

An Autoethnography of Bullying and University Climate: A University Student's Lived Experiences



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Abstract: *Bullying remains a salient issue facing university students, necessitating continued research from diverse methodological lenses. This autoethnographic study explores bullying and climate issues from an insider student perspective. The researcher leverages their personal experiences with bullying victimisation and witnessing as current university students. Through reflective writing, they provide detailed first-person accounts of specific bullying events and perceptions of the broader campus climate. Qualitative analysis of these emotive narratives reveals key themes around the persistence of bullying behaviours, complex bystander dynamics, unsupportive institutional responses, and protective factors like inclusive climate and student empowerment that could be expanded upon. While limited in generalizability, the findings demonstrate autoethnography's potential for generating nuanced, experiential insights on bullying complementing traditional prevalence data. Practical implications highlight opportunities for anti-bullying education, policy improvements, youth-adult partnership, and further research centred on student voices.*

Key Words: Bullying, Autoethnography, School Climate, Student Experience, Phenomenology, Bystander Intervention, Youth Participatory Research

Introduction

Bullying is a critical issue hurting people in all occupations, but it is most prevalent in the education and workplace sectors. Bullying is a problem not just because it occurs but also because of the harmful consequences of bullying, bullying others, and being a spectator to bullying (Butt, Muhammad, & Masood, 2021). Anxiety, sadness, suicidal thoughts, social isolation, and poor health are some repercussions (Campbell, 2016).

Bullying is a major issue that can manifest itself in various ways. Bullying was originally investigated using a technique that is still in use today. According to this definition, bullying occurs when someone exploits their position, repeatedly does the same thing, and intends to harm someone (Olweus, 1994). As society evolved, so did the methods by which individuals bullied one another, giving rise to new forms such as cyberbullying.

Bullying and cyberbullying are well-known issues in education and the workplace, and there has been much discussion about how to address them (Rajpoot, Muhammad, & Anis, 2021). Olweus researched bullying in schools. Consequently, he developed a definition of bullying and techniques for protecting and assisting bullied persons (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Bullying in universities has received less attention due to a lack of research, and hardly any debate or proposals for how to avoid it have been made (Aslam, Muhammad, & Nasir, 2022). Due to inadequate reporting and the fact that most universities do not have a regular structure for documenting bullying incidents, researchers cannot rely on university reports for data gathering. Underreporting can occur for various reasons, including a person's belief that reporting bullying would have no positive effects, a lack of acquaintance with bullying terminology and concepts, appropriate laws, and who to report bullying to (Campbell, 2016). More reasons exist.

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Autoethnography involves conducting an in-depth analysis of personal experiences to gain insider insight into sociocultural dynamics (Ellis et al., 2011). This qualitative method aligns with calls for youth participatory research centring young people's voices in matters directly affecting them. Firsthand emotive student accounts can illuminate complex dynamics around bullying and climate issues in compelling ways. However, self-reflexivity is crucial for interrogating biases in representing personal experiences (Adams et al., 2015).

The atmosphere of universities and a university's values, relationships, interactions, and structures all contribute to the "climate," which reflects the quality and personality of the university's environment. In addition, how administrators, teachers, students, and other school personnel interact is frequently used to gauge values and relationships.

Although the terms "university culture" and "university climate" are frequently used interchangeably, Maslowski (2001) described university culture as a reflection of society and its many values and ideas. This investigation will focus on the institution's overall atmosphere, which was classified as authoritative (positive) or non-authoritative (negative) for reference purposes. For this study, the atmosphere of the university will be conceptualised as a group of the scores obtained on scales assessing the institution's disciplinary structure and the level of student assistance.

This autoethnography aims to evocatively share my lived experiences with bullying as a university student. I [the first author] reflect on specific bullying events I have witnessed and endured, including my perceptions of the broader campus climate. Through rich first-person narration, I share nuanced perspectives on the interpersonal, institutional, and sociocultural factors that shape bullying issues from a young person's standpoint. Findings could inform practitioner efforts to address bullying issues through a lens of empathy and understanding. The study seeks to demonstrate autoethnography's potential value for participatory investigations of education issues directly impacting students.

