

Lived Experiences of Bullied High School Male-Gay Students: Towards Mental Health Policy Adoption

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Abstract: School bullying has been a major concern than it has ever been before. Alongside understanding bullying, attention should also be given on its damaging impact on the mental health of young people who experience it. Grounded on Hutchinson's Conflict Theory, this study delved on the lived experiences of fifteen (15) bullied male-gay high school students. This study utilized the Husserlian descriptive phenomenology in exploring and describing the experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms and significance of experience of the student-participants. The study used snowball sampling technique where data was confirmed based on in-depth one-on-one semi-structured interviews among participants from two high schools in Burauen District, DepEd Leyte Division, Eastern Visayas. Findings revealed six (6) interesting themes: "a bitter pill to swallow"; "thorns in the heart"; "passing through the wall"; "sweet altering to bitterness"; "it's not written on the rock"; and "keeping a distance". The implications of the study may serve as basis for discussion, formulation of bullying prevention policies and adoption of mental health programs. This may also give insights to school administrators to identify series of actions and interventions the school might take to mitigate the problems.

Keywords: School bullying, Conflict Theory, challenges, coping mechanisms, mental health

1. Introduction

Bullying is one of the major problems over several countries. It has always occurred and over the last few decades, there was an increased amount of research due to the necessary changes in social attitudes.

According to Vol (2008), Filipino children have a higher rate of being made fun by other children at 57-58% than school children in Australia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan. Bullying has increasingly become a central topic in intervention and research as well as a major topic of public concern drawing media attention, with articles in major newspaper and magazines reporting cases of children who have either committed or attempted suicide due to being victimized at school (Rigby & Smith, 2011).

Bullying is a serious matter for it doesn't only deal with the physical effects, but also socially, mentally and emotionally. The ones that are being bullied can experience depression, changes in sleep and eating patterns, loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy, etc. Unfortunately, if no one will seek solution, the bullied will continue to suffer while bully will continue to bully. In short, the society and future may be in chaos.

The goal of this study is to portray the possible impact of bullying. The researcher wanted to know the lived experiences of the bullied male gay students. The researcher also wanted to seek solution from this continuously spreading phenomenon.

Several researchers about school bullying had been conducted in the past (Mizzi, 2013). It had been an international concern as it pose great implication to mental health. However, first-hand studies about bullying among high school students and its possible implication to students'

mental health are still very limited, and no phenomenological inquiry had been conducted especially about bullying experiences among junior and senior high school students in the Philippines.

The researcher hopes to contribute knowledge in relation to the lived experiences of the bullied male gay students with the aim in view to describe, explore and document their experiences. This may give light to administrators in formulating policies and programs that would help address the problem.

2. Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to get a deeper understanding of the subjective, lived experiences and perspectives that the bullied male gay students experienced. Specifically, the following questions were explored: 1) What are the unique individual experiences of the male-gay students who have been bullied? 2) How can bullying affect their behavior and social life? 3) How did they manage to overcome those experiences? 4) What meaning do participants ascribe to those experiences?

Theoretical Underpinning

This study is anchored on Conflict Theory. According to Hutchinson (2011), Conflict Theory is the imbalance of power, inequality, and instances of oppression. Conflict theory can also be applied on a large or small scale to study group-based patterns of inequality or imbalance of power as well as on their small individual scale and how it affects human behavior. Additionally, Conflict theory raises issues of status in considering human diversity, all relating back to the social justice mission.

3. Review of Literature

Bullying is defined in different ways, but researchers agree that it is a form of aggression, and for bullying to occur, three characteristics must be present: (1) The behavior is meant to inflict physical or psychological harm, (2) The behavior must be repeated overtime and, (3) There is an imbalance of power among the people involved (Banks, 1997; Deitrich, 1997; Espelage and Swearer, 2003; Nansel et al., 2001).

