



Disclosing or Hiding Bullying Victimization: A Grounded Theory Study From Former Victims' Point of View

Małgorzata Wójcik¹ · Krzysztof Rzeńca¹

Accepted: 16 April 2021 / Published online: 24 April 2021
© The Author(s) 2021

Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the process of disclosing bullying victimization from the former victims' point of view. Twenty-three individuals with prior experience of victimization at school were interviewed. A grounded theory approach was used to analyze the data, which generated a grounded theory of help-seeking in victimization, comprising factors and conditions that influenced the willingness to ask for help when bullied. We concentrated on disclosure barriers and facilitators in a school context to identify important factors, which comprised type of peer harassment, type and form of initial attack, perception of available support at school, and perception of peer support. In terms of the practical implications of the present study, the identification of disclosure tendencies could provide a basis for developing school policies to facilitate disclosure.

Keywords Bullying · Victimization · Disclosure · Grounded theory

Introduction

Bullying is aggressive, goal-directed, and systematic behavior that harms individual students within the context of a power imbalance (Olweus, 1993). Bullying is universal (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Wójcik & Hełka, 2018), occurs in direct (physical, verbal, or material) and indirect forms (rumor spreading, gossiping, silent treatment, destroying reputation, exclusion, or cyberbullying) (Pyżalski, 2012; Salmivalli, 2010), and is a stressful experience for children and adolescents, especially in the case of recurrent bullying over a long period (Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Salmivalli, 2010, 2014; Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2017; Wójcik & Kozak, 2015). The costs are high and the effects far-reaching, both for victims and bullies. Victimization is associated with serious adjustment problems, including anxiety, depression, suicidal tendencies, social withdrawal, emotional dysregulation, low self-esteem, loneliness, school avoidance, poor academic results, peer rejection, and lack of friends (DeLara, 2016; Hodges & Perry, 1999; Wójcik & Flak, 2019). The impact of bullying can be felt throughout

life, resulting in adult psychological problems, described by Thornberg et al. (2013) as lingering internal victimization and after-effects of bullying. It is therefore important to identify why some bullied individuals are able to seek help effectively and avoid long-term victimization, while others decide not to disclose bullying, exposing themselves to its negative consequences (Thornberg, 2011; Wójcik & Mondry, 2020).

Certain students who are perceived to be weaker, less assertive, shy, or with characteristics seen as different may be particularly at risk of being harassed and bullied; nevertheless, all children are likely to experience some form of harassment at some point. Whether they become stable, long-term victims and their victimization reaches the ultimate stage with serious after-effects may depend on certain aspects of the school context (Wójcik & Mondry, 2020), the quality of social support and the way victims utilize it (Smith et al., 2001), and how victims cope with harassment and behave during bullying incidents.

The effectiveness of coping behavior depends on whether a bullied child uses problem-focused coping skills, such as telling bullies to stop, fighting back, and seeking help from friends or adults (Compas et al., 2001), or engages emotion-focused coping skills such as hiding, ignoring, or being nonchalant about the problem, crying, or running away (Olweus, 1993). Which coping strategy is used depends on the internal and external resources

✉ Małgorzata Wójcik
mgolonka-wojcik@swps.edu.pl

¹ Institute of Psychology, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, SWPS, Techników 9, 40-326 Katowice, Poland

available to the victimized child. Internal resources include intelligence, high self-esteem, physical strength, assertive personality, and high social skills, while external resources include social network and support, quality of friends, and the school context, including the existence of anti-bullying policies. Both sets of resources influence the likelihood of becoming a long-term victim (Thornberg, 2011; Smith & Shu, 2000).

For most students, bullying lasts for a few weeks or a semester and ends through a “bullying exit” stage (Thornberg et al., 2013); however, for some, it extends over several years, even after changing schools (Juvonen et al., 2016; Smith & Shu, 2000). Those who were bullied for longer through middle and secondary school were found to face more serious consequences, as they did not cope with victimization earlier in the process and were likely to lack coping strategies, social skills, or high-quality, protective friendships (Hodges et al., 1997). Given the negative consequences of peer harassment and their stability, it is essential to understand the determinants of chronic abuse by peers. Thus, it is valuable to investigate former victims’ perspective and interpretation of their own victimization path. A few studies have previously interviewed individuals about their victimization. De Lara (2012, 2019) identified lasting consequences of childhood bullying in young adults in terms of mental and psychological well-being, eating disorders, and relationship and trust issues. Thornberg et al. (2013) generated a grounded theory of being a victim of bullying at school and identified a basic process of victimization that consisted of four phases: initial attacks, double victimization, bullying exit, and after-effects of bullying. Wójcik (2018) added to this by showing that phases are consecutive and complemented in a multi-stage process of collective victim creation and rituals confirming the victim’s status. Yablon (2017) identified differences between teachers and students in the perception of bullying and the identification of perpetrators and showed that the identification of perpetrators of severe violence can be performed via their victims. Furthermore, Wójcik and Flak (2019) showed that the victims’ perception of the bullying situation is unique, as they are situated inside the bullying circle but not connected to others within it, which enables them to reflect on the interpersonal relations created around them. From their position of victim, they are able to observe other students’ roles and changes in behavioral patterns toward them. Very interesting results were presented by Tholander (2019), who analyzed how a victimized student framed her victimhood narrative and tried to portray herself as a genuine bullying victim during a conversation with adults at school; nevertheless, the adults’ inadequate responses increased the original suffering of the victim and created

secondary victimization by shifting the responsibility for bullying to the victim.

