‘I Was Afraid All the Time at Home’: Exploring the Lived Experiences and Self-Perceptions of Adults Who Were Childhood Bullies – An IPA Study

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by

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the work submitted in this dissertation is fully the result of my own investigation, except where otherwise stated.

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Abstract

This study explores how adult bullying perpetrators (BPs) retrospectively understand their roles and self-perceptions in school, addressing a gap in the research that often overlooks perpetrators' experiences. Using the social-ecological diathesis-stress model alongside humanistic, psychodynamic, and cognitive-behavioural frameworks, semi-structured video interviews (using Microsoft Teams) were conducted with six adults aged 25 to 45, who were identified as childhood BPs. The interviews were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), revealing three general experiential themes (GETs): destabilisation of the 'self' due to chaotic and insecure home environments, emotional vulnerabilities related to family dynamics and bullying, and a lack of self-awareness and support.

These findings suggest that bullying may function as a maladaptive coping mechanism, enabling participants to navigate feelings of powerlessness, diminished self-esteem, absence of adult guidance, and perceived need for control. Furthermore, it provides nuanced insights into the complexity inherent in the development of personality traits and roles. Ten subthemes emerged from the GETs, including attempts to regain agency through bullying, the normalisation of abusive behaviour, and the emotional toll of shame and guilt.

This study highlights the need for early empathetic psychological interventions, particularly those that strengthen parent-child attachment bonds and provide effective, school-based emotional support. It recommends training educators to identify vulnerable children and integrate family engagement in both preventive and rehabilitative efforts, offering a holistic, person-centred approach to addressing bullying from a counselling psychology perspective. Further research is recommended to explore the long-term impact of bullying on perpetrators' mental health and socio-emotional development.

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Glossary

BP: Bullying Perpetrator

BPs: Bullying Perpetrators

BV: Bully victims

BPS: British Psychological Society

HCPC: Health and Care Professions Council

NICE: National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

CoP: Counselling Psychology

CoPs: Counselling Psychologist

CLR: Critical literature review

EMDR: Eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing

TF-CBT: Trauma focused, cognitive behavioural therapy

ToM: Theory of Mind

SEDSM: Social Ecological Diathesis Stress Paradigm

ADHD: Attention Deficits Hyper-Attentive Disorder

WHO: World Health Organisation

GDPR: General Data Protection Regulation

UPR: Unconditional Positive Regard

LGBTQ+: Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, Queer, Questioning and Ace

LMU: London Metropolitan University

RSHE: Relationships, Sex and Health Education

Ofsted: Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills

REC: Research Ethics Committee

NSPCC: National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

DfE: Department for Education

HMCI: His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills

UK: United Kingdom

USA: United states of America

Part 1. Introduction

Overview

Childhood bullying has become an adverse public health problem owing to the risks associated with educational, social, and health outcomes in children, adolescents, and adults. These consequences affect not only victims but also BPs (Armitage, 2021). During childhood, bullying perpetrators may experience difficult living conditions including abuse, neglect, low self-esteem, and overprotectiveness (Espelage, Low, Rao, et al., 2014; Lines, 2007; Lodge, 2014). They may also experience social or adaptive impairments, which can lead to feelings of insecurity, resulting in impulsive, violent, and antisocial behaviours. In the UK, bullying may also be associated with violent behaviour, suicide, and emotional distress in children (Alavi et al., 2017; Klomek & Gould, 2014). This thesis sought to explore the experiences of the sense of 'self' and the role of adults who self-identify as bullying perpetrators during childhood.

The thesis begins with a brief background, highlighting the study topic, followed by a reflexive statement declaring the unavoidable biases that may impact this enquiry and the potential steps to mitigate them. The following sections contain six main parts: Introduction, Critical Literature Review, Methodology, Results, Discussion, and Conclusion. Finally, the References and Appendices are presented. A critical review of literature on bullying perpetrators (BPs) revealed a gap in UK-specific data. Insights were derived from international studies and UK-based quantitative research on victims and bullying victims (BVs), which illuminated perpetrator behaviours.