Whether it takes physical, verbal or sexualized forms, in person or in social media, bullying endangers the safety, health and education of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) youth (Ryan, 2017). Studies in the Philippines have found that, among young LGBT people, low self-esteem and poor self-acceptance, with discrimination was also linked to destructive coping behaviors such as substance use or unprotected sex due to anxiety, isolation and depression. To consider something as bullying, it should be done severely and repeatedly. It should also have a hostile effect on the environment (Tinio, 2013).

Gutierrez (2013) emphasized that whether its physical, verbal, or cyber bullying, school should have their own policies and reinforcement for those who commit such act.

The Department of Education documented more than 1700 cases of child abuse and bullying in school year 2013-2014. Sixty (60) percent of these cases have already been resolved (DepEd, 2014).

Bullying is a relationship problem. It is the assertion of interpersonal power through aggression. Bullying involves: a) repeated and consistent negative actions against another; and b) an imbalance of power between the bully and the target as a result of the bullying episode where the child who bullies may feel excited, powerful and amused while the target may feel afraid, embarrassed or hurt (Alberta, 2008). Freedman, Kevorkian, and D'Antona (2002) stated that, bullying goes to the care on how people treat each other. Verbal bullying begins when children and people in general do not treat each other with respect and use vulgar words to hurt or to humiliate another person which includes name calling, insulting, making racist comments, and constant teasing.

According to Bullock (2012), people who use their friends to bully others are called relational bullies. They use their friends to hurt their own peers. For instance, a bully spread lies about a member of their group, spoils other's secrets, and asks someone else to attack a certain person.

A research about relationship between repeated peer bullying and the indication of anxiety and depression in early teen years by Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin, and Patton was conducted in 2001. The researcher found evidence that past event of victimization and reduced social interaction foresees the start of emotional problems. The results have proposition for how important the occurrence of victimization is cared for and for motivation of intervention program focusing on mental health problem and bullying.

Larson (2008) in his research conducted by the National Mental Health Association in 2002, he found that 78% of the general population of student reported those gay students and those who were thought to be gay to have been bullied.

Saleban, Sano, Tanganco, Tingda, Toryaden, and Zapanta (2012) conducted a study to investigate the manifested bullying behaviours of students in Baguio City National High School Main Campus and Pines City National High School Annex in Quezon Hill. The results revealed that there is on-going manifested bullying behaviour that is happening in secondary public schools on Baguio City. The researchers found out that physical bullying scored the highest in terms of being experienced by the high school students. Based on the result, male gays are more affected in bullying incidents because they are more emotional than girls. The result also shows that gays can easily cope with bullying incidents, because they prefer to be with their close friends or best friends after being bullied.

Being a victim of school bullying is associated with a number of different dimensions of internal distress and psychological problems. Research has shown that students affected by bullying run a higher risk of developing depression, anxiety, loneliness, distrust of others, poor social adjustment, low self-esteem, poor academic achievement and mental health problems as compared to others.

4. Methods and Design

The study used Husserlian Phenomenology and Colaizzi's Method for data analysis to allow the researcher to get a deeper understanding of the subjective, lived experiences and perspectives of the male gay bullied students.

Descriptive phenomenology is widely used in social science research as a method to explore and describe the lived experience of individuals (Christensen, 2017). Husserl's descriptive or transcendental phenomenology was so called because the observer could transcend the phenomena and meanings being investigated to take a global view of the essences discovered, the settling for generic descriptions of the essences and phenomena without moving to a 'fine-grained' view of the essences and phenomena under investigation (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Phenomenological study is to describe 'lived experience' of a phenomenon. Essentially, the focus is on the meaning of experiences and behavior (Waters, 2017).

The process of Colaizzi was used in extracting, organizing, and exploring the data (Sanders, 2014). The researcher listened to the audio records numerous times to absorb the whole experience and understand the participants' thoughts. This was done before extracting the significant statements and formulating the meanings and themes.

