Reasons for the Failure of Bullying Victims to Seek External Assistance

Siyao Li

Moorestown Friends School, New Jersey, USA
lis@mfriends.org

Abstract. Existing studies have shown that barriers such as stigma, fear of retaliation, lack of trust in institutions, and limited access to resources often prevent victims from actively seeking or obtaining effective support. This paper mainly focuses on the reasons why victims of bullying fail to seek help from the outside world. In today's society, bullying is increasingly prevalent, and its age range is expanding. It happens from school bullying among students to workplace bullying among adults, showing that bullying has increasingly become a social phenomenon. Some victims of bullying will seek help from the society, such as posting their experiences on the internet to seek comfort or solutions; some will go to seek psychological counseling to console themselves. However, a large number of them cannot receive effective help and cannot help them overcome the psychological consequences of being bullied. Therefore, this paper aims to explore what the reasons are behind this phenomenon, in order to better help the victims of bullying obtain effective help from society.

Keywords: Bullying victims, help-seeking behavior, social barriers, psychological consequences, stigma

1. Introduction

Bullying is a kind of aggressive behavior that is intentional or unintentional, simple or habitual. It usually occurs between people with unequal power (such as physical strength or social power), that is, the attack of the powerful group on the weak group. This kind of attack may involve physical, mental or psychological aggression. Most of such attacks are not accidental events, but rather long-term and repeated aggressive incidents. This study holds that the definition of bullying encompasses a series of criteria. These criteria include various behaviors and forms. They include physical, verbal, or psychological manifestations [1]. Generally, they involve intentional actions, repeated behavior over a long period, and not attacking the vulnerable group when provoked. Most people agree that bullying can manifest as physical, verbal, or psychological behaviors, and also includes broader forms of social bullying, such as socially recognized behaviors in highly competitive academic, sports, or social success contexts, which intentionally make others feel inferior or cause pain [1]. In terms of verbal bullying, they point out that if the words are of a demeaning and offensive nature, or repeated teasing, and continue even when the target shows clear pain or opposition, then it falls under the category of bullying. However, when teasing is carried out in a

friendly and relaxed manner, it will not be called bullying. They also explain that bullying is an attack by the dominant group on the vulnerable group [1]. The power source of the dominant group is usually physical strength, and it may also obtain power from a gang or a support group. The importance of mental strength cannot be ignored, such as mental control or brainwashing of the vulnerable group. Another factor that may result in different levels of power or influence is social status or popularity. The popularity of the bully is typically average or slightly above, which may amplify their ability to exert influence over peers. In short, Guerin and Hennessy believe that intention, repetition, provocation, and imbalance of power are the main causes of the bullying phenomenon [1]. The four main categories of bullying behavior are: physical bullying, verbal bullying, psychological bullying, and social bullying. Physical bullying refers to any form of bullying that harms someone's body or steals their property. Typical behaviors include theft, assault, and deliberately damaging someone else's belongings, all of which are forms of physical bullying. In physical bullying, a person's body or a part of their body is the main tool for bullying others. The main source of power in physical bullying is the bully's physical strength or size advantage. They use their stronger physical advantage to bully or assault others, which is a relatively direct form of bullying. Verbal bullying is also a common form. It usually refers to the behavior pattern of bullying others through conversation without any physical contact. Common forms of bullying include using unpleasant nicknames to address others, making personal attacks, spreading rumors about someone, mocking others, or finding amusement in others. This bullying pattern can occur to anyone and there is no fixed group of bullies. In society, the definition of verbal bullying is also rather vague, usually determined by the feelings and experiences of the person being bullied. Sometimes, someone says something that makes others feel uncomfortable, but they consider it just a joke, but it may have caused psychological harm to others, which is a type of bullying that is difficult to define due to subjective differences in victims' perceptions. While psychological bullying often involves verbal bullying, it is more severe in nature, such as humiliation or mental oppression. It manipulates others mentally, leading to the mental breakdown of the bullied or causing them to develop psychological disorders. Social bullying refers to a form of bullying that uses interpersonal relationships to harm others. This term is also used to describe any form of bullying that aims to damage others' reputation or social status. Sometimes such bullying may include physical bullying or verbal bullying. Typical behaviors include social exclusion, intentional isolation, and excluding others. In social bullying, the bully usually uses their network of relationships or social status to oppress others. Unlike physical bullying, social bullying may not be obvious and often requires people to observe for a period of time before they notice the existence of social bullying. The harm caused by social bullying usually emerges gradually and may have long-term effects on victims' self-esteem and social integration.

