Higher Education Students' Bullying Victimization Experiences

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Article Info	Abstract

Bullying is a destructive social phenomenon that, contrary to common perception, is not only a problem in childhood and adolescence but affects all age groups and communities. This study concentrates on the experience of being a victim of bullying during higher education studies, aiming to describe the victimization process from start to finish. The research question is: How is the phenomenon of bullying of higher education students described by victims? To answer this question, the study analyzes the bullying experiences of 19 participants using a narrative approach. Two datasets were gathered, using an anonymous online questionnaire and interviews. The findings illustrate the multiformity of victims' perceptions and the complexity of the phenomenon. They show that although every experience is unique, they share common factors, especially at the beginning and end of the bullying process; that instead of sticking to official bullying definitions, it is imperative to prioritize the perception of the victim, and that it is important to recognize the multilateral loneliness of victims. Furthermore, the study reflects on possible solutions drawing on the findings and previous research.

Introduction

The subject of this study is experiences of bullying victimization in the context of higher education (HE), and the participants are HE students in Finland. Bullying victimization refers to the perception of a person who becomes a victim of bullying (Harrison et al. 2022a). The study aims to illustrate how victimized students describe their experiences. Since these students unwillingly fall into circumstances where they have little to no means to influence what is happening to them, it is crucial to give them the opportunity to recount their side of the narrative (see Wójcik et al., 2022). The victims can also be considered "in a front row seat" with regard to the phenomenon and can therefore offer knowledge only they have.

The growing body of research on bullying in HE has mostly concentrated on bullying of HE staff (see e.g., Heffernan & Bosetti, 2023; Hodgins et al., 2024; Pheko, 2018a). The bullying of HE students, however, has gained more attention only in the last two decades (Tight, 2023). Still, different researchers have elucidated it, for example, from the point of view of humor styles and personality traits (Antoniadou & Kokkinos, 2025), bullying of marginalized students (Clark et al., 2023), and cyberbullying perpetration and its effects (Al Qudah et al., 2020). Some multinational studies have also compared bullying perpetration in HE student communities in different countries (see e.g., Pörhölä et al., 2020; Tay & Cameron, 2023).

The research designs of studies on bullying of HE students are mostly quantitative, using surveys and creating numeric data on the prevalence, severity, and consequences of bullying (Tight, 2023). However, in addition to producing statistics about the number of people experiencing or who have experienced bullying during HE studies, it is also important to look at the issue through a qualitative lens. Since research on this specific type of bullying is relatively scarce, the phenomenon lacks profound understanding and terminology developed specifically for the contexts of HE students (Harrison et al., 2022a), which also affects the ability of the quantitative tools used to detect the phenomenon (Harrison et al., 2022b). Qualitative study on victims' perceptions is needed to not only better define how HE students experience bullying, but also to help develop more effective measurement tools.

Although there are nuanced differences between bullying in school, workplaces, and HE institutes, the impacts of and solutions to bullying in these three contexts also have many similarities (for a review, see Faucher et al., 2015). Though context-specific research is important, the existing research on bullying in schools and workplaces still offers valuable viewpoints, especially since their research traditions are much longer. Therefore, research on bullying in schools and workplaces was also consulted for this study.

Bullying of HE students has widespread and long-lasting negative effects on individuals, communities, and the entire sector (Vveinhardt et al., 2020). Still, the line between incivility or intrapersonal conflict and actual bullying is difficult to draw (Heffernan & Bosetti, 2021; Hodgins et al., 2024), and this is made even more difficult by the plethora of bullying definitions used (see e.g., Tight, 2023). Most definitions, regardless of the context, emphasize the need for the negative actions to be repeated, intentional, and to take place over a sustained period of time for them to count as bullying (Tight, 2023). Still, it can be argued that a single negative act can be labeled as bullying if it has long-lasting repercussions for the victim (Tay & Cameron 2023; Faucher et al., 2015). This perspective

puts the victim at the center of defining bullying, emphasizing their perceptions and experiences, which is consequently the goal of this study.

Bullying Victimization

Bullying victimization can be defined as "being on the receiving end of the bullying act" (Harrison et al. 2022a). The concept of bullying is thus divided into perpetration and victimization, perpetration being the action, and victimization the reaction. Bullying victimization can be further divided into different forms, for example physical, relational, and verbal (Gómez-Galán et al., 2021), or social, physical act or trace, psychological, and direct verbal victimization (Harrison et al., 2022b). The forms of victimization can be seen as counterparts to the different forms of bullying perpetration (see e.g., Salmivalli et al., 2021).