Reflexive Statement for Research Topic

The significance of self-reflection in counselling psychology research cannot be overemphasised. Self-reflection entails recognising the unavoidable impact of one's personal experiences on the subject under investigation, thereby enabling the avoidance of judgments rooted in personal actions, experiences, or beliefs. By cultivating self-awareness, researchers can incorporate unique perspectives into their work, thereby shaping their interpretation of an individual's experiences (Archer, 2012; Kasket, 2013; Shaw, 2010). The Health Care Professional Council (HCPC) ethical standards advocate for 'reflexivity' in counselling psychologists (CoPs), emphasising critical reflection on self-use, respect, and confidentiality in therapeutic processes (HCPC, 2016, p. 12). Recognising the inevitable influence of my experience is vital as a reflexive researcher. I wanted to delve more into BPs past experiences, but the CBT I practiced did not allow for a full exploration of such experiences, as I had hoped as a trainee CoP. Instead, the focus was on the "Here and Now", according to the recommendations of Beck et al. (1979) and Clark et al. (1999). Initially, I felt relieved when my research revealed that BPs also experienced emotional difficulties in childhood and later in life. This indicates a potential confirmation bias (BPS, 2018), which may have impacted my findings throughout the research process. However, through reflections in a journal, with my supervisor and personal therapist, I gained more awareness, empathy, and nonjudgemental perspectives, viewing BPs in school as children who require understanding and support (Rogers, 2012). Following Henton and Kasket's (2017) guidance, I bracketed and declared the potential influence of my bias on the research process

From this perspective, I set out to study perpetrators due to the social injustice involved in bullying, as embedded in my professional identity as a CoP trainee and personally as someone who strives to embrace individual differences. Additionally, I gained insight into individual experiences of bullying among close family members, which significantly shaped

my outlook on perpetrators. Contrary to my fear that this family member would be bullied due to racial differences, they were targeted because of their academic excellence and perceived social status. The school's inadequate response, which suggests that bullying could not occur due to the presence of friends, was particularly frustrating. This raises questions regarding the power dynamics involved in bullying situations. This experience led me to explore the field of bullying research, where I observed a notable imbalance. While a substantial body of literature exists on victims, there is a dearth of resources on perpetrators. This prompted me to develop a keen interest in exploring their lived experiences and gaining a deeper understanding of them, with the aim of amplifying their voices in further research on prevention and support. Moreover, the existing literature often overlooks the vulnerability of bullying perpetrators (BPs), treating them as though they were not children and, therefore, not in need of sympathy or support. For instance, in one of the annual conferences by the UK Psychiatric Society, they debated whether to pity or fear perpetrators (Bolton et al., 2004). This study does not endorse BP's actions as acceptable, given the impact of their conduct on all children, including themselves. Rather, it aims to comprehend the context and differences from the perspective of a CoP, as this may facilitate further research, particularly in identifying effective interventions to mitigate vulnerabilities in all children. Moreover, this study was initially motivated by the experience of the victimisation of a close family member.

During the research process, another family member who was awaiting a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) experienced difficulties with peer relationships at school, often feeling misunderstood and different. In their pursuit of peer acceptance, challenges in interpreting social cues sometimes led others to perceive them as a bully. With these individual experiences, I endeavoured to maintain objectivity in my reporting. However, it is acknowledged that these experiences may have influenced my approach as well as my data analysis and reporting.

As a high-intensity (HIT) cognitive behavioural therapist (CBT) and CoP Trainee, I was acutely aware of asking each adult patient about their bullying status and experiences which resulted in working with clients who were bullying perpetrators (BPs). I also assumed that BPs may be happy, successful, confident, and boisterous without any regard for others. However, these therapeutic encounters reveal the complexity of their experiences. For instance, despite BPs justifying their actions in helping them navigate hostile school environments, others lacked insight and reported family vulnerabilities. For example, untreated neurodevelopmental presentations may have led to bullying behaviour in the past. These clients presented with a great deal of self-blame, guilt, shame, early traumas, and pain at subsequent adverse life outcomes. This understanding alleviated my self-doubt as a parent, and reinforced my commitment to protecting children's rights to safety, education, and emotional well-being, as suggested by Swearer and Hymel (2015). This reflective journey has subtly shaped my approach to the literature review. Conscious of my previous experiences, I have used neutral language, supervision and employed bracketing informed by Kasket (2013) to reduce bias, focusing on the research objectives more effectively.