Theoretical Framework

The current study was based on relational model theory (Haslam & Fiske, 1999) as a conceptual umbrella. According to this theory, individuals organize their social life in terms of their relations with others, forming relational schemas or structures that represent regular interpersonal relationship patterns. These structures include images of self and others as well as scripts for expected interactions and are activated under certain circumstances to guide social perception, attribution, and behavior. Relational schemas may be specific to relationships with family, peers, teachers, or friends and are employed to make sense of interpersonal worlds. The term “horizon of expectations,” from literary theorist Jauss (1982), suggests that students could cross the perimeter—or physical horizon—of a school yard or playground by subjectively bearing a set of relational schemas, frameworks, or a “horizon of expectations” of being treated in a certain way, which shapes their subsequent coping behavior. As indicated above, early coping styles and strategies may impact the path of victimized students, leading either to short-term bullying with a quick “bullying exit” or long-term victimization lasting for many years.

Therefore, there is a clear need for further research to gain an understanding of former victims’ perspective of their victimization path, especially their own coping strategies. The present study aimed to explore how victims of bullying in the past perceived their experience, understood the relationships within the bullying context, interpreted their own coping behaviors, and the factors that might have influenced their decision to choose certain coping strategies, such as hiding or disclosing victimization.

Following their interpretations and perceptions of their own and others’ behaviors, we aimed to identify why some individuals are able to seek help and avoid long-term victimization, while others suffer in silence and decide not to disclose the bullying. As such, these individuals’ perspectives can shed light on the barriers to effective coping strategies.

Method

Participants

A volunteer sampling method was used to recruit participants. Following approval from the University Committee for Research Ethics, a recruitment questionnaire was distributed at three largest, public universities in southern Poland, as they gather students from various areas of the country and

different backgrounds, leading to a high student diversity. Moreover, there was an established cooperation between those universities and the authors' university. The questionnaire was distributed via Facebook, students' council pages, and virtual university services. The questionnaire's purpose was to identify students who had experienced bullying victimization in primary, middle, or secondary school and were willing to participate in an interview.

The questionnaire began with the definition of bullying ("School bullying is defined as repeated actions of aggression, harassment, or exclusion characterized by an intention to harm as well as an imbalance of power between the bully and victim") and examples of bullying behavior: physical (physical assault, pushing, jabbing, kicking, etc.), verbal (name calling, insults, mocking laughter, humiliating publicly by saying something, etc.), material (hiding or destroying personal belongings, forcing money from someone, etc.), relational (excluding, ignoring, gossiping, not inviting to common class events, etc.), sexual (touching or patting, making vulgar comments about appearance, or sexual behaviors), cyber (posting and circulating someone's photos without his/her knowledge, public ridicule on the internet, etc.). It took 10–20 min to complete the questionnaire.

Of those completing the questionnaire, 154 students reported past victimization and 41 agreed to participate in the interviews. Some of them later changed their minds or left for other universities as part of the Erasmus exchange program. Thus, the final sample included 23 undergraduate students: 12 females and 11 males, aged 19 to 23 years, with a mean age (*SD*) of 20.565 (1.409) years. Students reported their bullying experience began in elementary school ($n=9$), middle school ($n=8$), or secondary school ($n=6$). They were bullied over a period from 1 to 10 years, with a mean duration of 4.457 (2.804) years. Informed consent was obtained from all study participants. The students' names were changed to initials to ensure their anonymity (Table 1).

Data collection

Data were collected via semi-structured face-to-face interviews held between January and May 2019. Each participant was informed that the interview would focus on his or her experience of bullying and was assured that it would be confidential and recorded for research purposes only. An interview guide was used, but participants were encouraged to determine what they wanted to discuss. Each interview began with an open-ended question, such as "Tell me about your experiences at school" or "What are your most important memories of school?" The respondents were also encouraged to talk about their bullying experiences from the start to the end; their thoughts and actions regarding the bullying; the actions of other students and teachers; and the way they dealt with the bullying (e.g., help-seeking or

Table 1 Participants of the study

Gender Age	Initials	First attack and initial stage of bullying	Duration of bullying in years
F 19	K.M	Elementary school	8
F 21	M.M	Elementary school	9
F 20	R.J	Middle school	6
F 19	A.D	Middle school	6
M 23	T.L	Elementary school	10
M 23	K.K	Elementary school	9
M 21	M.B	Middle school	6
M 20	M.W	Middle school	6
M 19	A.O	Elementary school	7
F 22	A.M	Elementary school	1,5
F 22	S.P	Elementary school	5
F 19	D.F	Middle school	3
F 19	G.H	Middle school	2
M 19	J.L	Elementary school	5
M 21	J.K	Elementary school	3
M 21	L.Z	Secondary school	2,5
M 21	C.V	Secondary school	1
F 19	G.L	Secondary school	1
F 23	L.M	Secondary school	2
M 21	J.B	Secondary school	1,5
F 21	L.P	Middle school	3
F 19	V.S	Middle school	2
M 21	B.B	Secondary school	3

hiding). Probing questions were used to clarify respondents' descriptions and interpretations of their victimization path, such as "Tell me how it all started," "Why, in your opinion, did other students bully you?" "What did your teachers do?" "Did you try to do anything?" and "Did you ask for help?" At the end of each interview, respondents had time to add anything that they felt they needed to, ask questions, or express doubts. Each interview was conducted in a university building, lasted for an average of 56.10 min, and was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants were encouraged to take breaks whenever they wished and were offered drinks and snacks. Since interviewees were likely to talk about sensitive issues or become upset, the interviews were conducted by a qualified psychologist (first author). Participants received a refund for transport costs and a bookstore coupon in exchange for their participation in the interview.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using NVivo 11 based on a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2017), which included coding (creating

qualitative codes and categories grounded in the data), constant comparison (comparing data with data, codes with codes, data within codes, and so on), memo writing (writing down ideas about relationships between codes and other theoretical ideas that came to mind during the coding), and memo sorting. Theoretical sampling (Glaser, 2005) led to adding new questions concerning help-seeking strategies and teachers' attitudes/reactions. We initially performed open coding, which involved breaking down the data into units of meaning. Because the interviews were not structured, we analyzed the data sentence-for-sentence, looking at bullying situations, described reactions, and coping strategies. This step involved coding words, lines, and segments of data. This coding process was guided by the following analytical questions (Charmaz, 2017): What do the data suggest? What is happening in the data? What category does a specific situation or relation indicate? How did the participant perceive their classmates, teachers, other adults at school? The central themes in respondents' discourse were reporting/hiding bullying; perceived available support; received help/lack of help; and trust/distrust in others at school. These distinctions guided further analysis as we examined why some respondents chose to tell about their victimization but others suffered in silence; what facilitated and hindered disclosure; and what the outcomes of such decisions were.