Previous research has aimed to explain how a person becomes a victim. For example, Hodgins and colleagues (2024) described the process of workplace bullying, starting with the victim's uncertainty regarding whether the unpleasant actions count as bullying, escalating to the perpetrator's knowing and intentional misuse of their power which is maintained by constant bullying behavior, leading to the victim experiencing disappointment in the organization's ineffective responses and finally lasting adverse effects. Similarly, research on chronic victims by Wójcik and colleagues (2022) presents bullying victimization in school contexts as a downward spiral consisting of first attack, initial stage, full-blown bullying stage, and bullying exit, i.e., graduation from school.

Both conceptualizations start with a warm-up period during which the victimized person does not yet label the behavior as bullying. Research on bullying victimization of HE students has discovered a similar unclear onset (Harrison et al., 2022a). This could be a result of being embedded in a social setting where bullying has become a norm, and therefore identifying bullying and labeling the different participant roles takes time (Zawadzki & Jensen, 2020). A feeling of powerlessness also seems to be an integral part of bullying victimization (Doxbeck & Karalis Noel, 2023; Hodgins et al., 2024), alongside a reluctance to report bullying (Bjereld, 2018). The implication that bullying ends only when the victim leaves the context where it happens is also present in studies on bullying in the workplace (see e.g., Higgins, 2024).

Who is selected as a victim and why? Much research has tried to find fault in individuals, concentrating on the attributes of perpetrators and victims (Søndergaard & Hansen, 2018). Thus, victims are blamed for being bullied (Harrison et al., 2022a), and in fact even victims are prone to search for reasons in themselves (Forsberg & Horton, 2022; Pheko, 2018b). The individual point of view does not consider the social processes that lead to the victim being deemed unworthy of belonging to the community (Søndergaard, 2012), i.e., becoming stigmatized. Considering that the same trait or traits can be used both to stigmatize and to prove the normalness of a person (Goffman, 1968), becoming a victim is socially produced. The person is given the role of victim by the community and is expected to act accordingly (Thornberg, 2015). This is due to the fact that the person somehow breaks social norms, although what is normal seems to be defined only through abnormality, making the situation unclear (Wójcik & Mondry, 2020).

What is it like to experience bullying victimization? Many studies on different bullying contexts present the victim as someone actively trying to survive bullying and its effects, using extensive amounts of time and energy in the process (Hodgins et al., 2024; Thornberg et al., 2013; Wallace, 2024). Victims can experience loneliness and embarrassment (Wallace, 2024), feel misunderstood and worthless (Søndergaard, 2012), and suffer low self-esteem and symptoms related to depression (Bibi et al., 2021). The academic performance of victims can decline (Bibi et al., 2021), possibly because their resources are used for survival instead of studying. Victims can also suffer from concentration and motivation problems, avoid going to lectures, and even drop out of courses or discontinue their studies (Antoniadou & Kokkinos, 2025).

Moreover, although a person does not choose to fall into the role of a victim, being in the role affects their behavior so that they unintentionally prove that they belong in it (Thornberg et al. 2013). Indeed, Gómez-Galan and colleagues (2021) discovered that the victim's role can persist even when the person moves from an educational stage to a subsequent stage. This could in part be explained by the adopted "victim behavior", which in turn affects how the community treats the person, leading to continued bullying in different contexts. Even if the victim can break free from behavioral patterns learned through victimization, the experiences could still influence how and with what expectations they enter a new social setting.

What complicates the matter even further is the subjectivity of bullying (Tight, 2023), i.e., not everyone perceives the same behavior as bullying behavior. This individuality of the victim's interpretation of the negative acts, which through this interpreting are labeled bullying and then perceived and experienced as such, is what makes the phenomenon so complicated. With this in mind, it is important to take the experiences of every person who discloses bullying seriously and investigate them accordingly (Harrison et al., 2022b; Tholander, 2019). Even if the situation is revealed to have been a misunderstanding, the experience of it remains real and damaging for the victim (Buglass et al., 2021).

Method

The research question for this study was: How is the phenomenon of bullying of higher education students described by victims? To answer this question the study used a narrative approach, more specifically analysis of narratives (see Polkinghorne, 1995). The narrative approach and bullying as a phenomenon share a socio-constructivist nature. Where the narratives of one's life and past are self-constructed (Bruner, 1987), bullying, as discussed above, is constructed in the community. Becoming the victim of bullying is a social construct, but the personal meanings and explanations given to the events related to it, i.e., bullying victimization, are constructed by the victim.

The first dataset was collected using an internet-based questionnaire created specifically for this study. Because of the sensitivity of the subject the participants were offered an entirely anonymous method of answering (Bibi et al., 2021). The questionnaire started with a short introduction explaining the purpose of the study and how the answers would be used. By choosing to continue to the questionnaire, the participants gave their informed consent. They could also stop answering the questionnaire at any point if they changed their mind about participating.

