems, diminished academic performance, and school avoidance (Moore et al., 2014). However, few studies provide an intimate, nuanced look at students' lived experiences as both targets and bystanders of peer harassment. This study aims to fill that gap through an autoethnographic exploration of my [the first author's] personal encounters with bullying during my university years.

Autoethnography combines autobiographical storytelling with cultural analysis and interpretation (Adams & Herrmann, 2023; Ellis, 2004). It allows the researcher to systematically analyse their own experiences to gain insider insights into social phenomena (Carspecken, 2023). Through vivid narrative descriptions and self-reflection (Ademowo, 2023), I seek to illuminate the complex interpersonal dynamics, power imbalances, and systemic factors surrounding bullying in one specific university context. By connecting my experiences to existing theory and research, this account also aims to shed light on the broader cultural forces that allow bullying to persist.

Within higher education settings, bullying encompasses behaviours like harassment, humiliation, social exclusion, cyberbullying, and physical abuse perpetrated by students against their peers (Betts, 2016; Lester, 2013; Vogels, 2021). Power differentials enable it and often target students perceived as vulnerable due to disabilities, appearance, sexual orientation, race, gender expression, or other traits. While estimates vary, studies suggest that 15% to 25%

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of college students experience bullying that impedes their education (Chapell et al., 2006; Jackson, 2020).

My analysis pays particular attention to the role of bystanders, given evidence that bystander intervention can inhibit bullying (Jenkins & Nickerson, 2016; Paull, Omari, & Standen, 2012). However, factors like fear, peer pressure, and diffusion of responsibility often prevent intervention (Salmivalli, 2010). I reflect critically on my own experiences as a bystander to gain insights into barriers against active bystanding.

On a broader level, the study examines how institutional factors such as policies, reporting mechanisms, and responsiveness of administrators influence bullying behaviours. I consider how my university's climate did or did not promote student safety and inclusion. The aim is to illuminate gaps that may allow bullying to go unchecked in academic contexts.

This autoethnography provides a personalised account of bullying from one student's lived perspective. While not generalisable, the analysis highlights cultural patterns that likely resonate with many students' experiences. It aims to engender empathy for victims, crystallise the trauma inflicted by bullying, and galvanise commitment from educators to foster safe, supportive learning communities. By rendering my experiences with richness and authenticity, I hope to stimulate a deeper understanding of this pressing social issue.

Method

This study utilises an autoethnographic approach (Adams, Ellis, & Jones, 2017; Anderson, 2006) to provide an in-depth, personalised account of my experiences with bullying during my university years. Autoethnography is a qualitative method that allows researchers to systematically analyse their personal experiences to gain deeper insights into sociocultural phenomena (Adams & Herrmann, 2023; Ellis, 2004). It combines autobiographical storytelling with ethnographic analysis of the broader cultural context (Hughes & Pennington, 2017).

For this study, I relied on retrospective self-observation(Clegg, 2018) and critical reflection (Shandomo, 2010) to recall and narrate key incidents from my university years involving bullying, both as a target and a bystander. I aimed to provide rich, detailed descriptions of these experiences from my perspective, recreating scenes through vivid vignettes

(Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020). My personal memories were the primary data source (Chang, 2016). To supplement my recollections, I also reviewed old emails, journal entries, social media posts, and conversations with classmates from that time (Flick, 2017). These additional artefacts triggered further memories and insights (Chang, 2016; Flick, 2017).

My mode of analysis aligned with the principles of analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006; Olobia, 2023). I sought to connect my personal experiences to wider academic literature and theory on bullying and peer violence. After completing the initial narrative descriptions, I examined the narratives to identify common themes, patterns, and recurring dynamics (Adams & Herrmann, 2023; Chang, 2016). I then explored how these themes illuminated broader cultural and systemic issues using existing concepts from psychology, education, and sociology (Adams, Ellis, & Jones, 2017).

To maintain rigour (Leavy, 2017; Mills & Gay, 2019), I focused on recalling details as accurately and honestly as possible. However, memory can be fallible. To enhance credibility, I verified unclear details with former peers when possible. Descriptions focus on my thoughts and emotions at the moment rather than judgments in hindsight. I aimed for coherence and transparency in describing my positionality and analytic approach. Extracts from the narratives are included in the results section to allow readers to evaluate the interpretations.