In the second step, we used focused coding to cluster and organize the data. We compared the most frequent codes derived from the open coding to synthesize data into more complex concepts: onset and type of bullying; relational schemas of teachers/adults at school; and relational schemas of peers at school. Finally, we used theoretical coding (Glaser, 2005) to explore and analyze how the core conceptual categories and constructed codes related to each other. We then integrated them into a grounded theory using the theoretical codes.

Results and Discussion

The systematic analysis generated a grounded theory of help-seeking in victimization consisting of factors and conditions that influenced the willingness to ask for help when bullied. We concentrated on barriers and facilitators of disclosure in a school context and identified the following factors: peer harassment, type and form of initial attack, perception of available support at school, perception of peer group.

Type of Peer Harassment and Form of Initial Attack

Our respondents could recall their bullying journey from the initial attack to bullying exit or graduation. They were also quite aware of the bullying timeline, bullying incident occurrence, and their thoughts, interpretations, and

reactions. Each bullying path began with an initial attack, which occurred in elementary school for nine participants, middle school for eight participants, and secondary school for six. Nine participants experienced several bullying episodes (after changing school or class) with different forms of initial attack.

By initial attack, respondents meant a single act of aggression performed by a perpetrator or group of perpetrators. The same perpetrators continued bullying victims for a longer time, repeating acts of aggression in different forms. Participants mentioned four types of harassment during the early stage of bullying: physical (pushing, jabbing, stabbing with a pencil, poking), verbal (name calling, writing insulting things about somebody on a board, insults, laughing at somebody's appearance, humiliating publicly, laughing as a respond to somebody's remark or question), material (hiding, stealing destroying personal belongings, forcing money), and relational (excluding, ignoring, gossiping, stopping the conversation or whispering when person approaches, making meaningful facial expressions and/or gestures to offend somebody, spreading false, unpleasant rumors). They also talked about two major forms of initial attacks: obvious with an easily observable beginning, and insidious with a diffuse beginning that was hard to pinpoint. Physical and material acts of bullying that started with obvious, unambiguous incidents were most often disclosed (by 17 participants).

When I was nine, a group of boys chased me one day after school, beat me, and ruined my clothes. So, my mom knew what happened and reported it at school and I told my teacher about everything.

My classmates stole my wallet with money and ID, I knew I had to report it as an offense. I went straight to the headmaster.

On the other hand, relational bullying with a diffuse beginning was harder to disclose. Our respondents presented a few reasons for not reporting relational bullying. One reason was not recognizing it as bullying and therefore not reporting it (6 participants):

They called me dumpling or fat, and I kept telling my teacher about that, but I never mentioned that they didn't want to play with me or that nobody invited me to their birthday.

When I was eight, I had bruises (from being hit), so I went to my teacher and just showed her. I couldn't show or explain how they pretended that I stank and ran away from me. I didn't even know that it was something to tell my teacher.

Other reasons were connected with the feeling of shame, being afraid they would not be taken seriously, not knowing how to describe certain bullying behavior, wanting to

be independent in dealing with difficulties, and taking the blame for the situation (8 participants), as illustrated below:

Others gossiped about me being a lesbian and having different partners. Girls didn't want to sit with me. Boys were disgusted. I was too embarrassed to even mention it.

One thing is to report being beaten up – it is illegal. Another thing is reporting stigmatization and rejection. There is no school regulation saying don't reject and be nice to everybody.

Additionally, five participants mentioned relational aggression was connected with sexuality, intimacy, sexual orientation, and body changes related to puberty, which made it nearly impossible for victims to report:

They started calling me gay when I was 13, I mentioned it to my teacher, and he asked me if I was gay. So embarrassing.

Girls were comparing their busts before the PE lesson. I was flat, so they laughed at me all the time. I never told anybody.

The commencing of relational bullying was difficult to determine, and it took some time for respondents to recognize it as bullying. They noted that quarrels, fights, or teasing happened all the time at school and only sometimes turned into long-term bullying, so they delayed their decision to object or seek help. They thought it was better to hold back and see how the situation developed, so they “woke up when it was too late.” From their perspective, bullying grew step by step from single comments and jokes about mis-fitting behaviors or appearance, for example: “They looked at me when I was eating with strange smiles”; “One boy, my neighbor, told the others that my brother had Asperger's”; “A girl asked me: do you ever wash your clothes?” Then, comments intensified, became varied, and more students joined in, leading to social isolation and exclusion. Victims were already unhappy, disorientated, and insecure, which in their mind impeded help-seeking. As some of them said, “All of a sudden, I found myself alone with nobody to talk to”; “It was very slow, step by step. One day they were laughing at me, the other day everyone was ok. And after some time, I noticed that there were no more ok days.”

Relational bullying was revealed when reporting physical or material aggression (six participants) or not reported at all (six participants). Only two respondents who were victims of relational bullying and collective exclusion acts (but not physical aggression) in secondary school reported it. One decided to talk directly to the homeroom teacher; another sent print screens of conversations to a school counselor. Neither report was taken seriously, so respondents never tried again. Others reported physical and verbal bullying,

causing a reaction that eventually stopped the bullying, including its relational aspects.