Part 2. Critical Literature Review

Introduction

"All children and young people have the right to safe, inclusive and effective learning environments" asserted Ms Stefania Giannini, Assistant Director-General for Education, during the 2019 Education World Forum in London (Global citizen, 2019, p.1).

Despite this declaration, school bullying remains a prevalent issue which renders the lives of many children unsafe in educational institutions. This chapter investigates the perpetration of bullying, which includes some victims' narratives, since both are the outcomes of BP. Increased bullying prevalence and associated problems are linked to increased perpetration, even if only one child bullies others in a school (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). Hymel and Swearer (2015) offered an overview of 40 years of bullying research among school-aged children and suggested further studies on perpetrator experiences. According to Nozaki (2019), BPs are crucial in prevention strategies, as interventions can target a few perpetrators rather than addressing the long-term impact on many victims.

This chapter appraises the literature on bullying perpetration (BP) and impact of bullying on all children in school to inform perpetrators context and impact. Thus, the critical literature review (CLR), in which the topic of school bullies, also called bullying perpetrators (BPs) or aggressors, shall be introduced. The beginning of this CLR details the data search procedure (see Appendix I). The history, bullying roles, prevalence, nature of bullying, cultural perspectives on BP, the impact of bullying in childhood and adulthood and the social and psychological theories underpinning this study are presented. These further include the social-ecological diathesis-stress model (Swearer & Hymel, 2015), which comprises developments in social learning (Bandura, 1971) and social dominance theories (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), incorporating psychological theories, such as the Humanistic paradigm, Cognitive behavioural theory (Beck et al., 1979), and Psychodynamic theory (Rigby, 2002).

Finally, I present the limitations of the existing literature, a summary of the knowledge gap that informs the research question and the aims and relevance of current research to counselling psychology (CoP).

Literature Search Strategy

A literature search strategy was devised to identify and explore scholarly publications from journal articles, books, dissertations, and conference proceedings. The search gathered empirical evidence, as well as theoretical discussions concerning the focus of the study. Furthermore, the literature search prioritised contemporary studies published within the past five years, with the exception of seminal works that continue to inform current research and practice. This involved search engines and library databases with repositories of peer-reviewed and academic materials. The following databases were accessed: LMU Library Database, APA PsycInfo, PsycArticles ProQuest, Athens, Sage Journals, PubMed, Scopus, Wiley Online Library, Web of Science, and ScienceDirect. Google Scholar was used to search for additional relevant literature. Key search terms related to the study's major concepts were used to ensure the retrieval of relevant literature. The primary search terms were: ‘bullying,’ ‘bullying perpetrators,’ ‘childhood bullying,’ ‘bullies in school,’ ‘childhood bullying perpetrators,’ and ‘childhood bullies.’ I also used Boolean language search terms such as: ‘bullies experiences AND ‘school’ AND ‘retrospective experiences AND ‘bullying perpetrators experiences’ AND ‘bullies’ sense of self and role.’ No related search results were found for searching the research topic (see Appendix L), but there were other suggested references broadly related to the research topic.

This method led to the identification of broad and specific trends related to current research. Although primary fieldwork was conducted in the UK, bullying is a global issue recognised by the United Nations (UN) and various governmental agencies. Therefore, the literature review presented a global perspective, narrowing it to the UK context for the

fieldwork. Since the actions of perpetrators often give rise to other bullying roles, their behaviours cannot be fully understood in isolation from the broader bullying context. In addition, the reference lists of the retrieved articles were examined to pinpoint additional sources not identified in the initial searches. Google searches on specific topics revealed three results that also studied victims and adult BPs. Later, topic searches were conducted, which produced broader data such as charity reports, which were largely quantitative with open-source data to understand distinct aspects of bullying. The Literature review noted Lines' (2007) book on violent BPs who were in difficulty or going through the care system. Lines' role as school counsellors further supported the lack of data on BPs experiences, attributing the challenge to lack of access to all types of perpetrators, who can self-identify to be interviewed. No data were found specifically on BPs' sense of self and role from a CoP perspective using IPA. However, the literature search overall yielded expansive and relevant content for the context of perpetrators (e.g. bullying roles) from global to local perspectives.