Methods

This study used an autoethnographic qualitative design. Autoethnography involves conducting an in-depth analysis of personal lived experiences to gain

insight into sociocultural phenomena (Adams et al., 2015). This approach was selected to provide an emic perspective on bullying and climate issues from my standpoint as a university student. Autoethnography allowed me to leverage my insider knowledge while rigorously examining my subjective experiences as both a witness to and a target of bullying (Muhammad & Brett, 2015).

Participant

As the sole participant, I brought an intersectional lens as a 26-year-old, heterosexual, cisgender female of Punjabi ethnic background pursuing a postgraduate degree in education. My positionality influences my interpretations of experiences in both enlightening and limiting ways. I have witnessed and endured bullying across various educational contexts since elementary school. These lifelong encounters with bullying fuelled my interest in sharing my perspectives for this study.

Data Collection

Data collection involved reflective writing focused on my personal memories, observations, thoughts, and feelings related to bullying experiences at my current university. I aimed to provide evocative descriptions of specific bullying events I have witnessed or directly experienced on campus property or associated with campus life. I also detailed my perceptions of and affective responses to the broader campus climate. Writing prompts included:

- Describe a time you observed bullying on campus. What happened? Who was involved? How did you feel/respond?
- Recollect a time you were personally bullied in a university context. What forms did the bullying take? What impacts did this have on you?
- How connected and cared for do you feel at the university? What contributes to those feelings?
- In your opinion, how well does the university address bullying issues? Provide examples that inform your perspective.

I wrote approximately multiple pages of reflective data over the course of several weeks. Revisiting memories and associated emotions often proved challenging. I practiced self-care throughout the process given the sensitive nature of the topics explored.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using qualitative procedures informed by the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014). Initial line-by-line coding was used to assign conceptual labels to small units of data. Focused coding then identified recurring patterns and categories across the developing codes. Finally, theoretical coding elucidated relationships between categories to synthesise larger themes.

Data gathering and analysis started straight away. To ensure the validity and reliability of the data analysis procedure, which started with a systematic approach, categories and sub-categories were defined. As soon as the process started, all ideas were considered tentative.

I engaged in memo writing throughout the analysis to record my reflexive observations and interpretations. Imaginative variation was employed to examine the data from multiple angles and challenge my assumptions. Member reflections offered by fellow students who reviewed the findings also augmented perspective-taking. These strategies aligned with autoethnography's emphasis on exploring subjective meanings while avoiding solipsism (Adams et al., 2015).

Findings

Becoming Aware of Someone being Bullied

One day at a university, I observed a situation in the cafeteria where a group of students made fun of a fellow student for their appearance. They laughed and made hurtful comments about the student's clothes and hairstyles. The student being targeted looked visibly upset and uncomfortable. One group of students is very prominent and well-known in the university. They pass comments on the physical appearance of their female colleagues and continuously pass comments on them. They follow the girls very often, and due to them, girls feel very insecure in the university.

One day while going back home after attending classes, I witnessed that group harassing the girls and passing comments on them. The other day I was sitting in the common room. A girl who is some sort of mentally retard was. Also, their girls were passing comments on her and continued making fun. A student repeatedly shoved a peer in the university's main building.: A group of students consistently calls a classmate derogatory names and makes fun of her

clothing choices. They often laugh at her when she speaks in class, causing her to feel embarrassed and self-conscious. On the main ground of the university, a student repeatedly pushes his classmate, making him trip and fall. He does every day, and the victim has started avoiding the schoolyard to escape the bullying. After a disagreement between two friends, one posts hurtful comments about the other on social media. The other classmates join in, and the negative comments spread across the platform, causing emotional distress to the victim.

Bullying Incident I Witnessed Personally

I am new to the university and experienced direct bullying from unknown students during the start days. They knew I was new. They came to my class and bullied all of us. That day is still in my memory, and whenever I see those faces at my university, I try to change my way so I don't face them. One of my university professors frequently bullied me during instructional time. He used to always put me down and degrade me. He always tried to feed me that I was good for nothing. He always questioned me about my presence in the university. I experience daily verbal bullying from male students. One group of students is very prominent and well-known in the university. They pass comments on the physical appearance of their female colleagues and continuously pass comments on them. They follow me very often, and due to them, I feel very insecure in the university. I don't want to attend university, and I often miss classes. My studies are affected, and I can't give my best. My confidence and body language are badly affected. I have been a victim of bullying since my childhood.