The researcher himself was the main instrument of the study who conducted in-depth one-on-one semi-structured face-to-face interview, transcriptions and analysis. A number of significant statements and theme clusters were integrated to formulate the overall themes which describe the phenomenon thoroughly. In qualitative researches, researcher both influences on and take effect from the

research procedure. Since the goal of qualitative phenomenological research is to describe a 'lived experience' of a phenomenon (Waters, 2017), the researcher as instrument provides an opportunity for him to enter into the unknown world of individual about the phenomena in question.

The bracketing techniques that were considered in the study include the suspension of literature review until after the analysis of data and sensitivity to one's issues and articulation of one's predispositions. This was achieved by holding the researcher's own biases towards the problem. Bracketing is a method used in qualitative research to mitigate the potentially deleterious effects of preconceptions that may taint the research process (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Participants of the Study

Data were collected from fifteen (15) senior high school male students in two high schools in Burauen District, DepEd Leyte Division, Eastern Visayas. Saturation point was reached with the 15th participant. Their ages range from 12-18 years old. Snowball sampling design was used in this study since the researcher chose the subjects whom he is sure could correspond to the objectives of the study (Baraceros, 2016). In this sampling technique, research participants recruit other participants for a study. It is used where potential participants are hard to find (Glen, 2014). It is called snowball because once you have the ball rolling, it picks up more "snow" and become larger and larger (Cristobal & Cristobal, 2013). In this study, this was employed by asking bullied male gay students to refer to the researcher other bullied male gay students that they know. The participants were audio-taped after getting their consent.

Table 1: Profile of Participants

Participants (Pseudonym)	Age	Grade level
Jeff	18	12
Nathan	17	11
Louis	14	10
Rick	18	12
Jerry	14	10
Gill	12	9
Josh	13	9
Mark	14	11
Alwen	18	12
Dave	14	11
Arwen	16	12
Rodel	15	11
Jay	12	8
Carl	14	9
Neil	12	8

Ethical Considerations

The researcher adhere to the ethical codes and policies for research in the conduct of the study. Written permission was submitted to the principals of the two schools before conducting the interviews to the students. He then asked the participants' consent and demographic data. The rationale and possible implications of the study were explained to them. Participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of whatever data that will be gathered. He also asked the participant's consent for the audiotaping of the

interview. The interview questions were open-ended which covers the unique experiences, perspectives and coping mechanisms of the participants to the situation. After the results have been consolidated, the researcher validated the transcriptions from the participants, who in turn enriched and augmented the descriptions with additional information.

5. Results and Discussion

The themes of meaning that describe the unique individual experiences of the bullied high school male gay students were as follows:

Theme No. 1: "A bitter pill to swallow"

Due to the occurrence of the phenomenon, the participants encountered negative experience from bullies around them which gave a huge impact to their disposition in life.

Ricky, a grade 12 student said: "...When I was 10 years old, in grade 5, I had experienced harassment as well as insults from people, like the by-standers in my neighbor's 'sari-sari' store. I don't understand why they're doing that to me. Sometimes, I couldn't just take it."

Victims of bullying are repeatedly exposed to negative actions over time, and has difficulty defending him/herself as a result of the power imbalance between him/herself and the bully or bullies.

A similar experience was shared by Neil: "Some of my classmates and schoolmates would call me 'bayot' (gay) instead of calling me by my name... I felt bad. It hurts inside."

Name-calling, teasing and rumor spreading are just some of the negative actions that might take place during bullying aside from hitting, kicking, threatening (Olweus, 1993).

Theme No. 2: "Thorns in the Heart"

Participants expressed how painful bullying is. The pain that was given by the bully leave scars to their hearts. Even the greatest doctor cannot heal it. It can be forgiven but can't be forgotten.

As expressed by Carl: "What they have done is painful. They don't know how to give respect to someone like me..."

Jay narrated: "Whenever I see the person (bully), my heart beats so fast. My heart is liked crumpled. I would remember what he did to me."