Part two covers the gap in the literature on bullying perpetrators. The chapter begins with an introduction, followed by a history of bullying, bullying roles, and bullying prevalence globally. Next, I discuss bullying prevalence in the UK, types of bullying perpetration, bullying perpetrators, the impact of bullying perpetration in childhood, and the impact of bullying perpetration in adulthood. The chapter concludes with a summary of the gaps identified in the literature, the research question, and the aims of the study.

History of Bullying

From the literature search, bullying perpetration and definition have evolved as studies on the subject have progressed. This study adopts a combination of Olweus 's(1993) and Smith's (2016a) definitions of bullying in the context of a school environment. According to this combined definition and context, bullying involves children up to the age of 18, who systematically engage in various forms of aggression towards other children or

groups in school. This behaviour causes physical, emotional, or social harm and is characterised by repetition and power imbalance, creating a persistent threat to the victim's well-being.

It has been contended that the history of this bullying behaviour dates to the primate ancestors, forming an intrinsic part of the contemporary human psyche as much as any other instinct (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). The history of bullying is more nuanced due to the complexity involved in its detection, accurate reporting and the different nature in various communities (Lines, 2007). For instance, according to Da Silver (2012), bullying behaviour has been historically documented under different guises, including as an evolutionary survival prosocial trait. Thus, when considering key features such as dominance, impulsivity, intentionality, and the infliction of harm, various historical processes including slavery, tribal domination, and colonialism can be conceptualised as forms of bullying at both individual and collective levels (Da Silva, 2012; Lines, 2007; Volk et al., 2012).

The first scientific study on bullying was conducted in Scandinavian countries due to a rise in this phenomenon. As one such example, Olweus (1986) articulated that bullying was initially called 'mobbing', which was later revised to its modern conceptualisation (Olweus et al., 1986). Since then, research on bullying has progressed in other countries; the UK, Canada, and the United States of America (USA) joined this research field in the 1990s, which was crucial in broadening the definition of bullying (Smith, 2011). Researchers in the USA have further developed research on victimisation. The current area of focus is on perpetrators of both traditional bullying and cyberbullying to develop long-lasting strategies to reduce perpetration.

Research indicates that bullying is a global phenomenon that has likely evolved differently across various countries. For example, cyberbullying is increasingly prevalent in technologically advanced Western nations compared to developing countries (UNESCO,

2019). Nonetheless, although the definitions remain similar, Da Silva (2012) cited bullying's prevalence in cultures among Amazonian Yanomamo and the phenomenon even dates back to Ancient Greece. According to other sources such as Koo (2007), the first article in the United Kingdom (UK) on bullying was written by Burk in 1897, despite the phenomenon being already prevalent as portrayed in stories such as *Tom Brown's School Days* (Hughes, 1857).

Nonetheless, as institutional bullying appears to have a longstanding and far-reaching history, this might suggest that modern society rewards accomplishments that could claim some form of dominance over others (Twemlow, 2017). These displays of bullying have been theorised by Lines (2008) to extend back to evolutionary times, serving an adaptive function to survive and build territorial security for animal packs. Bullying, often perceived as human behaviour, can be understood as both a human construct and an animal instinct. Evidence from animal behaviour studies shows that dominance hierarchies are common in many species, such as primates, wolves, and birds. Aggressive behaviours resembling bullying establish social order and access to resources (Waal, 2007). In humans, bullying extends these instinctual behaviours but is shaped by socialisation. Unlike some animals, humans possess advanced cognitive abilities such as empathy and moral reasoning, which may counteract aggression. Olweus (1993) noted that the prevalence of bullying across human societies suggests evolutionary roots. Cultural norms significantly modulate its expression, indicating that, while the impulse to dominate might be instinctual, its specific manifestations seem to be a human construct (Sapolsky, 2005). Others suggest that it stems from social activities or a pathological and group survival drive (Waal, 2007). As such, bullying might have emerged as a more contemporary trait, with some benefits for some perpetrators (Volk et al., 2022), but with huge psychological, cultural, and socio-economic costs for many (Baiden & Tadeo, 2020; Hysing et al., 2019; Olweus, 2011a).