2. Literature review

One reason victims fail to seek help is their lack of trust in the social environment. In the first experiment, a mixed research method was adopted, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative focus group interviews, to explore the individual and situational predictors of bullying and victimization during childhood and adolescence, and to analyze how these factors change with age and gender. The quantitative part involved two questionnaires for 2,678 primary and secondary school students, measuring aspects such as self-evaluation, broad beliefs, school atmosphere, and the relationship between bullying behavior and victimization experiences [2]. The qualitative part involved 14 focus group interviews with 115 students who did not participate in the questionnaire survey, to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of bullying behavior and its relationship with the social identities of teenagers and different genders [2]. The gender ratio was roughly equal, and

the research population was primary and secondary school students [2]. The conclusion of this experiment was that low self-evaluation and negative school atmosphere were common predictors of bullying and victimization, and bullying was regarded as a means of obtaining power and entertainment among teenagers [2]. The shortcomings of this article are that the time span is relatively short, only tracking one academic year, and unable to capture the long-term development trajectory; in addition, the sample size is not large enough to represent all students [2]. Another study adopted a hybrid approach and explored in two phases the views and coping strategies of fifth and eighth graders in 12 schools in England regarding bullying. The study first conducted in-depth focus group interviews with 230 students, and then carried out questionnaire surveys with 953 students. The core finding is that students generally are reluctant to report their experiences of being bullied to adults, especially teachers, and this tendency intensifies with age [3]. Only 31% of eighth-grade students think it is "relatively easy" or "very easy" to confide in their teachers, which is much lower than the 51% of fifth-grade students [3]. Students attribute this reluctance to multiple risks, influenced by both institutional practices and peer culture: teachers' responses may be ineffective, insensitive or excessive, and may undermine confidentiality and invite retaliation; Parents may overreact or not be taken seriously by the school. At the same time, peer culture strongly opposes "informing on" [3]. In contrast, confiding in friends is regarded as the option with the lowest risk [3]. The research conclusion emphasizes that "informing" is a complex risk assessment process [3]. Schools need to create a safer and more trusting environment and respect students' autonomy rather than simply encouraging them to "speak out" [3]. This research reflects students' distrust of the adults around them. After conducting a risk assessment, students foreseen that seeking help from authoritative figures such as teachers might bring greater risks (such as not being trusted, leaking secrets, or inviting retaliation), so they voluntarily chose to remain silent or only confide in their peers. In another study it did a study based on data from 2,025 nationally representative employees in the UK's "Fair Treatment at Work Survey (2008)". This study used a cross-sectional survey design to examine the influence of organizational resources and demands on perceptions of workplace bullying [4]. The sample covered different genders, ages, education levels, and income levels [4]. Using self-report questionnaires and established scales, and analyzed via OLS regression, the study found that trust in management significantly reduced perceptions of bullying, while role overload increased these perceptions [4]. Job autonomy and employee participation acted as resource passageways with buffering effects [4]. However, social support from colleagues had an effect contrary to expectations, where higher levels of support were associated with higher perceptions of bullying [4]. The findings emphasize the crucial influence of organizational environment factors on bullying perceptions, which is consistent with most studies, but generalizability is limited due to the cross-sectional design, self-report data, and UK-specific sample [4]. The further conclusion of this study is that Insufficient trust in management can predispose employees to interpret ambiguous situations as bullying due to heightened sensitivity to threats [4]. The fourth study was an empirical study conducted at an NHS community trust in southeast England, aiming to investigate the prevalence of workplace bullying and its relationship with occupational health outcomes, as well as the role of job support. The research conducted an anonymous questionnaire survey among 1,580 employees and ultimately collected 1,100 valid questionnaires (with a response rate of 70%) [5]. The questionnaire includes a list of 20 types of bullying behaviors, as well as standardized scales for measuring work stress, anxiety, depression, job satisfaction and job support [5]. The conclusion of this study is that bullying is a widespread social phenomenon [5]. 38% of the employees reported having experienced one or more types of bullying in the past year, and 42% had witnessed others being bullied. Although two-thirds (67%) of the victims attempted to take action against bullying,