Although many studies provide a definition of bullying to participants, this might result, for example, in a potential participant judging that their experience does not fit the definition and choosing not to answer (Tight, 2023). Therefore, the questionnaire for this study consisted of open-ended items, such as "Describe the bullying you experienced during higher education", encouraging the participants to write about their experiences in their own words, without predefined definitions. At the end of the questionnaire the participants were asked to complete a short demographic section (gender, age, university or university of applied sciences, field of study, year of study). The questionnaire was available in Finnish, Swedish, and English, and a link to the questionnaire with a cover letter asking students to participate in the study was sent in the fall semester of 2021 to all the student unions of Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences (N=37). The questionnaire was also shared via different social media channels, for example Facebook. In total, 19 participants shared their narratives through the questionnaire.

The second dataset was collected through interviews. After finishing the questionnaire, the participants were given the opportunity to leave their email on a separate form if they were willing to be interviewed later. Six participants left their contact information, and when contacted four agreed to be interviewed. From these participants, the answers to the questionnaire were combined with their interviews. In addition, two participants expressed their willingness by contacting me directly via email, thus bringing the number of interviewees to six. The interviews were conducted individually via online meeting platforms over a five-month period from the end of 2021 to early 2022. They were unstructured and lasted from 30 minutes to 2.5 hours (M= 71.16 minutes).

At the beginning of each interview, I gave a little information about my background and about the study. After the participants had the opportunity to ask questions, I asked if I could audio-record the interview. After getting permission, I started by asking the participants to tell me their experiences, giving them time and space to talk, and asking follow-up questions when something needed clarification. If the participants needed prompting, I used the same loosely formed questions from the questionnaire. During the interview I sought to establish myself as a compassionate listener, empathizing with the participants' experiences while remembering my position as a researcher (see Jackl, 2018). At the end of each interview, I asked if the participants had any questions for me and thanked them for sharing their story.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, including longer pauses and utterances such as chuckling, sighing, or using fill-words (e.g., like, uhm). After that I anonymized both datasets where needed, i.e., I deleted names of people, specific institutions, and cities. I gave each narrative a number and will refer to the participants with the pronouns 'they' and 'them'. Also, I will not share the ages or fields of study of individual participants to further ensure as much anonymity as possible.

From the total of 21 narratives two were omitted from the analysis, since the participants had not experienced bullying in higher education themselves, making the final number of participants 19. Of these two identified as men and 15 as women. Two participants preferred not to disclose their gender. The age of the participants ranged from 20 to 52 years (M=31.14). 13 participants had been victims during earlier educational stages as well, whereas six had never been bullied before. All the participants were studying or had studied at a university and represented

various fields and years of study.

I started the data analysis by reading through the data several times, immersing myself in the experiences of the participants. I then created nine tentative codes (*detecting bullying*, *form of bullying*, *reason for bullying*, *consequence*, *support*, *COVID*, *value*, *solution*, and *turning point*). I also consulted the results of a previous study (Luukinen et al., 2022) for support in creating the codes. Then I coded the data using various first-cycle coding methods, including *initial*, *in vivo*, and *descriptive coding* (Saldaña, 2009), constantly remaining open to possible codes arising from the data. For example, the code *consequences* seemed inadequate, so I divided it into *reaction*, *consequence*, *fallout*, and *aftermath* to better distinguish between the different phases of events. I went through the entire body of data multiple times until no more new codes emerged, thus justifying the transition to second-cycle coding. In total 15 codes (*setting the scene*, *reason*, *role*, *form*, *breaking point*, *severity*, *reaction*, *support*, *COVID*, *consequence*, *fallout*, *aftermath*, *value*, *solution idea*, *in vivo*) emerged from the first-cycle coding.

The second-cycle coding method used was *focused coding* (Saldaña, 2009). The nuances of the code *consequence* together with the code *setting the scene* had already created a sense of a timeline, a bullying victimization process. Examining the first-cycle codes further supported this idea. The second-cycle coding produced eight main categories (*setting the scene*, *unfolding*, *breaking point*, *fallout*, *support*, *impact*, *wrap-up*, *endnote*), which I then placed on Freytag's pyramid of dramatic structure (1863).