Research shows different tendencies in reporting different types of bullying. Shaw et al. (2019) showed that younger students are more likely to report physical bullying, while studies with middle and high school students (Dowling & Carey, 2013) demonstrated that help-seeking is not dependent on the form of bullying. In our study, respondents remembered their reluctance to report relational aggression, but physical or material bullying were visible and apparent, which facilitated disclosure. Moreover, teachers often view physical bullying as more serious than other forms of bullying and are more likely to intervene (Craig et al., 2000). The form of the initial attack influenced victims' willingness to report, especially when it was ambiguous and prolonged. This resonates with Wójcik's (2018) concept of the collective creation of multi-deviant victim stages. The process is initiated by peers, who label one student a victim and begin with primary exclusion markers relating to mis-fitting features (e.g., fat, unfashionable, girlish, sloppy), followed by secondary exclusion markers assigned to the local class culture (e.g., listening to different music), and a story-telling stage that ultimately isolates the victim from social interaction with the class. It takes time for victims to realize that their relationship with peers has changed and that they have been labeled, which also enforces self-labeling as a victim and hinders help-seeking (Tholander, 2019). This process alters peers' and teachers' perceptions, imposing behavior changes where victims' identity and others' perceptions are reconstructed during the initial bullying stages, affecting subsequent behavior and leading to further confirmation of a victim identity. According to labeling theory in bullying (Burns et al., 2009), bullies self-label and find it difficult to break bullying behavior patterns. In our study, victims adopted the same assumptions, saying, for example, “It was too late to do anything” and “I should have told the teacher at the beginning before it was too late.”

Perception of Available Support at School

We asked our respondents how they felt about talking to the teacher or adults at school about their problems. Respondents provided several examples of the important factors that may facilitate disclosure: liking or trusting the teacher/adult (19 respondents), believing in his/her ability to assist (21 respondents), confidentiality (23 respondents), and ease of reporting (16 respondents). While talking about trust, respondents emphasized a professional, confident approach, stable position at school, and a firm, openly stated anti-bullying opinion. For example, one respondent, who was bullied for 1 year in middle school, took 5 months to decide whether to report and to whom. He carefully chose a specific teacher:

I turned to [the] biology teacher because I could trust her; she was middle-aged and had experience in dealing with school issues. The way she behaved and talked to students made me think she could help, and I was right.

Another student decided to talk to the school librarian when she realized that bullying was continuing after holiday:

I didn't know him [the librarian] very well but he was always there [in the library] calm and composed. Kind of proper adult. So, one day I pretended that I needed a book just before [the] library closed and very nervously asked if I could talk to him. It was a relief for me and a solution.

Another respondent said the following:

It's strange when I think about it, but I didn't like that teacher, I was horrible at math. She was very strict but always treated us seriously. I talked to her, she listened, carefully asked questions, asked for my suggestions. And promised to act. And so, she did.

The idea of *proper adult* (not necessarily a teacher) surfaced in several responses as an important factor in deciding to disclose. Another important characteristic of *proper adult* was the ability to assist, which was also described as responsible, consistent, and coherent behavior. As some said, "When she made a promise, she kept it"; "If he said something, he always did it no matter what"; "I was afraid of that teacher, she was serious, strict, and demanding. Always prepared and ready. When I was in trouble, I turned to her"; "I was lucky, after the whole year of harassment, we had [a] new homeroom teacher, I felt immediately that I could trust her." This perception of an adult at school facilitated the decision to report because the adult was expected to provide the right help and, more importantly, not to make the matter worse by unexpected, reckless action. By reckless action, students meant making a fuss, punishing bullies, talking openly about the case, or calling parents. As they put it, "I needed somebody diplomatic"; "Before I was bullied for the first time [at 10 years old], I told my teacher. But later [at 16 years old], it was much harder to decide who to talk to, being a teacher was not enough."

Another important factor mentioned by respondents regardless of their disclosure experience was being taken seriously by an adult (20 respondents). Although students expected effective intervention, they also focused on the importance of a supportive conversation with the teacher:

It was just before graduation, so he couldn't do much but at least talked to me and advised on my future decisions.

When I reported bullying for the first time, this teacher didn't even listen to me, so I backed away

for years. In secondary school I tried, and it was a different story. This time, my class teacher talked to me for an hour, explained how bullying worked, and assured me that there was nothing wrong with me.

What our respondents feared the most was being accused of reporting class matters to the teacher (22 respondents), so confidentiality was a main factor. The need for confidentiality was connected both with the fact of reporting and with the delicate nature of what was reported. Respondents remembered feeling ashamed and embarrassed, and they did not want a person to repeat details to anyone, especially when the aggression related to intimacy or sexuality:

I was thinking about it for weeks before revealing it. I was so ashamed that I let them treat me like trash. I even had trouble repeating what they were saying. I feel sick when I think about it.

Shame even when thinking about it now. So, I felt that if things came to light, I would have to kill myself.

Adults' availability and open, confidential access, were additional important factors. Availability could not be too obvious, but rather "*by the way*," so other students would not realize the real purpose of talking to the adult. Our respondents gave examples of reporting bullying under the guise of asking for extra help with a difficult subject, attending art club or other extracurricular subjects, or borrowing books from the library, for example:

It was easy to talk to him because he had [an] extra class: "math for dummies," which I had to attend. After class I talked to him. Normal thing, others thought I needed help with some homework. Every week my teacher had art club in the afternoon. It was a perfect opportunity. [The] library was a good place. I went there to hide from bullies and probably looked quite miserable. She asked if I was ok. First, I said nothing, but later I talked to her. Later I told another bullied boy to turn to her. I heard that the library was a place to get help, my brother's friend told me. It wasn't official or anything. But it worked well.

In contrast, official reporting channels were considered too apparent and therefore dangerous. None of our respondents reported or considered reporting bullying via an e-school system because it was perceived as unsafe and not sufficiently confidential. They also did not know who would receive the e-report. Only four students reported violence to an on-call school psychologist. As one explained, "Three times a week there was [a] psychologist who was introducing anti-bullying actions, but nobody ever visited her for fear of public reveal."