Nevertheless, Smith (2011), questioned the universality of bullying across all societies, particularly in hunter-gatherer communities, since its early evolution. Smith posited that children would have been grouped according to similar age and size, potentially fostering cooperation rather than bullying behaviour. Conversely, Volk et al. (2016) contended that bullying served as a facilitative evolutionary adaptive strategy for hunter-gatherers, predicated on developmental trajectory, as it reinforced group norms, such as conformity, hierarchies, and deterrence of deviant behaviour. This enforcement can deter actions perceived as disruptive or harmful, thus maintaining the group's overall functioning and unity (Sapolsky, 2005). Similar dynamics were observed in the context of school bullying. BPs often target peers who are perceived as different or challenge established social hierarchies and norms. This behaviour can reinforce conformity to group norms and deter disruptive actions (Espelage & Holt, 2013; Søndergaard, 2014). Studies have also shown that bullies often hold influential positions within their peer groups, and their actions can maintain social order and cohesion by marginalising those who do not fit in (Volk et al., 2016). Given the number of studies on the negative impact of bullying, the positive attributes noted in hunter-gatherers seem to have morphed into negative consequences for most children involved (Connolly & O'Moore, 2003; Hemphill et al., 2014).

Bullying Roles

For decades, extensive literature has attempted to describe the nature and impact of bullying and its nuanced role (Da Silva, 2012; Griffin & Gross, 2004; Olweus, 2013; Salmivalli et al., 1996; Steffgen et al., 2013; Ttofi et al., 2012)**.** In these studies, there was a consensus regarding the labels used to identify those involved in bullying. For instance, perpetrators of bullying, pure bullies, aggressors, or bullying perpetrators (Lines, 2008; Olweus, 2013; Volk et al., 2014). Additionally, the term ‘victims’ is commonly used to identify those bullied by perpetrators. In some cases, victims might reverse roles by carrying

out bullying as well, a term called ‘bully-victim’ (Guy et al., 2019). Salmivalli et al. (2017) and Cowie (2010) categorised bullying roles as bullies, reinforcers of bullying, assistants of bullies, victims’ defenders, and outsiders.

Gender also appears to suggest a disparity in bullying roles in school children under 18 years of age. Boys often play reinforcer and assistant roles, while girls tend to play the roles of outsiders and defenders (Figula et al., 2023; Olweus, 1978; Valerie, 2006). Salmivalli et al. (1999) found that victim' reactions to perpetrators also differed according to gender. For instance, girls responded to bullying by feeling hopeless and nonchalant (not caring). While, boys mainly responded with counter-aggression and nonchalance (Salmivalli et al., 1996). However, this study revealed the limitations of peer and self-evaluation methods in categorising bullying roles in childhood research. This occurs because some offenders may downplay their hostility towards other children by opting for labels that are socially acceptable. Olweus (2013) also noted self-reported assessment biases towards social desirability, including fear of peer retaliation. None of these studies differentiated bullying reactions by self-assigned gender, such as transgender, non-binary, or other non-cisgender participants. This likely reflects the time of the studies when such identities were less formally recognised. Consequently, participants who might now be identified as non-cisgender were more likely to be categorised as cisgender, limiting understanding of their experiences. Intolerance and a lack of understanding of gender diversity are likely to have been prevalent during this period (Meyer, 2009; Russell & McGuire, 2008). Other studies, such as Evans et al. (2018), surveyed cumulative experiences of bullying, emphasising bystander influence in determining perpetration, particularly among psychopathic and sadistic personalities attempting to control, harm, and show off to others. My research, grounded in phenomenology and critical realism within IPA, and informed by non-judgemental humanist principles as a CoP trainee, ensures that participants are not labelled as bullies unless they

self-identify as such. Participants were given the opportunity to define their roles, genders, and perspectives.