According to Freytag (1863), dramatic structure consists of five stages: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement. These created a narrative framework for presenting the results, as shown in Figure 1. Following Freytag, I named the model the Bullying Victimization Arc. It must be noted, though, that in the data the participants did not always describe their experiences in chronological order.
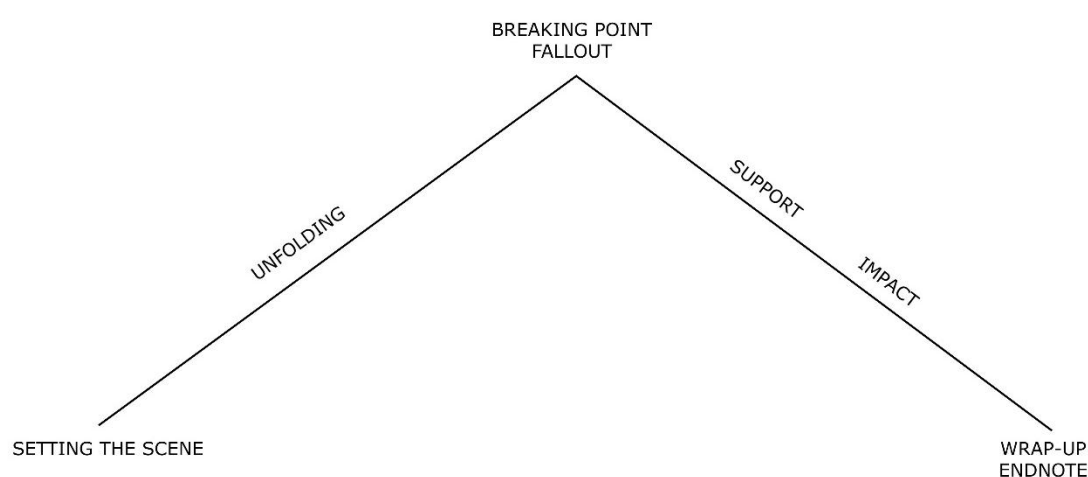

Figure 1. The Bullying Victimization Arc

Results

Here I present the results of the analysis in the order of the Bullying Victimization Arc (Figure 1). The first two

stages have one category each, while the last three stages have two categories each. I will explain these divisions in more detail in the corresponding sections.

Exposition

The exposition stage of Freytag's structure is represented by the category *Setting the scene*. This category contains the participants' descriptions of the situation at the onset of bullying. They described how bullying behavior in HE takes place in a range of arenas, such as lectures, student events, lunch breaks, and while volunteering for student associations. What linked the experiences in different contexts was uncertainty. Many participants stated that at first they were unsure whether what was happening was actually bullying, since in the beginning it consisted of "just" vague negative actions, situations, and emotions: "Like, it's really hard to say where it started" (10); "I wondered if I was just imagining the eye-rolling and sighing when I said something" (21).

Eight participants recounted how the bullying behavior started at the beginning of their first year. At this time, individuals are going through many simultaneous changes in their lives, which may contribute to the uncertainty and thus make identifying bullying more difficult: "In that particular environment in the beginning I was likely, of course, confused because everything is new" (18). Some of the participants even reflected on how in the beginning everybody was somewhat lost, having possibly moved to a new city, which made people almost desperate for a social safety net. Two participants described how difficult it was for them to find like-minded people or friends in the student community. In contrast, three participants reported that they had quickly made a friend or friends, but that these friendships did not last long.

In cases where the participant had not experienced bullying as a first-year student (N=11), it started when the person in some way assumed a new role or entered a new setting. For example, two participants mentioned that the problems started when they started work on the board of a student association. Two other participants shared that they had experienced bullying while taking part in a course where they did not belong to the established student group.

Rising Action

The category *Unfolding* characterizes how initially participants were undecided about what was happening, since the situation had not escalated yet. Thus, the category corresponds to the rising action stage of the pyramid, which describes how circumstances develop. The participants tried to find reasons for the occurrences in themselves, in the person acting negatively towards them, or in the overall situation.

One participant commented that "the mechanisms of bullying at higher education level are more subtle, but very strong: it's about who you want to spend time with and who you don't" (2). This idea of bullying as a social choice was in fact represented in the narratives of 12 participants. One participant expressed their frustration about not being given a clear reason for being left out: "I think my fellow students should at least give a reasonable explanation for their behavior instead of remaining silent and excluding me and some other fellow students" (16).

Indeed, ambiguity about the possible reasons was discernible in the narratives of nine participants. Even in the narratives of participants who somehow knew why they were singled out (N=10), the bullies had not explicitly given them a reason. These participants mostly blamed some individual factor, such as being active in class, not using alcohol, or educational background. The participants felt that because they stood out for some actual or supposed reason, they were excluded from the community.

The participants described bullying behaviors leading to exclusion as both verbal and non-verbal, such as unpleasant comments, spreading rumors and lies, meaningful looks or eyerolling, and ignoring. Negative behaviors were also perceived online, for example on WhatsApp, such as not answering messages, criticizing a member of a chat group, or leaving someone out of one. Exclusion happened during courses too: "I was not wanted as a group member for group work when students are free to form groups of their choice. I was shown through words, facial expressions, and gestures that I was not welcome" (14).

The individual characteristics of the bullies were considered for reasons as well. For example, one participant mentioned that the bullies were younger and hence immature, and the participant suspected that they had had an easy life so far. Another participant felt similarly: "But of course, not all my fellow students have the same [difficult] situation as me, fortunately, so they can use their time at university for something else and they can throw a tantrum about who sits next to them or something…" (21).