Assistance to a Victim of Bullying

I want to share my experience helping bully victims and why I chose to make a difference. Throughout my school years, I witnessed several instances of bullying that left lasting impressions on me. One particular incident ignited a passion within me to support those who were suffering.

During my studies at university, I noticed a girl who was often the target of verbal bullying. She was a quiet and artistic individual who didn't seem to deserve the harsh words thrown at her. The bullies mocked her clothing choices, ridiculed her interests, and even spread false rumours about her.

Seeing her pain and isolation broke my heart. I remember feeling frustrated that such cruelty could exist within our school community. I knew someone had to step up and make a change, so I decided to be that person.

I started by contacting her, discussing her interests, and offering friendship. It took time, but slowly, she began to open up to me about the bullying she had been enduring. Her vulnerability and strength in sharing her story inspired me even further. Together, we decided to take action.

We approached a trusted teacher and informed them about the situation. The teacher was empathetic and supportive, and they helped us report the incidents to the university administration. With their guidance, we started an anti-bullying campaign to raise awareness about the impact of hurtful words and the importance of kindness.

The campaign involved creating posters, organising university-wide walks, and initiating open discussions about bullying and its consequences. We encouraged students to stand up against bullying, be more inclusive, and support one another. The response was overwhelming – many students joined our cause, sharing their experiences and pledging to make a positive change.

Over time, the bullying directed at her began to subside as the university's culture shifted towards greater acceptance and empathy. The victim's confidence grew, and she no longer felt like an outcast. Witnessing her transformation and knowing our efforts were making a difference was incredibly rewarding.

Witnessing Bullying Incidents in which I did not want to Intervene

I witnessed an incident of bullying in the university cafeteria. A group of students were targeting a shy and introverted student. The group was making fun of his clothing, imitating their mannerisms, and laughing loudly. I observed the situation from separate tables. However, I did not step in to help the victim. I hesitated because I was new to the university and didn't know anyone involved. I felt unsure of how to address the situation and was worried about potential backlash from the bullies. I have witnessed, on the other hand, seen similar incidents before and assumed that someone else would intervene.

I felt a mix of discomfort and guilt as they continued to witness the bullying unfold. I was aware

that their inaction contributed to the lack of support for victims. Still, their concerns about the social repercussions and uncertainty about how to intervene kept them from taking action. In another part of the university,

Students' Willingness to help a Victim

I think some students do understand the motivations, but not everyone. Those who have experienced bullying or have a strong sense of empathy can usually relate to why someone would want to help a victim. They know it's about standing up against injustice and creating a more supportive environment. But at the same time, honestly, I don't get it. Bullying is bad, but getting involved can make you a target too. Some people have a stronger sense of right and wrong or are more courageous than I am. I'd rather stay out of it and not risk causing more drama. I understand why some students want to help victims of bullying. It's about building a community where everyone feels safe and accepted. When you see someone mistreated, it's natural to want to step in and make a difference. It's about solidarity and empathy.

Bystanders without Intervening

I witnessed a group of students making fun of a classmate in the school cafeteria. They were imitating her voice and laughing loudly. The other students knew the victim from some of his classes but didn't feel close to her. They felt uncomfortable witnessing the situation but decided not to get involved because they didn't want to be targeted by the bullies. They rationalised their inaction by telling themselves the victim would handle it alone or someone else would step in. I also saw a fellow student being cyberbullied on a group chat. Hurtful messages and offensive memes were being shared, and it was clear that she was upset by the comments. I know her close friends. They felt a moral dilemma about whether to say something or not. Ultimately, they chose not to intervene, worried that her friends might alienate her if she spoke up. They regretted their decision afterwards but didn't know how to address it. In our class, I witnessed a heated argument between two classmates. One was close to tears, and the other was shouting at her. A classmate wasn't friends and didn't want to get involved in their problems. He kept walking and pretended not to notice, convincing himself it wasn't his business. Later, he felt guilty for

not stepping in but believed intervening would have complicated the situation.