the vast majority (74%) were dissatisfied with the outcome [5]. This reveals that the internal handling mechanisms and environment of the institution (such as complaint procedures and management interventions) seem ineffective to the victims. Research has found that a supportive working environment can protect employees to a certain extent and mitigate some of the harmful effects of bullying (such as the negative impact on job satisfaction and turnover tendency) [5]. This indicates that social support is a key protective factor in dealing with bullying. In terms of the conclusion, all four studies agree that bullying is a widespread social phenomenon, and victims usually have difficulty seeking help. The support from the surrounding environment is a crucial condition. In terms of the research methods, all four studies extensively employed the questionnaire survey method as the main approach for collecting quantitative data; the differences lie in that some studies adopted a mixed-method research design, some used a cross-sectional questionnaire survey design, and others employed a two-stage sequential form, thereby enhancing the breadth and depth of the research. In terms of limitations, some studies had a short time span or a small sample size. However, overall, they all jointly point to a core: improving the atmosphere of organizations or schools and establishing a trustworthy environment is the key to breaking the cycle of bullying silence.

Another major reason why the bullied fail to seek help is the fear of retaliation from the bullies. A study investigated 75 (32 boys and 43 girls) junior high school students aged 13 to 15, aiming to evaluate the influence of temperament and family factors on bullying and help-seeking behaviors through a Bayesian network model. The study adopted a cross-sectional design and was measured using the EAS Temperament Questionnaire, the FACES IV-SOR Family Scale and the self-compiled questionnaire [6]. Data analysis results show that good family communication, high family life satisfaction and high sociability jointly predict up to 99% of the probability of seeking help [6]. The high-risk combination for bullying behavior is individuals with high emotionality (prone to pain and fear) and high activity, but living in a family environment with low cohesion and low flexibility [6]. This will make the bullied person afraid of being retaliated against, to the extent that they refrain from reporting incidents [6]. However, this study also has limitations, including a small sample size, possible bias from participants being volunteers of anti-bullying workshops, and issues regarding the reliability of self-reported data [6]. The second study, through a survey of 990 teenagers aged 11 to 20, systematically examined the reaction mechanisms of bystanders in cyberbullying using the situational experiment method. It was found that whether the victim shows emotional distress is the decisive factor driving bystanders to take intervention actions: when the victim appears depressed, bystanders are more likely to seek adult help, offer emotional support or directly stop the bullying [7]. On the contrary, it is more likely to ignore or even encourage bullies. In addition, the public nature of the incident and the anonymity of the bully can also affect the willingness of bystanders to intervene, but their influence is second only to the emotional response of the victim [7]. Research has found that whether the victim shows signs of depression strongly influences bystanders' responses, highlighting the role of emotional expression in social interactions [7]. This result demonstrates how the fear of retaliation can indirectly lead to the failure of seeking help through the psychology of an onlooker [7]. The fear of being retaliated against is not merely the inner terror of the victim; it is also a behavioral strategy that leads to their "invisibility", and this strategy directly results in the disappearance of external assistance [7]. The third study explored the factors influencing the behavior of bystanders in cyberbullying through experimental methods. Researchers designed 24 virtual scenarios, manipulated four variables: openness, anonymity, type of bullying, and victim response, and asked 990 people (545 females, 403 males, 42 undisclosed [8]; Students from secondary schools and colleges in England, aged 11 to 20 with an average of 13.16, assessed