Participants (21) ruthlessly commented on a common method in Poland, namely a complaint box, usually displayed outside the headmaster or school counselor office: “You would have to walk in front of everybody to place your complaint in the box. Yah right, very confidential. How can anybody be that stupid to expect kids to do that?”.

Ease of access was also understood as an opportunity for straightforward and easy initial interaction. Several participants said that they had problems starting a conversation about bullying, especially in adolescence. This problem was particularly salient for our male participants:

I didn't know how to say it. Like say “Hello, I am bullied” or maybe start crying. So, I never even tried. I didn't say anything for 4 years. Surprisingly, nobody asked.

It's easier for smaller kids, they are used to telling [the] teacher about everything all the time. I didn't know what I should say, when was a good moment, shall I go into details, etc.

Six participants reported anonymous initial contact through email and messenger that gave them a chance to evaluate the quality of the response and decide whether they wanted to reveal their identity and continue the disclosure. Two others initiated anonymous contact and then continued. As one said, “She [class teacher] gave us an email address before a trip. I wrote anonymously to start a conversation about my situation. I gave a hint, and she picked it up. Step by step, I told her about years of bullying.”

As in previous research (Boulton et al., 2017; Shaw et al., 2019), we found that although victimized students wanted the bullying to stop, they perceived numerous barriers that prevented an open dialogue with adults at school. Respondents thoroughly analyzed both the situation and the people involved, and calculated whether the risks outweighed the benefits, where the risks concerned confidentiality, fear of ridicule, retaliation, or losing face, and the effectiveness of adult interventions (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Mishna & Alagha, 2005).

Moreover, student-adult relationships played an important role (Yablon, 2010). Students valued closeness and attached importance to professionalism, a stable position at school, and a firm anti-bullying attitude. This was consistent with Rigby and Bagshaw's (2003) findings that consideration of teacher fairness, helpfulness, and effectiveness in dealing with conflict influenced student decisions about whether they would seek help.

Respondents (19) in our study declared the need to be taken seriously, which had a positive effect even if bullying was not resolved. This need was previously demonstrated by Bauman et al. (2016), who showed that listening to a student's concerns, taking them seriously, and checking in later to see if the situation had resolved, were generally effective

strategies, while telling the student to stop “complaining” most commonly worsened the situation and hindered further problem-focused coping strategies.

Important results of this study that may have special significance for practical solutions involve easy, but not apparent to others, access to an adult to facilitate the initial contact. In a study on sexual abuse disclosure, Schaeffer et al. (2011) found that children will report abuse when they have the opportunity to do so and described this process as facilitated disclosure. They found that victims may not reveal their abuse until an external event or a supportive environment prompts them to disclose it. Facilitated disclosure may assist smooth reporting by providing a safe, confidential, *by the way* contact with a *proper adult*.

Perception of Peer Group

According to our respondents, group coherence influenced disclosure decisions. If victimized students perceived their group as coherent in their bullying attitudes, meaning that others exhibited only pro-bullying or neutral behaviors, they were rarely willing to disclose victimization. Being bullied or ignored by everyone in the class was perceived as the loss of peer support and discouraged help-seeking for two reasons: a lack of possible allies when talking to the teacher, and self-attribution: “I remember thinking that if everybody hates me, there must be something wrong with me”; “I didn't have anyone to encourage me. Like say: go and tell the teacher.”

In contrast, if a group was divided and exhibited both pro- and anti-bullying attitudes, it became easier to talk to adults about victimization. Having a friend or group of friends was a protective factor, which is consistent with other study findings (Bukowski & Sippola, 2001). A single student with a pro-victim attitude increased the chances of disclosure, even if the attitude was not presented openly in the class. Seven of our respondents mentioned individuals in their classes who were friendly outside the class context, which provided encouragement and confirmed that bullying should be reported. One respondent said, “He was not my friend or anything, but anytime we met after school, he was saying that what they were doing (bullying) was not ok and I should tell somebody about it.” Moreover, 10 participants remembered spontaneous decisions about reporting after being defended by someone:

A new student came to the class, very handsome and sporty, and when girls started to laugh at me, he told them that it was mean and cruel, and they should be ashamed. And you know, I thought that he was right, they should be ashamed not me, and the same day I went to talk to the headmaster.

Perception of Unique Versus Shared Plight

When discussing their school and class life, respondents referred to their fate as either unique or shared with other individuals. This perception was related to their willingness to tell an adult at school. Out of 17 respondents who never talked to anybody at school or stopped talking about it after few attempts, 11 said that there were no other long-term victims in their school or class context. They remembered incidents of aggression, short episodes of plotting against somebody, or disagreements within friends' groups, but they all ended after 2 to 4 weeks. This hindered students' willingness to report for three reasons: they considered the bullying their fault; it was difficult to talk to the teacher because there was no link to other cases; and bullying was not discussed during lessons, so they did not feel that it was something to be reported.

It is hard to believe, but for 4 years, I was the only one bullied in my class. It wasn't open aggression, but I was completely alone. Everyone else was getting along, so there was no point in reporting this situation. I was the only fat girl and the only victim of bullying. So, I believed it was natural that nobody liked me. Bulling was no subject, it was never mentioned, so I didn't want to be the first infamous victim.

Six respondents remembered victims in their own class or at school. They felt better mainly because it meant that they were not alone and bullying was not their fault. Moreover, after some bullying incidents, teachers talked about it during lessons, so it was easier to report.

There was another girl excluded from the class. She wasn't my friend, but she was ok. It felt better because it meant I wasn't a weirdo. I went to my teacher to report that she was bullied, and then by the way I said it was also my problem.

Surprisingly, the perception of a shared plight did not stem only from observation in one's own school but also came from other sources. Seven respondents watched vlogs recorded by victims, a few read articles about bullying in Polish schools, and others participated in lessons that presented the percentage of bullied students in Poland and worldwide. In all those cases, respondents remembered that they felt better about themselves, and some decided to talk to an adult at school.