Feeling afraid and embarrassed or hurt are common sentiments that are experienced by victims of bullying (Pappas, 2013). This is alarming as this may result in increased suicide risk, depression, poor school performance, and low self-esteem

Theme No. 3: "Sweet altering to bitterness"

The student-participants who were bullied felt a sudden effect of the situation concerning their emotions. They felt hatred, anger, mad, and even say such words that they don't even dare to speak.

As pointed out by Alwen, senior high school student: *“Well, when there’s someone who bully me, I felt hatred and anger and if I can’t withstand with it already, I would say painful words.”*

Rodel made mention: *There are times when I failed to control my thoughts coz I’m carried-away with the situation. I felt like I’m evil and bad just like them.”*

Arwen also said: *“Sometimes I feel mad to others and sometimes I get mad to persons who are not involved. I felt I’m bitter.”*

According to Bond, et. al. (2001), past events of victimization and reduced social interaction foresees the start of sudden change of attitude among victims of bullying and this may develop severe mental illness like depression.

Theme No. 4: “Passing through the wall”

Some participants identified coping mechanisms to overcome the experiences. It was difficult at first, but as time goes by, they were able find strategies on how to deal with it.

As explained by Jeff: *“I just ignore them because my mother once told me that, if you mind them, they will continue doing what they are doing.”*

This was affirmed by Nathan: *“I don’t mind what they have said because I know that someday, they will be tired of teasing me.”*

Without hesitation, Jerry said: *“I just kept myself busy to forget those things.”*

These responses reflected positive insights of victims with regards to creating positive goals that may increase their self-esteem. It made them more confident to face challenges.

Theme No. 5: “It’s not written on the rock”

The participants behave in a different way from the way they are. Change occurs to their behavior after the bullying incidence.

Dave stated: *“I always get angry. I don’t want to go to school sometimes and the worst part is I also try to bully other people.”*

As revealed by Josh: *“I learned how to fight because I don’t want things to be repeated again from what happened to me when I was 10 years of age.”*

Evidence on bullying has highlighted the detrimental effects of being bullied on children’s mental health and shift of behavior (Gini and Pozzoli, 2009; Lereya et al., 2011).

Theme No. 6: “Keeping a Distance”

Due to the occurrence of this phenomenon, the participants tend to have a great distance from other people.

Jerry shared: *“I’m depressed. I became detached from other people, especially if the incident is still fresh.”*

Further, Alwen commented: *“It affects my social life through having low self-esteem, anger, and grief. It affects*

my social status that lead to my loss of self-confidence of facing other people.”

Gill also shared: *“I felt like I’m losing self-confidence to communicate with other people.”*

There is a strong connection between victimization and indications of depression and anxiety. Therefore, poor social relationships with peers and a history of victimization lead to problems among young adolescents (Bond et. al., 2001).

6. Conclusion

Bullying is a serious problem that can dramatically affect the ability of students to progress academically and socially

Most of the participants experienced harassment and verbal bullying when they were in the elementary. They were being bullied not only in the streets or plaza, but also in the school. They were also teased and called by different names. Gay students who are involved in bullying are depressed. They also feel so ashamed every time they are being bullied. There is a manifestation of victimization and indications of depression and anxiety, which are indicators of mental health problems.

Further, the participants tend to go away from other people, but in the end, among the circumstances they have been through, they still mingle with others and just ignore the bullies. They cope up with this phenomenon by simply ignoring it.

7. Recommendations

Given the possible impact of bullying to students’ mental health, school may offer a promising venue for prevention and support to victims.

School management may conduct capability training programs to equip teachers with content and pedagogical knowledge and skills in handling bullying cases and in reaching victims. Learning action cells, mentoring and technical assistance will be helpful in capacitating teachers.

The Department of Education may establish mechanism to solve the problem. The findings of the study may be considered as policy research or evidence in establishing programs and projects. Policies shall be in place in school that prohibits victimization of bullying.

Future researchers may do further researches in relation establishing intervention programs to solve bullying incidence.

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