the severity of each situation and reported their willingness to intervene as bystanders [8]. The study conducted data analysis using within-subjects ANOVA and found that the victim's response (whether depressed or not) was the strongest predictor influencing whether bystanders offered help [8]. This conclusion indicates that the intervention of bystanders is highly dependent on situational cues, which is consistent with the findings of other studies that emphasize the bystander effect and the complexity of the online environment. This pair of glasses reflects a potential reason why victims fail to seek help: the fear of revenge of the bullied person can suppress the behavior of seeking help and indirectly weaken the external support that may be obtained by influencing the victim's external performance. The fourth study adopted a sequential interpretation hybrid approach design, aiming to explore the situation of victims disclosing their bullying experiences to teachers from the perspective of victims, with a focus on analyzing the impact of direct and indirect bullying forms and the quality of teacher-student relationships. The research subjects were 190 out of 1,091 Swedish high school students (54.2% female and 43.2% male) who had experienced bullying in junior high school, and in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 of them [9]. The research first conducted quantitative analysis through questionnaire surveys, used logistic regression to examine the variable relationships, and then carried out constructivist grounded theory analysis on the interview content to explain the quantitative results [9]. Research has found that victims are more likely to disclose to teachers when they suffer from indirect bullying, such as spreading rumors or social exclusion [9]. However, many victims choose not to report [9]. Qualitative data reveals that the core reason lies in the concern that teachers' intervention is ineffective or makes the situation worse, such as teachers' failure to stop bullying, negative responses (such as asking students to "forget it" or passing the problem on to others), and even retaliation for reporting, which leads to the intensification of bullying [9]. It reveals that when students foresee that seeking help from teachers may not yield effective protection but instead intensify the bullying and lead to more severe retaliation, they tend to remain silent. In summary, in terms of research methods, these several articles employ not exactly the same but each has its own complementary approaches. At the core conclusion, these studies collectively point out that whether it is the victim seeking help or bystander intervention, it is not determined by a single cause, but rather the result of the complex interaction between an individual's internal tendencies and the characteristics of the external situation. They all emphasize that the reactions of others are the key to breaking or continuing the cycle of bullying. In terms of research limitations, although these studies have different methods, they all have their own limitations, such as the universality issue of small samples and the gap between hypothetical situations and real behaviors.

The overall conclusion of the current research is that there are many reasons why the victims of bullying are reluctant to seek help from society. The most significant reasons include distrust of the social environment or institutions, and the fear of retaliation. Based on this overall conclusion, some feasible suggestions are proposed here: Firstly, the social environment should offer more tolerance and care to the victims of bullying, and shift the focus of social attention more towards the bullies rather than the victims. It is undoubtedly important to pay attention to the physical and mental health of the victims of bullying, but if the focus is constantly on them, it will make them feel anxious and disoriented. If the social focus is more directed towards the bullies and the society gives corresponding criticism, then the situation of the victims of bullying will be much better, and they will not be in an isolated and helpless state. One of the studies also provides another feasible solution. The SHIELD framework offers a comprehensive and innovative approach, integrating strengths-based interventions, empowerment, and developmental strategies to address the key issues of juvenile bullying and cyberbullying [10]. This framework integrates evidence-based practices to

promote resilience and emotional health by emphasizing strengths, treatment, intervention, empowerment, learning and development [10]. This is a comprehensive strategy that can not only alleviate immediate damage but also cultivate long-term resilience [10]. This resilience can also help bullied individuals reduce the burden of fear of retaliation, thereby being more proactive in seeking help from society.

3. Conclusion

Based on a comprehensive analysis of multiple studies, this article explores the core reasons why bullying victims find it difficult to seek effective external assistance. Research has found that distrust of the social environment and the institution one is in, as well as fear of retaliation, are the main obstacles hindering seeking help. Meanwhile, the emotional expression of the victim, the quality of teacher-student or superior-subordinate relationships, and situational factors such as the organizational or campus atmosphere jointly influence the behavior of seeking help and the possibility of bystander intervention. To this end, the research suggests that in practice, a reliable support environment should be systematically constructed, the focus of intervention should be partially shifted to bullies, and the institutional response capacity should be strengthened. At the theoretical level, comprehensive intervention frameworks such as SHIELD, which focus on fostering resilience, can be promoted. The significance of this study lies in revealing that the key to breaking the silent cycle of bullying is to jointly build a safe and responsive social support ecosystem from multiple levels, including individual psychology, interpersonal relationships, organizational practices, and cultural contexts.

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