Another explanation considered was that bullies were trying to hide how bad they felt by attacking others. For example, two participants named the bully's jealousy as a possible reason. Some participants also thought that the bullies were somehow lacking something, e.g., social skills, and because of this manipulation and playing games was all they knew: "They didn't really have anything personal against me; the bullying was their way of cooperating with others" (7).

The bully could also be a member of personnel. For example, one participant disclosed that they had been bullied by administrative staff. This manifested, for example, as impolite communication, inflexibility, and demanding additional documentation from them for an application that they knew other students had gotten approved without complications. Two participants were bullied by a teacher. One of them mentioned that the teacher favored certain students, thus creating a negative atmosphere and polarization.

The participants described community-level reasons for bullying too. One participant mentioned that the learning community did not feel safe, and that the employees were also suffering. Another suggested that bullying was due to clique behavior, the need to be accepted, and the dilution of responsibility in a large group. One participant commented that "It's so shocking to me how others don't... People act like they don't dare say anything or intervene in the situation, like they can't do anything about it." (20)

Climax

The tip of the arc, unlike the previous two stages, includes two categories. The *Breaking point* category illustrates

the bullying at its worst. The *Fallout* category includes the participants' different reactions to it.

Breaking Point

This category represents the point where the uncertainty cloaking the situation evaporated and the participants realized that the unpleasant behavior and strange atmosphere could and should be labeled as bullying. The breaking point was not always a clear single event; in some cases, the negative actions accumulated until the participant recognized they were a victim of bullying: "It's not me, like, that I'm not smart or skillful enough, it's just, like, this is not supposed to happen" (18). One participant reflected on the multiformity of the bullying they experienced: "They told other friends not to talk to me and would threaten them with the same treatment, plan events knowing I was doing something already, laugh in Zoom classes when I was speaking" (19). Four other participants also remembered how they perceived that the bully or bullies succeeded in spreading a negative attitude towards them. Two of these four even had the feeling that whatever they did, the bully or bullies found the bad side of it. This solidified the participants' status as an outsider. Although the situation had reached a point where there was no uncertainty regarding whether it was bullying or not, the participants were still deeply perplexed by what had brought this on them: "I don't know how the situation turned out like that, but in the end, I was completely excluded" (13). Ruminating on the situation took a lot of energy.Five participants mentioned that the process reached its breaking point relatively quickly, i.e., some victimization processes had a shorter timespan than others. Two participants even reported that the bullying involved just one incident. The reasons why these participants perceived the episodes as bullying, even though the negative behaviors did not last long, will be discussed in more detail later.

Fallout

The reactions of the participants after reaching breaking point varied extensively. Some participants were only mildly bothered, whereas others were completely flabbergasted. These reactions were a kind of "fight-flight-freeze response", i.e., the participants tried to either stand up for themselves (N=4), somehow leave or at least avoid the situation (N=9), or survive it (N=6). Those participants whose reaction was to fight started actively defending themselves against the bullying: "I told myself I had been badly treated. I've been wronged. I can't, I can't back out now" (5).

The reactions that could be categorized as a flight response led to different forms of escapism. One participant ended up changing their major. Three participants moved away. Milder but similar reactions included not wanting to go to university, not participating in a specific course, and trying to do as much as possible remotely. "The bullying lasted for about a year, after which I moved away from the city where I was studying" (3).

The participants who reacted by freezing reflected that they felt they could do nothing about the bullying. One participant even explained how they were ashamed of "letting" themselves be bullied, and for this reason they did not tell anyone about it at first. Another described how trying to cope with bullying diverted their energy and resources away from studying: "Out of three years, I have the feeling I only studied for one, because in the first

two I was just fighting to survive" (18). Another participant had a different kind of freeze response, noticing that they were being bullied but seeking to remain indifferent to it. This was the case with one participant who reflected that this reaction was because they were bullied during two different courses, and since they knew the courses would end, they were not overly affected.

Falling Action

The falling action stage is divided into two categories, *Support* and *Impact*. These categories depict the multifaceted effects the participants experienced when the bullying had not ended but had passed the most intensive phase, or the victim had somehow gotten used to it. The first category covers the kinds of support the participants sought and received, and the second covers the feelings that arose because of the bullying and what was required to get over it.

Support

The different types of support the participants mentioned can be divided into individual, communal, and institutional support. Individual forms of support included self-esteem, knowing one's worth, and resilience. Tools mentioned that helped strengthen or build these characteristics included meditation and sport. To overcome bullying, many participants reflected that they somehow tried to build strength by themselves.