Bullying Prevalence Globally

Empirical evidence suggests that a notable proportion of students experience bullying, with victimisation rates ranging from 10 % to 33 % and 1 % to 11.5 % of students identifying as both perpetrators and victims (Dulmus et al., 2006; Nansel, 2001). Furthermore, between 5 % and 13 % of students admitted to bullying others (Solberg et al., 2007; Perkins et al., 2011; Seals & Young, 2003). However, under reporting of bullying behaviour might contribute to the relatively low self-reported rates. This discrepancy in the number of BPs versus victims aligns with findings in delinquency and criminal behaviour research (Swearer et al., 2014). This indicates that a small portion of the population is accountable for the majority of bullying (Hamparian et al., 1978).

Lessne and Yanez's (2016) study on victimisation concluded that 20.8 % of students in a typical school were bullied. According to Long et al. (2020), at least 33 % of children have been bullied at least once in their lifetime. Consistent with these findings, Menesini and Salmivalli (2017) have noted that bullying is a global phenomenon. A worldwide study by UNESCO (2018) confirmed that globally, 32 % of children are bullied one or two days a month, with some variation between different countries: Sub-Saharan Africa (48.2 %), North Africa (48.2 %), and the Middle East (41.1 %) recorded higher bullying rates than Europe (25 %), while the Caribbean (25 %), and Central America (22.8 %) recorded more moderate numbers. In the same report, children in Europe aged 11-16 using the Internet reported an increase in cyberbullying from 7 % in 2010 to 12 % in 2014. Sexual and physical bullying were identified as the most frequently reported forms of bullying. Older children were less likely to be involved in physical bullying than younger children were, and bullying was most common among pupils aged 12-18 years. Although traditional bullying remains prevalent, the

emergence of cyberbullying has contributed significantly to an increase in bullying perpetration rates.

Social media might be utilised to combat bullying, promote awareness, and launch successful anti-bullying initiatives, (O'Keeffe, 2016). However, Martin et al. (2018) contended that social media exacerbates this problem, with data showing a significant rise in cyberbullying, as traditional bullies continue to harass people online. A 2016 survey revealed that 79 % of Internet users aged 12-15 experienced harmful online events in the year and 23 % reported being bullied (NSPCC, 2016). Cyberbullying rates in the US have increased from 9 % (O'Keeffe, 2016) to 15 % (Martin et al., 2018).

The highest number of bullying incidents involve students with disabilities (UNESCO, 2023), which is also commonly observed among students of minority ethnic groups, non-heterosexual sexual orientation, and confident faith groups (Bhopal, 2018). Bullying based on race and sexual orientation, such as being called derogatory terms like "faggot" or being called "gay" as an insult, was prevalent among primary and secondary school children, particularly adolescents. (UK Safer Internet Centre, 2016). Moreover, BP is crucial because of its correlation with emotional distress, suicide, and violent behaviour in both perpetrators and victims, especially in the UK (Alavi et al., 2017; Klomek & Gould, 2014). Researching BP may contribute to greater understanding and, thus, the development of targeted interventions to highlight approaches to mitigate bullying aimed at modifying the psychological and social dynamics driving perpetrators' behaviour.

Bullying Prevalence in the UK

Methodological differences in bullying studies and children's reluctance to report their BP roles affect the accuracy of UK statistics. However, the UK case reflects global trends. In memory of Diana, Princess of Wales, a charity was established to empower young people as changemakers, emphasising that underreporting is often linked to fear of backlash, with 28% of children concealing incidents. (The Diana Award, 2022). Likewise, an anti-bullying alliance, and a Ditch the Label (2019) charity study revealed that one in four cases of bullying go unreported due to adult inaction or fear of being labelled a 'snitch'. Teachers' perceived lack of concern also contributes to non-disclosure (Bhopal, 2018). The data presented below include bullying perpetrators and all children involved in bullying, as both outcomes are consequential and relate to perpetrator actions and contexts.