The study design has several limitations. The findings reflect my individual perspective and context as a student at one urban university during a particular timeframe. Other students may have different encounters with bullying based on their social position and life experiences. The analysis is filtered through my interpretive lens. In autoethnography, the researcher and subject are intertwined; my own assumptions and biases inevitably shape the account in some way (Adams, Ellis, & Jones, 2017). The study relies on memories, which can fade or become distorted over time (Chang, 2016). Despite these limitations, autoethnography offers a uniquely vivid, personalised window into a complex social phenomenon (Chang, 2016) like bullying. By evocatively rendering my lived experiences (Ademowo, 2023), this account allows readers to make connections to their own lives and gain a deeper appreciation of bullying's human impacts.

My Reflection on Bullying Experiences

Experiences Where I Became Aware of Someone Being Bullied

A student was targeted because of his backward background. He often hears racial slurs and stereotypes about his culture from his classmates, making him feel unwelcome and marginalised. A group of boys regularly make inappropriate comments about a girl's appearance and clothing. They make her uncomfortable with explicit remarks and gestures, creating a hostile environment for her. A student named, who uses a wheelchair, is often imitated by her peers who mimic her movements and make fun of her mobility challenges. This makes her feel embarrassed and ashamed of her disability. A teacher consistently singles out a student in class, belittling his ideas and ridiculing his contributions. The teacher's behaviour made him dread attending that particular class.

Examples of Bullying Incidents I Have Witnessed Personally

As you can see, I'm short in height and have braces too. This is the most predominant reason for my being bullied. Even my family and close friends make fun of me. I'm so used to bullying that I no longer react to these bullies. I'm not the direct victim of the bullying. I remember one of our professors used to criticise and degrade students whose performance during the exams and daily presentations was not up to the mark. He used to pass the personal comments on them.

I remember one day while sitting in the café with my friends, two boys came and physically harassed us. They sat around us and touched my friend in a very inappropriate way. We removed ourselves from the space to avoid any further scenes. They followed us to the class. A group of three girls in our class has this habit of bullying each member of the class. They seem to be very powerful, and they use their influence to bully the students even if they don't hesitate to misbehave with the teachers and the working staff.

Assistance to a Victim of Bullying

My experience of helping her and working on the anti-bullying campaign shaped my perspective on the power of kindness and advocacy. It made me realise that even small actions can create a ripple effect of positive change. This experience also solidified my passion for promoting inclusivity and standing up against injustice.

Since then, I've remained committed to helping bully victims and creating safer environments within the university. I volunteer with organisations that focus on bullying prevention, mentor students, and continue to engage in conversations about fostering empathy and respect. My journey has taught me that by offering a listening ear, extending a hand of friendship, and taking proactive steps, we can empower those who are suffering and inspire a more compassionate society.

Witnessing University Bullying Incidents in Which I Did Not Want To Intervene

I witnessed a confrontation between two classmates in the library. A student was visibly upset and was raising their voice at the other, accusing them of spreading false rumours about them. The confrontation was escalating, and other students nearby could sense the tension. I chose not to intervene. I believed that the argument was a personal matter between them and that getting involved might make things worse. I, on the other hand, also felt uncomfortable with conflict and didn't want to become a target of their anger. I rationalised my lack of action by thinking that they should resolve their issues on their own. I didn't want to be seen as taking sides or potentially exacerbating the situation. As a result, they watched from a distance, hoping that the argument would fizzle out without their involvement.

In both instances, the presence of bystanders who were hesitant to intervene allowed the bullying or conflict to continue unchecked. The bystanders' concerns about their own social standing, fear of making things worse, and discomfort with confrontation led them to choose inaction. These examples highlight the complex factors that can prevent individuals from stepping in to help when witnessing bullying or conflicts.

Helping a Victim

I think it depends on the person. Some students might not fully grasp the motivations because they've never been in that situation, or they might be more focused on their own concerns. But those who are socially aware and have a sense of responsibility for others will definitely understand why helping a victim is important. Absolutely, I believe most students can understand the

motivations. It's about compassion and making the world a better place. Nobody wants to see someone else suffer, especially when they know they can make a positive impact. Those who step in to help victims are like the unsung heroes of our school.