In fact, the participants felt alone in the situation. One participant remembered how the fear of social contamination was so strong that fellow students avoided them because they feared that if they did not, the bullying would spread to them as well: "I didn't have anybody [in the freshers' group] because, for example, people didn't dare come to eat with me so others wouldn't think we were friends" (21). Another reflected on how the bullies managed to turn the friends they had made in the student community against them: "Those people were mean to me in a strange way, but then they sucked my friends into it too..." (10). The narratives of three other participants also included a turncoat, someone who the participant had trusted or thought of as a friend, but who either later decided to join the side of the perpetrator(s) or had been insincere from the beginning. One participant had even at first thought of the bully as their best friend in the student community. Communal forms of support included talking to someone about the situation. Six participants mentioned that they talked about it with their friends and family. In fact, having a community elsewhere was seen as a supportive factor, since it made the participants less dependent on being accepted by their fellow students.

An institutional form of support involved telling staff about the bullying. Six participants did not disclose the bullying, and seven participants did not share whether they disclosed the bullying or not. Six participants did disclose the bullying to an official entity, but in five cases it did not lead to any direct action. For example, the participant who was singled out by administrative staff reflected on receiving unofficial support from inside the institution but that these people were somehow not in a position where they could make a difference. Another participant noted that the institution did not have any clear guidelines or protocols on tackling bullying, and the personnel's attitudes varied from deflecting or avoiding responsibility to showing interest but not taking concrete

action. One participant stated that "the university is pretty useless when it comes to this [bullying], and I know it won't be recorded or sorted and will go under the radar" (19). In addition, the student harassment contact persons that were involved in the situation of two participants were perceived to lack the authority to solve it.

Impact

This category covers the different ways experiencing bullying affected the participants' lives. It triggered many negative emotions, such as shame, confusion, hurt, frustration, disappointment, and loneliness: "I felt bad and unfairly treated" (9), "I felt a sense of inferiority because I wasn't good enough for my fellow students" (8). However, two participants recounted that although being targeted was unpleasant, they were not particularly affected by it. A third noted that "personally, I don't particularly mind the bullying and feel it doesn't upset me, but I believe that a more sensitive individual may suffer more" (4).

The participants described coping with and surviving bullying as time- and energy-consuming. For example, one participant mentioned that fighting for their rights slowed their study progress. Two participants even considered dropping out because of bullying. The situation could start seeping into other aspects of the participants' lives as well. One participant described how they became anxious and insecure in social situations, fearing that strangers and their old friends would hate them just like their new acquaintances from the student community did: "I started to fear that even my older friends hated me" (10).

In 13 cases the situation only ended when the participant somehow removed themselves from the situation, or the situation was altered by a force majeure, i.e., the SARS-CoV2 pandemic. In fact, the pandemic played an ambiguous role in the participants' narratives. Seven bullying situations had already ended before the pandemic started. For three participants the pandemic was a relief, for example because the participant did not have to face the perpetrator(s) on campus anymore. Two participants reflected that the pandemic made the situation worse, because the restrictions made them unable to get to know new people and hence, they could not build a different social group for themselves. Seven participants did not elaborate on the effect of the pandemic on their situation.

Denouement

The denouement stage is divided into the categories Wrap-up and Endnote. The category Wrap-up consists of descriptions of how the participants felt after the situation had come to an end. The category Endnote consists of more general musings on the phenomenon. The participants reflected on defining bullying, who should have the responsibility to stop it, and what tools could be used to prevent or tackle it.

Wrap-up

This category consists of how the participants described their feelings after the bullying came to an end. An alternate name for this main category was 'Resolution', but regrettably not all victimization processes were as resolved as one might hope. Six participants explained that although they would not describe themselves as bitter,

they still felt resentful. For example, one participant noted that "I wouldn't want to be a bitter person myself, but it's like... Maybe bitterness is, like, the wrong word. But yes, like, it's still that resentment... And that feeling of unfairness" (5). In some cases, the process was more like a wavy line than an arc with a clear ending: falling action led to rising action, which led to a new climax, and so on.

One participant felt that the situation had cleared up to some extent, which had changed their perception of it: "Some of these people still talk trash about me, but I don't experience as much active bullying, and I don't really feel bullied. People will always bad-mouth others behind their backs" (10). Two other participants also explicitly mentioned that, even though the situation was not active anymore, they felt the perpetrator's negative attitude towards them persisted. All three of these participants estimated that nowadays they would be able to interact with the perpetrators if it were needed.

14 participants reflected on how their experiences had left at least some kind of a mark. The two who were bullied while working in different student associations recounted, for example, that they would never consider volunteering for an association again. The one targeted by administrative staff noted that they still remember the names of specific people involved. One participant even commented that "the bullying just ruined what was meant to be a great time in my life and now all my memories of being in the city where the university is are negative" (19). In contrast, another participant reflected that although the bullying was very hurtful, they mainly had good memories from that time, since they were able to cut the group of people the bully belonged to out of their life and find new, better friends.

Endnote

The participants also reflected on bullying of HE students more generally. Many pondered how to define bullying. One described it as a scale with different perceived levels of severity: "There are different degrees of bullying, severe bullying, milder bullying, and bullying that is so mild and innocent that you don't really bother to bring it up" (12).