According to a study conducted by Ditch the Label (2019 England), 2% of children reported engaging in traditional bullying, while a much larger proportion (16 %) admitted to online bullying in earlier years (Modecki et al., 2014). Nonetheless, this statistical representation contrasts with 22% of victims and 27% of bystanders. Additionally, Ditch the Label (2019) found that 62% of young people who experienced bullying in the past year reported that the perpetrator was a classmate. Additionally, 37% of respondents were bullied by someone at school, 34% by an ex-friend, 30% by an enemy, and 30% by a close friend. In 10% of the cases, the perpetrator was unknown, and in another 10%, bullying was by someone known only online. Stonewall (2017) revealed that 59% of LGBTQ+ youth who experienced online bullying were targeted by someone known. These statistics highlight and confirm bullying as relational and occurring among school peers, within communities, and in friendships.

Another report by the House of Commons, *Bullying in UK Schools* (Long et al., 2020), found that 29% of children reported bullying to UK school principals, putting the

nation second in the European league table for bullying, behind Finland at 29.4% (Long et al., 2020). Out of 72% of children bullied, 28% did not report it for fear of being victimised further, shame, and teachers not taking any action (Ditch the Label, 2019). These studies, (Bhopal, 2018; Ditch the Label, 2019; Smith, 2022) identify a trend of under-reporting of bullying incidents, by BPs, victims and schools, and the data are still high for the negative consequences involved for school children.

Long et al. (2020) and Bhopal (2018) demonstrate that bullying increases with rising immigration to the UK, due to a more diverse school population. While diversity can promote integration and positive change, it can also be exploited by perpetrators to target those who differ from the majority.

Bhopal (2018) indicated that 40% of people in the UK experience bullying at some point in their lives. According to Baroness Brinton, the co-chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on bullying, 16,000 children are bullied each year in the UK, and around 44% of suicides among children aged 10-14 are linked to school bullying (Hansard, 2013). According to the Office for National Statistics in England and Wales (ONS), these figures have since increased, with children aged 10-15 being bullied ‘slightly’ increasing from 16% in 2013 to 17% in 2017 and 2018 (DFE, 2018).

The Diana Award (2022) survey confirmed that 57% of young people in schools had been bullied, with 75% expressing feelings of anxiety, sleeplessness, and suicidal thoughts caused by worries about returning to school. As Long et al. (2020) stated, the prevalence of bullying in the UK has increased over the last ten years, showing a consistently rising trend that appears to have plateaued at 17% since 2017 and 2018. The Diana Award (2022) charity noted 65% of children were scared to return to school and 33% were very clearly distressed. Additionally, 89% of parents were also anxious and worried that the school environment was unsafe for their children, especially as 42% of the children polled agreed that the school was

not effective in combating bullying, leading to isolation and worsening psychological impact. However, UK data collated by the Diana Award (2022) through the awareness campaign 'Return to Bullying' (instead of Return to School) focused primarily on victims' views, highlighting the lack of representation and support for BPs in research and public studies.

Types of Bullying Perpetration

Research on how bullying varies. This section reviews the literature on the perpetrators of bullying and how they bully in a school context, whether physical, verbal, sexual or cyber related.

Who are the Bullying Perpetrators?

In the literature, bullying perpetrators (BPs) are typically viewed as instigators of bullying behaviours (Álvarez-García et al., 2015; Rupp & McCoy, 2019). In the UK, however, BPs' personalities are increasingly understood within the school environment, challenging earlier assumptions that they predominantly come from low-income or aggressive families and have lower self-esteem, while lacking empathy and social skills. Recent studies also show that BPs have more complex and nuanced personalities and backgrounds (Ditch the Label, 2019; Huitsing & Veenstra, 2012; James, 2010; Lines, 2007; Lodge, 2014; Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Menesini and Salmivalli (2017) describe BPs as high-achieving, confident, with advanced social skills and theory of mind (ToM), capable of manipulating peers and evading adult detection.

Contrary to perceptions of BPs as shy and socially deficient, evidence suggests they often possess superior ToM, high social standing, and popularity among peers, enabling them to dominate others (Nelson et al., 2019; Sutton et al., 1999a). Sutton et al. (1999a) found that BPs' well-developed ToM, combined with confidence and social dominance, enhances their ability to manipulate others. This understanding extends to why pupils in private or elitist

schools, who often exhibit high ToM and confidence, may be more vulnerable to bullying compared to their state school counterparts (von Stumm & Plomin, 2021).