Witnessing Bystanders without Intervening

I have also witnessed a group of boys teasing a student about his appearance and the way he talked. The victim looked visibly upset, but other students didn't know him well and didn't want to attract attention to themselves. They told themselves that the victim should be able to handle the situation on his own or that a teacher would eventually intervene. We felt bad afterwards, realising that her inaction contributed to victim distress.

I was present when a group of students mocked a classmate during a class presentation. They whispered hurtful comments about her presentation style and appearance. I did not personally know her and felt like it was not my place to say anything. I was afraid of confrontation and didn't want to risk getting involved. I later wondered and felt embarrassed that I should have spoken up to support her.

My Views on Safety in the University For Students

Student organisations and clubs are present that promote positive social interactions, inclusivity, and empathy can significantly improve the campus climate. Peer-led initiatives often resonate with students and create a sense of belonging. Educating faculty and staff about recognising signs of bullying or distress and providing appropriate support can lead to early interventions and a safer environment for students. This university values and celebrates diverse cultures, backgrounds, and perspectives, which can help mitigate incidents of discrimination or harassment based on identity. Adequate lighting, security personnel, and emergency provided by this university response protocols contribute to students feeling physically safe on campus. I also feel that partnering with local organisations, law enforcement, and mental health professionals can expand the range of support available to students. It's my suggestion that university leadership should take a stand against bullying and harassment and hold those responsible accountable; it sets a precedent for the entire community.

Effectiveness of Teachers and Administrators in Responding to Bullying at My University

We, as students at this university, want to feel that my reports are handled with confidentiality and that their safety is a priority. Any fear of retaliation or breach of privacy can impact my willingness to report incidents. There is not a single system that allows students to provide feedback on how bullying incidents are handled, which can give them a sense of agency and influence in shaping the university's response strategies. Administrators are not doing their best to show cultural sensitivity and an understanding of the diverse backgrounds and identities present on campus. I feel that handling incidents with cultural awareness can enhance trust. In my university setting, I feel the university leaders don't actively participate in anti-bullying initiatives, engage with students, and don't show their commitment to a safe environment; leaders should be involved so that it can positively influence student perceptions.

Teachers and Administrators at this University Care about Students

One of our teachers encourages students to reach out with questions or concerns, and they hold regular "open door" hours where students can drop in for discussions about coursework, career goals, or any other topic.

Administrators in student affairs respond to emails from students, offering to meet in person or over video call to discuss any issues they might be facing. They also share their personal phone number for urgent matters.

Our course advisor takes time to learn about each student's academic interests and career aspirations. They provide tailored guidance on course selection, internships, and research opportunities to help each student succeed.

During a challenging semester, one of the professors notices a change in one student's performance. Instead of reprimanding them, the professor reaches out to express concern and offers resources to help manage the student's workload.

My Opinion about the Orderliness of My University

The grading is consistent across assignments and

classes; students can better gauge their performance and make informed improvements.

There is an organised registration process that allows students to enrol in classes, pay fees, and access necessary resources without undue confusion or delays.

There is a clearly outlined curriculum that progresses logically from introductory to advanced topics, helping students understand the course's purpose and their learning journey.

Allowing Bullying Incidents to Happen?

A lack of emphasis on peer support and intervention is leading students to believe that they should avoid getting involved in bullying situations. If the university doesn't actively address issues of discrimination, prejudice, and bias, students might feel that certain groups are more susceptible to bullying. This university doesn't provide sufficient mental health resources or support for both victims and perpetrators; that's why bullying behaviours persist.

This university doesn't address cyberbullying effectively; students might feel that online harassment is less likely to be punished. Students might perceive that the university doesn't adequately convey the real-world impact of bullying, leading to a lack of empathy and understanding.

Feeling Connected to this University

There are many engaging activities. This university offers a variety of clubs, organisations, events, and extracurricular activities; students can find opportunities to connect with like-minded peers and pursue their interests.

There are comfortable spaces and well-designed and maintained campus facilities, including libraries, study areas, lounges, and common spaces, which contribute to a sense of comfort and belonging. There is effective communication. This university communicates effectively about events, policies, resources, and opportunities; students are more likely to feel informed and engaged.