As mentioned previously, two participants explained how the bullying they experienced involved an individual incident. Still, one added that they nevertheless remember the situation well after many years, while the other described: "However, I experienced the incident as bullying because I found the treatment totally outrageous and the mistreatment continued with the lecturer not acknowledging me at all in the faculty rooms or hallways" (9). So even when bullying involved just one incident, it nonetheless had lasting consequences. Another participant contemplated: "I don't know if my experience really met the criteria of bullying. I felt shame then and have felt it since the incident, and I feel like I'm just a burden and that no one wants my company" (6).

The participant who was targeted by administrative staff reflected on how to define bullying as well. They stressed, for example, that not every negative interaction could be perceived as bullying, but that it is important to examine the overall situation. They felt it was important to consider how much and what kinds of communication had been involved, whether the actions were instigated due to any actual reasons, and whether they were solution-driven

rather than just trying to make the situation even more difficult.

The participants also reflected on fighting and preventing bullying. One participant commented, "to get back to why bullying occurs, there is no prevention of it either" (21). In fact, there was some confusion among the participants about who should have the responsibility to tackle bullying. This was mainly caused by the ambivalent reactions they experienced when they reported the bullying or asked for help, or the idea that students are adults and hence need to deal with such issues amongst themselves. Still, six participants felt that part of the responsibility lies with the institution. One of these had a grim view on this matter: "No university wants to let people who have experienced bullying at university speak out, because they can't admit that it happens" (10).

The participants had ideas for solutions as well. Having practical, research-based procedures for personnel to turn to when bullying among students occurs was seen as necessary. Also, the need for a dedicated member of staff whose main duty would be to solve bullying situations in the student community was mentioned by two participants. The participants reflected that the student community, e.g., student tutors, associations, and unions, have responsibility for and influence in terms of improving the situation. For example, one participant proposed concentrating on low-threshold activities aimed at lonely students. Another suggested shifting the event culture in a more non-alcoholic direction.

Discussion

Examining the experience of being bullied in HE through the Bullying Victimization Arc illuminated what victims go through and how they handle it. The examination also revealed three thought-provoking aspects of the phenomenon. First, it showed that although every experience is unique, they share common factors, especially at the beginning and end of the bullying process. Second, it showed that instead of sticking to official bullying definitions, it is imperative to prioritize how the person experiencing bullying perceives what is happening. Lastly, it highlighted the multilateral loneliness of the victims.

It is noteworthy that the negative behavior towards the participants started when they entered a new community or took on a new role in an old one. This indicates that to prevent bullying between students, there is a need for proactive strategies at the beginning of their studies. For example, Khan and colleagues (2022) suggested that at the beginning of studies HE personnel should teach new students about proper conduct, which would help in creating a positive and productive study environment. Also, Mahon and colleagues (2019) highlighted the importance of respectful, caring, and sharing relationships among students, among personnel, and between personnel and students to support the practice of critical education. Building this kind of compassionate and collaborative atmosphere does not just happen alongside everything else, but takes intentional, dedicated effort (see Uusiautti et al., 2025).

Furthermore, in most cases the situation only ended when the victim somehow exited the arena where the bullying took place. It is important to develop forms of mediation so that bullying can be resolved without someone having to leave. Knowledge of such methods could also be useful later in working life, for example in solving conflicts

before they escalate.

As mentioned in the introduction, the three conditions for bullying commonly used in definitions are that the actions must be repeated, intentional, and happen over a long timeframe. However, the results of this study show how even a single event can have lasting, negative consequences for a person. Indeed, Faucher and colleagues (2015) have suggested expanding the concepts of repetition and time by pointing out that to define a single act as bullying, the effects of it should be repeated and long-lasting. When considering intentionality as a condition, we must remember the subjectivity of bullying discussed in the theoretical overview of this article. A relevant question to consider is where to draw the line that needs to be crossed for negative behavior to turn into bullying, and who is responsible for drawing it.

The victims experienced loneliness on various levels: they were somehow denied full membership of the HE community and had to deal with the consequences mostly by themselves as well. This was made worse by the inappropriate responses to their disclosure of the situation and the lack of protocols to deal with bullying of HE students. Of course, it is important to remember that not all victims tried to disclose their experiences of bullying at the time. Unfortunately, these participants did not elaborate on the reasons they chose not to do so.

Conclusion

This study shed light not only on the experiences of the victims, but also on the problems involved in dealing with bullying situations. One of the main obstacles was the lack of institutional support, which was due to a lack of protocols, inadequate responses, and also under-reporting. Indeed, not reporting bullying results in institutions being unaware how severe the problem is (Vaill et al., 2023).