I watched Amanda Todd's video. She was bullied, and she made a goodbye video telling her story, and after that she committed suicide. I remember thinking that I wasn't the only one. After a few days, I went to a school counselor.

What saved me, in a way, was a lesson with a graph that said that 35% of students in secondary schools are

excluded and bullied. I was 15 at that time, and it was a revelation.

As Corsaro (2005) and Wójcik (2018) suggested, students create and participate in their own unique peer culture, sharing a normative set of beliefs on power distribution, inclusion and exclusion criteria, peer relationship guidelines, and rules on punishment and reward. Group unity may constitute support for a culture of bullying, hindering coping strategies (Unnever & Cornell, 2003). Bullied students self-assess from their own frame of reference and the way they see themselves from the standpoint of their group. When students realize that they have no allies, the reason for victimization can be attributed only to themselves, which hinders disclosure (Graham & Juvonen, 1998). Similarly, social comparison with other bullied students influences the decision to seek help. Huitsing et al. (2019) reported that perceiving a shared plight protected youth from forming negative beliefs about themselves and decreased the risk of hiding the victimization; it also enabled the initial steps to report by providing an example to which students could refer. This might empower students in the same way as prior reporting, that is, as a bystander to another's victimization (Shaw et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Despite the small scale of this qualitative study, we explored the circumstances within a school context when bullying was disclosed or hidden. Those circumstances differed; some victims immediately told an adult, some waited for the right moment, person, or other favorable condition, and some never disclosed. Disclosure brought about various outcomes: an end to or continuation of victimization; continuation of the disclosure; or temporarily or permanently going back into hiding. This study further explored how victims perceived the factors within a school context that facilitated or hindered reporting. The results have limited general applicability but advance our understanding of the dilemmas faced by bullied students. Although retrospective studies rely entirely on the self-reports of former victims, who themselves cannot objectively identify a causal relationship, they provide an account of how adults interpret their childhood victimization experiences.

Becoming a victim of bullying enforces the reorganization of an individual's social life and relations with others (Tholander, 2019; Wójcik & Flak, 2019). Based on what they are experiencing, individuals develop relational structures that guide their perceptions, attributions, and behavior. Those structures include images of self and others within the immediate school context, namely peers and adults. This helps individuals make sense of their interpersonal

world, navigate the dangerous territory of victimization, and make everyday decisions, including those about disclosure, which is crucial both for the victims' wellbeing and bullying prevention.

Although identifying victims of violence and gathering information from them may be easier than finding perpetrators, studies show that victims are underreported and therefore unidentified (Ahn et al., 2013). Victims can suffer bullying for a long time without anyone knowing; even when adults witness obvious cases of bullying, they are often hesitant to intervene either because they do not feel prepared to do so effectively or because they are not sure if the bullied students would want the intervention (Novick & Isaacs, 2010). For useful prevention and intervention, victims need to report or seek help from the school staff when violence happens. The results of this study may help educators create the conditions that facilitate disclosure of relational and other forms of harassment.

Our findings highlight several factors that need to be considered. One such factor was students' reluctance to report relational aggression. Victimized students were sometimes unaware of relational aggression forms and did not recognize it as bullying; alternatively, they felt too ashamed, were afraid of not being taken seriously, had problems describing this type of victimization, felt the need to be independent, or thought it was entirely their fault. Another important issue was the form of the initial attack and its influence on the willingness to report it. The hardest to disclose was relational bullying, which begins in a diffuse, ambiguous, and prolonged way. It was difficult for victimized students to decide whether it was just teasing or actual bullying, and they therefore postponed the decision to report until it was "too late." It is not clear why victimized students considered it too late to report, but it might relate to certain steps in the bullying path (Wójcik, 2018) or to the victim's self-labeling (Burns et al., 2009). Thus, this phenomenon needs further research.

Our study results that are especially important for bullying prevention involve the school factors that facilitate or hinder disclosure. Some of these factors are linked to the perceived support available from school staff, while some are linked to the perceived peer group. Our respondents rarely talked about the entire school climate or school policy but concentrated on individuals with certain characteristics who seemed most suitable to trust and therefore report to. As such, professionalism, confidence, and a firm, openly stated, anti-bullying attitude were the most important characteristics. Equally important was consistent and coherent behavior reflecting a lack of reckless actions that might worsen the individual's situation.

Apart from *proper adult* features, respondents favored easy, safe, and confidential access to an adult. The need for confidentiality has been identified in previous studies

(Wójcik, 2018), but our study found specific rules for facilitated disclosure regarding adults' availability and first contact. It is essential that availability is not evident to others, but rather a *by the way* approach, so other students are not aware of the real reason for talking to the adult. Official reporting channels were perceived as unsafe and not confidential. Another important factor was a straightforward initial interaction to facilitate taking the first step and starting the conversation. Anonymous online contact presents an easy way to begin disclosure.

Unsurprisingly, victims formed a relational schema of their class that played a significant role in social perception, attribution, and expectation of being treated in a certain way. This perception of group composition and a unique versus shared plight influenced coping behavior. Groups perceived as coherent in their bullying attitudes (only pro-bullying and neutral behaviors) hinder disclosure because they leave students feeling that "everybody is against me." This pushes them into self-attribution of bullying, and they subsequently avoid any problem-focused coping, including disclosure. However, one classmate who breaks the pattern of pro-bullying or neutral behavior can facilitate disclosure. The finding that those victimized alone were unwilling to report is consistent with previous research.

Our study complements previous findings by advancing knowledge on shared plights in bullying, where observing that others were/are also harassment targets can facilitate help-seeking and disclosure (Graham & Juvonen, 1998; Kelley, 1973). Further, our results advance potential ways to change individuals' perception of their plight from unique to shared, such as access to trustworthy information on bullying prevalence (e.g., articles, research, school psychologist lessons), viewing a vlog recorded by other victimized students, or learning about the group dynamics responsible for instigating and maintaining bullying in the peer group.