Feeling Empowered at the University

There is Limited Student Involvement: Students have few opportunities to be actively involved in decision-making, or if their opinions are not valued, it can result in a lack of empowerment. There is Top-Down Decision-Making: University policies and changes are imposed without considering student input, which can lead to feelings of disempowerment. There is Unresponsive Administration: Students' concerns are not addressed, or administrative processes are unresponsive; I feel that their efforts to effect change are futile. There is a Lack of Representation: Certain groups are not represented in university leadership or are underrepresented in key discussions, which leads to feelings of exclusion and disempowerment. There is a Limited Voice in Curriculum: Students feel that their input is not considered in shaping the curriculum or academic offerings, and it impacts our sense of empowerment in the educational journey.

Suggestions to Make the University a Safer Place

Educators should proactively identify struggling students and offer additional support, whether academically or emotionally, to display a genuine concern for their overall development. Administrators should actively participate in student events, clubs, and activities and demonstrate a willingness to connect with students beyond the classroom. When teachers and administrators should work together to create a supportive environment, it signals a collective effort to prioritise students' needs.

To create a safer environment, the university could implement and enforce clear anti-bullying policies, provide education on respectful behaviour, offer counselling services for victims and perpetrators, encourage bystander intervention, and establish a reporting mechanism that protects whistleblowers.

Conclusion

This autoethnographic study offers an intimate look at my personal experiences (Adams & Herrmann, 2023) with bullying during my university years, both as a target and a bystander. Through critical reflection on these experiences and my observations of others, several key themes have emerged.

One major finding is that bullying in university manifests in diverse ways, ranging from overt harassment to subtle microaggressions (Randall, 2003). Students are targeted for any perceived difference, whether disability, cultural background, gender identity, or other traits. Bullying tactics include physical actions, verbal attacks, social exclusion, and cyberbullying (Butt, Muhammad, & Masood, 2021;

Rajpoot, Muhammad, & Anis, 2021). The reflections reveal the deep psychological impacts these experiences have on victims, including shame, anxiety, dread, and withdrawal. This highlights the need for greater awareness of how bullying damages self-esteem and impedes learning.

A second notable finding is that bystanders play a complex role in bullying dynamics. Whether due to discomfort with confrontation, fear of retaliation, or concerns about their social status, bystanders often choose not to intervene (Macháčková et al., 2012). Their inaction allows the bullying to continue and, at times, escalate. However, the reflections also demonstrate the power bystanders have to inhibit bullying by speaking up, showing support for the victim, or reporting incidents. This points to the need for education on the importance of bystander intervention and peer advocacy.

The analysis further surfaces how leadership and policies at the institutional level shape the campus climate around bullying. Lack of reporting mechanisms, unresponsive administration, insufficient mental health resources, and low prioritisation of student safety allow bullying to proliferate. Conversely, the visibility of campus leaders in anti-bullying programs and strong policies demonstrate a commitment to student wellbeing. This underscores the need for a multidimensional approach combining clear policies, reporting procedures, counselling services, education, and community building.

On a positive note, the reflections reveal the profound impact that small acts of kindness, mentorship, and inclusion can have on both victims and bystanders. Simple gestures like reaching out to an isolated peer or condemning hurtful remarks remind community members of our shared humanity. This highlights the need to foster greater empathy, celebrate diversity, and promote student empowerment.

While this autoethnography is limited to my personal perspective and context, the findings align with patterns noted in prior research. Further studies across diverse university populations could provide additional insights into students' lived experiences. Longitudinal data tracking impacts over time may be particularly enlightening. There is also a need for more evidence-based program evaluation to identify effective anti-bullying interventions.

Conclusion

On the whole, this reflective process underscores that bullying is still a pressing issue facing universities today, warranting ongoing attention from researchers, educators, administrators, and students. The problem requires a nuanced, multifaceted response focused on cultural change, policy reform, education, counselling, and youth activism. With compassion as an underpinning value, we can work collectively to ensure educational spaces become environments where every student feels safe, supported, and empowered to learn and thrive. Although the journey will be gradual, it is incumbent on each of us to promote human dignity, disrupt injustice, and foster communities where all are empowered to reach their full potential.

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