One possible reason for under-reporting is that the reporting process is not clearly defined. Thus, when developing protocols, it is also necessary to describe what concrete steps are taken after a student discloses bullying: who will process the report, what are the possible courses of action, and how long the process will approximately take. The information should be available to all members of the HE institution (HEI), and both students and personnel should receive regular training about how to act when they experience or detect bullying in the community.

In fact, the responsibility to intervene in bullying lies with everyone. To cultivate this mentality, HEIs might benefit from adapting the KiVa antibullying program (see e.g., Salmivalli et al., 2011) to the HE context. Similarly to KiVa, actions such as workshops, seminars, and materials about bullying should encompass the whole HEI, but more targeted actions should also be taken, such as discussions with the parties to ongoing bullying situations. The KiVa program also involves building KiVa teams and challenging prosocial individuals to support victims (Salmivalli et al., 2013). In HE contexts this could mean, for example, training volunteer employees and students to become compassion mentors (Tuominen et al., 2024). These individuals could further assist communities in developing a more supportive HE culture. It would also be beneficial to have a dedicated employee whose job would be to coordinate work to combat bullying. This person should somehow be external to the day-to-day academic life of the institution to guarantee impartiality in situations where the bully is a member of staff (see

Luukkinen et al., 2022). Of course, adapting a program developed for schools to thoroughly fit the needs of HEIs is a complicated task beyond the scope of the current study, but considering the different aspects of the whole-school approach of KiVa (Salmivalli et al., 2011; Salmivalli et al., 2013) could be a starting point to developing a whole-institution model for HE.

There are several limitations to this study that need to be noted. First, all the participants were studying or had studied in a university. Since participation was voluntary and I did not know which of the 37 entities the request to participate in research was sent to forwarded it to their members, it was impossible to control the composition of the data. Future research should concentrate on bullying of HE students in other types of HEIs as well. Second, because of the small number of participants, generalizing from the findings is not possible. However, generalizing was not the purpose of the study; this study aimed to paint a vivid picture of individual perceptions of the phenomenon. Third, 15 from the 19 participants identified themselves as women. Future research should try to recruit more participants that identify themselves as men, to better describe the phenomenon from different points of view. And lastly, the data consisted of retrospective narratives. Memories of past events can be affected by time, but also by how questions are formulated (Young-Jones et al., 2015). The questions used to collect the data for this study were broad, "tell me" questions (Salmela & Uusiautti, 2017), but it is still possible that they shaped the narratives somehow.

It is also important to consider the reliability of the study, which can be evaluated through the five principles of validation outlined by Heikkinen and colleagues (2012): historical continuity, evocativeness, dialectics, reflexivity, and workability and ethics. I considered these principles during the entire research process by familiarizing myself with previous research about bullying in different contexts, regularly asking for comments on my work, and reflecting on my position as a researcher. I have never been a victim of bullying, which on the one hand gave me a neutral point of view, but on the other hand meant that I perhaps lack some knowledge a person with personal experience of the phenomenon would have. In addition, I have been and still am a part of the HE community, though I have not been physically present in years. I was conscious of these facts and their possible influence throughout the study. I also strove to be empathetic through all the different phases of the study, especially the questionnaire planning and during the interviews.

I used many different methods to guarantee the anonymity of the participants. It was possible to participate through an anonymous questionnaire. I did not include the majors or HEIs of the participants in the report, or the ages of individual participants. I also used gender neutral pronouns to refer to both the participants as well as other individuals mentioned in their narratives. The narratives of individual participants were not presented in full, but only as a part of the results of the analysis.

I structured the report so that it would be clear and easy to follow, gave room for the voices of the participants and the multiplicity of their perceptions, described the research process in detail, and supported the conclusions drawn during the analysis with excerpts from the data. I chose excerpts from various participants to further ensure the polyphony of the results, at the same time making sure that direct quotes would not jeopardize the participants' anonymity. Most of them needed to be translated to English, which in turn reduced the potential for recognition.

I used rich description and illustrated a myriad of bullying victimization experiences for the reader to relate to and empathize with. The final assessment of this study's ability to evoke emotions is, of course, left to the reader.

I also offered concrete ideas on what can be done to address the phenomenon and tried to demonstrate how important it is to adopt a proactive approach. This should also be seen as an opportunity for HEIs to profile themselves. I see it not as a need to work against bullying, but to work for the well-being of the whole community. Negative phenomena such as bullying are not a force majeure; every individual, community, and institution can and should influence them by actively building an ethos of respect and compassion (see Buglass et al., 2021).

Research into the bullying of HE students is in need of a qualitative shift. To find effective solutions to bullying in HE communities it is important to examine the experiences and perceptions of individuals. In doing so the patterns of bullying victimization can be better identified, and better support and prevention methods can be developed and implemented. For these reasons, it was important to conduct this study, as it described the phenomenon of bullying of HE students from the point of view of the victim.

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