Practical Implications

Our findings have implications for anti-bullying practices developed by teachers and other school personnel. Identifying the predictors of students' willingness to report may help schools to address the factors inhibiting victimized students' help-seeking and better identify those in need of help, who may not reach out to an adult on their own. Our findings also have important policy implications. Schools should plan for facilitated disclosure, regardless of any existing anti-bullying policies, to assist those students in schools that are struggling by implementing anti-bullying programs (Unnever & Cornell, 2003). Additionally, even in schools with strong anti-bullying policies and successful interventions, there are still students who remain or will become victims and need a safe context and easy opportunity for disclosure. Facilitated disclosure should include the creation of a safe context for *by the way* disclosure,

which might be, for instance, a school library, extracurricular activities, or science or art clubs; selection and training of at least one adult at the school who meets the criteria for a *proper adult*; means for facilitating the first step (the beginning of a conversation), for example, by introducing an anonymous online reporting or contact system (e.g., Resql in Polish schools); analyzing existing systems for their level of confidentiality and anonymity.

It is also very important to raise teachers' and students' awareness regarding relational bullying from the earliest age; bullying prevalence (e.g., by openly discussing prevalence or presenting data on bullying in the country); and group dynamics (e.g., the circle of bullying, and the mechanisms responsible for its onset and maintenance).

Moreover, our findings have serious implications for prevention and intervention programs that impose punishment or implement a "zero tolerance" policy, suggesting that such strategies may further deter students' from reporting. Victims' views on "reckless actions" show that knowing bullies would be punished is associated with a lower likelihood of disclosure. Therefore, it may be useful to assure victims that punishment would be the last resort, and that the reporting student's identity would be protected.

It is important to note that even when teachers feel powerless to face bullying or do not feel supported by school bullying policies, they should be aware that they can have a profound indirect impact on a victim's situation by altering the student's perception of his/her victim schema's self-components. The teacher's support may break the chain of cognitive, affective, and interpersonal events that hinder effective coping strategies and lead to long-term victimization (Bauman et al., 2016).

Limitations

This study must be considered in light of its limitations. First, in qualitative interviews, there is a higher risk of social desirability bias compared with anonymous questionnaires. There is also a risk of recall bias, especially in cases where data are collected a long time after the events. Self-report can potentially distort experiences, as it can be difficult to remember the details of a whole year's worth of experiences (Berlan et al., 2010). In addition, by intentionally focusing only on the school context, we omitted individual or family conditions that may have influenced respondents' experiences; further studies are needed to gain a fuller understanding of the relations and processes that influence help-seeking. Furthermore, we our respondents were from Poland, and their experience might differ from those who attend school elsewhere, given the contextual and cultural variations across countries and educational systems.

Funding This study was co-financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education subsidies for maintaining and developing the didactic

and research potential of the Psychology Institute of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities SWPS (Grant number: 1567).

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Ahn, H.-J., Rodkin, P. C., & Gest, S. (2013). Teacher–student agreement on bullies and kids they pick on in elementary school classrooms: Gender and grade differences. *Theory into Practice*, 52, 257–263. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2013.829728>
- Bauman, S., Meter, D. J., Nixon, C., & Davis, S. (2016). Targets of peer mistreatment: Do they tell adults? What happens when they do? *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 57, 118–124. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2016.03.013>
- Berlan, E. D., Corliss, H. L., Field, A. E., Goodman, E., & Austin, S. B. (2010). Sexual orientation and bullying among adolescents in the growing up today study. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 46, 366–371. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2009.10.015>
- Boulton, M. J., Boulton, L., Down, J., Sanders, J., & Craddock, H. (2017). Perceived barriers that prevent high school students seeking help from teachers for bullying and their effects on disclosure intentions. *Journal of Adolescence*, 56, 40–51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2016.11.009>
- Bradshaw, C. P., Sawyer, A. L., & O'Brennan, L. M. (2007). Bullying and peer victimization at school: Perceptual differences between students and school staff. *School Psychology Review*, 36(3), 361–382
- Bukowski, W. M., & Sippola, L. K. (2001). Groups, individuals and victimization: A view of the peer system. In J. Juvonen & S. Graham (Eds.), *Peer harassment in school: The plight of the vulnerable and victimized*. Guilford Press.
- Burns, S., Maycock, B., Cross, D., & Brown, G. (2009). The power of peers: Why some students bully others to conform. *Qualitative Health Research*, 18, 1704–1716. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732308325865>
- Charmaz, K. (2017). The power of constructivist grounded theory for critical inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 23, 34–45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800416657105>
- Compas, B. E., Connor-Smith, J. K., Saltzman, H., Thomsen, A. H., & Wadsworth, M. E. (2001). Coping with stress during childhood and adolescence: Problems, progress, and potential in theory and research. *Psychological Bulletin*, 127(1), 87
- Corsaro, W. A. (2005). Collective action and agency in young children's peer cultures. In J. Qvortrup (Ed.), *Studies in modern childhood*. Palgrave.
- Craig, W. M., Henderson, K., & Murphy, J. G. (2000). Prospective teachers' attitudes toward bullying and victimization. *School Psychology International*, 21(1), 5–21
- DeLara, E. W. (2012). Why adolescents don't disclose incidents of bullying and harassment. *Journal of School Violence*, 11(4), 288–305. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2012.705931>
- DeLara, E. W. (2016). *Bullying scars: The impact on adult life and relationships*. Oxford University Press.