My Views on how safe the University is for Students

I think this university has clear and comprehensive anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies that strongly convey. These policies establish guidelines for reporting incidents and outline consequences for those found responsible. The availability of counselling, mental health services, and support groups can greatly contribute to a safer climate. These resources help students cope with the aftermath of bullying and address the underlying emotional and psychological impacts. Universities that actively educate students, faculty, and staff about bullying, harassment, diversity, and inclusion foster an environment where people understand the importance of respectful behaviour and are more likely to intervene when witnessing incidents. This university has an effective reporting system that ensures that students can safely and anonymously report incidents of bullying or harassment. This encourages victims and witnesses to come forward without fear of retaliation.

Effectiveness of Teachers and Administrators' Response to Bullying at the University

I think that we, as students appreciate open and transparent communication from teachers and administrators regarding anti-bullying policies, reporting mechanisms, and actions taken in response to incidents. Regular updates and clear guidelines can foster our trust. We have reported bullying incidents to the university administrations and expect prompt replies from administrators. There are delays in addressing reported issues that are leading to frustration and eroding confidence in the system of this university. I have observed that bullying incidents are not discussed consistently, and appropriate consequences are applied, affecting confidence in the university's handling of such matters. We as students, want to see that the university supports bullying victims, including access to counselling services, safe spaces, and resources for dealing with the emotional aftermath. Still, such prompt actions are not there in the university setting. This university has a proactive approach to preventing bullying is appreciated by students. Universities organise workshops, campaigns, and training sessions to raise awareness about bullying

prevention and foster a culture of respect; students are more likely to view the institution positively.

Teachers and Administrators at this University Care about Students

Teachers and administrators care about students because they often communicate openly and are approachable. They encourage students to share their concerns, questions, and feedback without fear of reprisal. Some very caring educators make themselves accessible to students. They hold office hours, respond to emails promptly, and are willing to schedule meetings to address student needs. Some teachers and administrators take the time to understand individual students' strengths, challenges, and goals, which suggests that they genuinely care about each student's well-being and academic success. Some teachers demonstrate empathy and understanding towards students' personal situations, struggles, and pressures, showing that they value students as individuals with unique experiences. Some Administrators are also present who actively promote diversity and inclusion through policies, events, and resources to create an environment where all students feel valued and respected. The teachers and administrators listen to and take action based on student feedback, indicating a willingness to adapt and improve the educational experience. Some teachers in the university advocate for resources, services, and accommodations that cater to students' physical, emotional, and mental well-being and demonstrate a commitment to student care. But at the same time, university policies should prioritise students' holistic development and well-being; it suggests a broader commitment to their growth and success. Teachers and administrators also acknowledge students' achievements and efforts, both academically and personally, showing that they are invested in their progress. One of my teachers is very popular among the students because he proactively identifies struggling students and offers additional academic or emotional support; he displays a genuine concern for their overall development. A few administrators actively participate in student events, clubs, and activities and demonstrate a willingness to connect with students beyond the classroom.

My views on the Orderliness of the University

Our course schedules are well-planned, with minimal overlap and convenient timing, allowing us to balance

their academic and personal commitments. My Organised professors provide clear syllabi that outline course objectives, expectations, grading criteria, and assignment due dates. The library, online databases, and academic materials are easily accessible and well-organised, and students find it easier to conduct research and complete assignments. Timely responses from professors, advisors, and administrative staff to student queries, emails, and concerns create a sense of organisation and efficiency.

My views on the University allowing Bullying Incidents to Happen

This university doesn't actively promote awareness about bullying, so we students might not fully understand the negative impacts of their actions or recognise when they are witnessing bullying. The anti-bullying policies are poorly defined, which could lead to a sense of impunity among bullies. I believe that reporting bullying incidents won't lead to effective action, or if I fear retaliation, I may not report incidents, allowing the behaviour to persist. I feel like there's a culture of tolerance for derogatory comments, teasing, or harmful conduct; students might perceive that the university environment doesn't discourage such actions. If teachers and administrators don't consistently intervene when they witness bullying incidents, students might feel that there's no authority actively addressing the issue. When students observe that bullies face little to no consequences for their actions, they might think that the university doesn't take the problem seriously. If certain groups or individuals hold social power and are not held accountable for their actions, students might perceive that the university indirectly permits bullying.