- DeLara, E. W. (2019). Consequences of childhood bullying on mental health and relationships for young adults. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 28, 2379–2389. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-018-1197>
- Dowling, M. J., & Carey, T. A. (2013). Victims of bullying: Whom they seek help from and why: An Australian sample. *Psychology in the Schools*, 50(8), 798–809. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.21709>
- Espelage, D. L., & Swearer, S. M. (2003). Research on school bullying and victimization: What have we learned and where do we go from here? *School Psychology Review*, 32(3), 365–383
- Espelage, D. L., & Swearer, S. M. (2004). *Bullying in American schools: A socioecological perspective on prevention and intervention*. Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Gini, G., & Pozzoli, T. (2009). Association between bullying and psychosomatic problems: A meta-analysis. *Pediatrics*, 123(3), 1059–1065. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2008-1215>
- Glaser, B. G. (2005). *The grounded theory perspective III: Theoretical coding*. Sociology Press.
- Graham, S., & Juvonen, J. (1998). Self-blame and peer victimization in middle school: An attributional analysis. *Developmental Psychology*, 34(3), 587. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.34.3.587>
- Haslam, N., & Fiske, A. P. (1999). Relational models theory: A confirmatory factor analysis. *Personal Relationships*, 6(2), 241–250. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.1999.tb00190.x>
- Hodges, E. V., Malone, M. J., & Perry, D. G. (1997). Individual risk and social risk as interacting determinants of victimization in the peer group. *Developmental Psychology*, 33(6), 1032. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.33.6.1032>
- Hodges, E. V., & Perry, D. G. (1999). Personal and interpersonal antecedents and consequences of victimization by peers. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 76(4), 677. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.76.4.677>
- Huitsing, G., Lodder, G. M., Oldenburg, B., Schacter, H. L., Salmivalli, C., Juvonen, J., & Veenstra, R. (2019). The healthy context paradox: Victims' adjustment during an anti-bullying intervention. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 28, 2499–2509. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-018-1194-1>
- Jauss, H. R. (1982). *Toward an aesthetic of reception*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Juvonen, J., Schacter, H. L., Sainio, M., & Salmivalli, C. (2016). Can a school-wide bullying prevention program improve the plight of victims? Evidence for risk \times intervention effects. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 84, 334–344. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ccp0000078>
- Kelley, H. H. (1973). The processes of causal attribution. *American Psychologist*, 28(2), 107. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0034225>
- Mishna, F., & Alaggia, R. (2005). Weighing the risks: A child's decision to disclose peer victimization. *Children & Schools*, 27(4), 217–226
- Novick, R. M., & Isaacs, J. (2010). Telling is compelling: The impact of student reports of bullying on teacher intervention. *Educational Psychology*, 30(3), 283–296. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410903573123>
- Olweus, D. (1993). *Bullying at school: What we know and what we can do*. Blackwell Publishers.
- Pyżalski, J. (2012). From cyberbullying to electronic aggression: Typology of the phenomenon. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 17(3–4), 305–317
- Rigby, K., & Bagshaw, D. (2003). Prospects of adolescent students collaborating with teachers in addressing issues of bullying and conflict in schools. *Educational Psychology*, 23(5), 535–546. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144341032000123787>
- Salmivalli, C. (2010). Bullying and the peer group: A review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 15, 112–120. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2009.08.00>
- Salmivalli, C. (2014). Participants roles in bullying: How can peer bystanders be utilized in interventions? *Theory into Practice*, 54, 286–292. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2014.947222>
- Schaeffer, P., Leventhal, J. M., & Asnes, A. G. (2011). Children's disclosures of sexual abuse: Learning from direct inquiry. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 35(5), 343–352. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2011.01.014>
- Shaw, T., Campbell, M. A., Eastham, J., Runions, K. C., Salmivalli, C., & Cross, D. (2019). Telling an adult at school about bullying: Subsequent victimization and internalizing problems. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 28(9), 2594–2605. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-019-01507-4>
- Smith, P. K., & Shu, S. (2000). What good schools can do about bullying: Findings from a survey in English schools after a decade of research and action. *Childhood*, 7(2), 193–212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568200007002005>
- Smith, P. K., Shu, S., & Madsen, K. (2001). Characteristics of victims of school bullying. In J. Juvonen & S. Graham (Eds.), *Peer harassment in school: The plight of the vulnerable and victimized*. Guilford Press.
- Tholander, M. (2019). The making and unmaking of a bullying victim. *Interchange*, 50(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10780-019-09349-1>
- Thornberg, R. (2011). 'She's weird!'—the social construction of bullying in school: A review of qualitative research. *Children & Society*, 25, 258–267. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.2011.00374.x>
- Thornberg, R., Halldin, K., Bolmsjö, N., & Petersson, A. (2013). Victimising of school bullying: A grounded theory. *Research Papers in Education*, 28, 309–329. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2011.641999>
- Tłuściak-Deliowska, A. (2017). *Dręczenie szkolne*. Społeczno-pedagogiczna analiza zjawiska.
- Unnever, J. D., & Cornell, D. (2003). The culture of bullying. *Journal of School Violence*, 2, 5–27. https://doi.org/10.1300/J202v02n02_02
- Wójcik, M. (2018). The parallel culture of bullying in Polish secondary schools: A grounded theory study. *Journal of Adolescence*, 69, 72–79. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2018.09.005>
- Wójcik, M., & Flak, W. (2019). Frenemy: A new addition to the bullying circle. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260519880168>
- Wójcik, M., & Hełka, A. M. (2018). Meeting the needs of young adolescents: ABBL anti-bullying program during middle school transition. *Psychological Reports*, 122(3), 1043–1067. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033294118768671>
- Wójcik, M., & Kozak, B. (2015). Bullying and exclusion from dominant peer group in Polish middle schools. *Polish Psychological Bulletin*, 46, 2–14. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ppb-2015-0001>
- Wójcik, M., & Mondry, M. (2020). "The game of bullying": Shared beliefs and behavioral labels in bullying among middle schoolers. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 24(4), 276–293. <https://doi.org/10.1037/gdn0000125>
- Yablon, Y. B. (2010). Student-teacher relationships and students' willingness to seek help for school violence. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 27(8), 1110–1123. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407510381255>
- Yablon, Y. B. (2017). Students' reports of severe violence in school as a tool for early detection and prevention. *Child Development*, 88(1), 55–67. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12679>

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.