The Feeling of Connectedness to and Empowerment at this University

There is an inclusive culture on the campus, due to which students feel accepted and valued for who they are, regardless of their background or identity; they are more likely to view the university as a welcoming place. There is a supportive community that leads to a sense of belonging that stems from positive relationships with peers, professors, advisors, and staff members who provide emotional and academic support.

There is an Inclusive Learning Environment: When students are encouraged to express their opinions, ask questions, and engage in critical

discussions in classrooms, it fosters a sense of empowerment. There are Supportive Faculty and Mentors: Professors and mentors who provide guidance, encouragement, and opportunities for students to take ownership of their learning can enhance their sense of empowerment. There is a Diverse Representation: students see individuals from diverse backgrounds in leadership roles within this university, and it can inspire a sense of empowerment among underrepresented groups. There are Meaningful Feedback Channels in this university that actively seek and respond to student feedback demonstrating that students' opinions matter, leading to increased empowerment.

My Suggestions to make the University a Safer Place

Communication gaps between departments lead to misinformation or confusion about important matters. Poorly planned or executed events, such as orientations, workshops, or campus-wide activities, can leave students feeling that the university lacks organisational prowess. Students may feel frustrated if professors have irregular office hours or limited availability, making it difficult to seek assistance. Buildings and classrooms that lack proper maintenance, cleanliness, or equipment can give the impression of disorganisation university provides accessible academic resources, mental health services, career support, and counselling, and students feel valued and cared for. An administration that listens to student concerns, acts on feedback, and addresses issues promptly fosters a sense of connection and agency. A diverse student body and faculty contribute to a vibrant learning environment that exposes students to various viewpoints and experiences. When students' accomplishments are recognised and celebrated by the university community, they feel a sense of pride and connection to their institution. The university's policies prioritise students' holistic development and well-being. It suggests a broader commitment to their growth and success. Teachers and administrators should acknowledge students' academic and personal achievements and show they are invested in their progress.

Discussion

This autoethnographic study offers an in-depth examination of my personal experiences with bullying and the university climate from an insider's

perspective. Several compelling insights emerge from the findings that warrant further discussion.

The Prevalence of Bullying

The frequent and varied examples of bullying described in the findings reveal that bullying remains an ongoing problem affecting the university campus. As the interview excerpts demonstrate, bullying occurs across multiple contexts from classrooms to common areas to online platforms. Verbal, social, and physical bullying are all present. These findings align with broader research showing bullying is still common in university settings (Chapell et al., 2006; Muhammad, Akhter, & Lala, 2019).

While statistics help quantify the scope of bullying, the examples provided in the findings add an important qualitative dimension. They provide a nuanced glimpse into the interpersonal dynamics, power imbalances, and social spectatorship involved in bullying. This underscores the value of qualitative, lived experience data for more fully understanding the complex bullying phenomenon. My personal encounters narrated in the findings reveal how bullying jeopardises victims' sense of safety, belonging, and empowerment at the university. This aligns with studies linking bullying victimisation to adverse mental health effects like anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Srabstein et al., 2008). By contextualising statistics within actual lived experiences, the narrative data makes the human impacts viscerally real.

The findings point to several factors that may enable bullying behaviours. Insufficient anti-bullying education, lenient consequences, power differentials, and social tolerance of bullying likely all contribute (Siddiqui, Muhammad, & Naseer, 2021). This highlights the importance of multifaceted prevention and response efforts targeting individual, peer, and institutional levels (Lee, 2006). While widespread bullying may feel intractable, evidence-based best practices offer hope for meaningful improvements.

The Role of Bystanders

A particularly notable finding was the recurring tendency for students to be passive bystanders during bullying events. Fear of becoming targeted, uncertainty about how to help, and diffusion of responsibility all influenced students' inaction. This theme demonstrates the complex interpersonal and psychosocial dynamics that perpetuate bullying through passive spectatorship.

The findings support the relevance of Latané and Darley's (1970) seminal bystander intervention model for understanding and promoting prosocial responses to bullying. Their model outlines five steps needed for intervention: noticing the event, interpreting it as requiring help, feeling responsible for acting, possessing skills to help, and implementing intervention decisions (Latané & Darley). Increasing education around safe and effective intervention skills could enable more students to progress through these steps. Active bystanders may be vital to shifting social norms and reducing bullying behaviours (Pozzoli & Gini, 2013).

Empowering student bystanders reflects a social-ecological approach that leverages peers' direct presence during bullying events. However, institutional strategies remain necessary for enacting lasting change. As Espelage (2014) argues, "Although peers are present during bullying and possess the power to intervene, we cannot expect youth to carry the sole responsibility for change; the adults in their environment must also be leveraged to prevent bullying" (p. 152). This study's findings reinforce that a multifaceted sociocultural approach is essential.

Administrative Response

The study exposed frustrations with the university's response to reported bullying incidents. Delays in investigations, limited communication, inconsistent consequences, and lack of victim support all contributed to perceptions that reports were not taken seriously. These findings indicate significant room for improvement in the university's policies, procedures, and practices around bullying response.

Research shows that fair discipline processes, prompt support services, and open communication with reporters all help establish norms against bullying behaviours (Cornell & Limber, 2015). When institutions fail to respond adequately, they can implicitly condone bullying, discourage future reporting, and further endanger targeted students. The university has an ethical and legal obligation to provide a safe learning environment for all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Strengthening response protocols is urgently needed.

From a critical perspective, the findings also raise questions about potential biases influencing whose concerns get prioritised. Delays or dismissiveness toward marginalised student reports could reflect institutionalised prejudice. Continued advocacy and

activism are needed to challenge systemic inequities and ensure all students' experiences are heard, validated, and addressed.

Fostering a Positive Climate

While highlighting areas for growth, the findings also identified existing strengths at the university that could be expanded upon. An inclusive culture, diversity, supportive faculty, and student empowerment initiatives all contribute to a healthier climate. This aligns with research linking a positive school climate to lower bullying rates (Wang et al., 2019). Fostering connectedness, modelling respectful behaviours, and facilitating open dialogues about differences are beneficial strategies validated by studies (Ortega et al., 2012).

The findings suggest student empowerment remains partial; enhancing student voice in decision-making could further improve the climate. Involving students in developing anti-bullying policies and prevention initiatives fostered shared responsibility and help ensure programs reflect youth needs. Students have unique insights as key stakeholders; their partnership is integral for creating contexts where everyone feels safe, accepted, and valued.

Implications for Researchers

This study also yields helpful methodological insights for researchers. The depth of data generated through an autoethnographic approach demonstrates the value of insider, emic perspectives for illuminating complex psychosocial issues like bullying. The evocative descriptions provide a level of detail and nuance that outsider studies cannot access in the same way. This supports the growing recognition of non-traditional approaches like autoethnography as legitimate means for scientific inquiry (Ellis et al., 2011).

However, as a subjective account, this autoethnography inherently presents my particular interpretation. Other students may recount different experiences that broaden their understanding of the university climate. Incorporating multiple voices through collaborative approaches could strengthen future investigations (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). My positionality as an educated male student also frames my lens; studies centring more diverse standpoints could reveal additional insights. Overall, this study exemplifies both the affordances and limitations of highly personalised autoethnographic research.

Implications for Practice

Several practical implications also emerge from this study. For university leadership, the findings underscore the need to implement more robust anti-bullying education, streamline reporting procedures, apply fair consequences, and facilitate open dialogues on climate issues. Improving policies and data collection around bullying could help monitor progress over time. Centring student perspectives in reform efforts is essential for ensuring initiatives match lived realities.

For student peers, this study highlights opportunities to become active bystanders by challenging bullying behaviours directly through confrontation or indirectly through distraction (Salmivalli et al., 2011). However, caution against expecting peers to carry full responsibility; youth still need adult guidance. For scholars, this autoethnography demonstrates the value of insider perspectives on bullying and school climate issues. Future research could expand insights by incorporating collaborative approaches and diverse student samples. Overall, these findings help illuminate pathways for continued progress in curbing the concerning persistence of bullying.

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