Studies further substantiate the normalcy of BPs by highlighting their peer-valued traits such as social hierarchy, good looks, and intelligence (Nelson et al., 2019). BPs who are aware of these advantages may abuse their positions by targeting less popular peers without fear of immediate or long-term consequences (Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Lines, 2007; Rigby, 2002; Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). However, not all BPs exhibit these positive characteristics, and research also points to negative outcomes, such as emotional and behavioural issues, which may persist over time (Baldry & Farrington, 2000; Lodge, 2014; Olweus, 2013).

Bullying behaviours can emerge as early as in preschool. Studies by Kellerman (1999), Lines (2008), and Wolke (2001) demonstrated early signs of bullying traits, with some children displaying aggression linked to later bullying roles. Jansen et al. (2012) explored early risk factors, including family characteristics, divorce, and parental mental health, finding that anxious preschoolers were more likely to become victims by primary school, while aggression predicted later bullying behaviour. This highlights the fluidity of bullying roles with socio-ecological vulnerabilities, including individual dispositions that influence bullying behaviours according to Reisen et. Al. (2019). Cowie (2010) highlights the role of social contexts, family, community, and peers in shaping bullying behaviours. She notes that bullies often exhibit traits like low fear reactivity and narcissism, which hinder empathy, while insecure family attachments desensitise children to others' emotions, reinforcing bullying.

Jansen et al. (2012), also found that children with superior motor skills were more likely to engage in bullying and less likely to be victims, feeding into theories that link perceived advantages, like athleticism, to coercive behaviours. Moreover, findings in all

suggest that childhood adversity is a significant risk factor for bullying (de Vries et al., 2018; Hemphill et al., 2014; Houtepen et al., 2020; Nozaki, 2019).

Ramírez (2001) characterised BPs as displaying higher levels of psychoticism, leadership, physical strength, susceptibility to violence, extroversion, and high self-esteem, in contrast to victims, who often exhibit self-control, anxiety, and shyness. Similarly, Kellerman (1999) and Lines (2008) depicted BPs as aggressive, overconfident, strategic, and impulsive. However, these studies are dated, and more recent literature suggests that BPs' characteristics are fluid, individualistic, and may confer social benefits (Reisen et al., 2019).

Kellerman (1999) posits that aggressive tendencies in BPs might have biological foundations, which could lead to habitual dominance and, if unaddressed, escalate into severe antisocial behaviours, including criminality. However, Kellerman's work is largely based on case studies that lack the empirical rigor and generalisability required in academic contexts. Although genetic, neurological, and hormonal factors have been linked to bullying (Coccaro et al., 2011; Fairchild et al., 2013; Tuvblad & Baker, 2011), these factors must be considered within a broader biopsychosocial framework to fully capture the complexity of bullying behaviours.

Neurodevelopmental disorders, such as ADHD and autism spectrum disorder, further illustrate the interplay between biological, psychological, and social factors. Neurochemical imbalances in ADHD may drive impulsivity and aggression, while social challenges in autism can make children vulnerable, both as bullies and victims (Banaschewski et al., 2010; Humphrey & and Hebron, 2015). These cases emphasise the need for an integrated biopsychosocial approach to comprehensively understand bullying behaviours.

Critics of purely biological explanations, such as Rogers (1961), argue that human behaviour, including bullying, is influenced by a complex interplay of factors beyond biological determinism. Environmental and social influences, such as overprotective

parenting and high-conflict family environments, often precede bullying behaviours, suggesting that these behaviours result from the interaction of multiple factors (Figula et al., 2023).

As a trainee counselling psychologist with a humanistic orientation, this study recognises the relevance of biological perspectives but prioritises understanding the psychosocial dimensions of bullying. This aligns with the aim of exploring the lived experiences and relational contexts of those who bully, highlighting the multifaceted nature of human behaviour. The following sections further outline the nature and roles of bullying, including relevant theoretical perspectives, to support this understanding.

Physical Bully

Litwiller and Brausch (2013) found that the most common and obvious type of BP is physical. More specifically, bullying might be physically instigated by children and used to demonstrate violence to control others and attain power. For instance, punching, shoving, kicking, slapping, and other forms of physical attacks. Physical bullying may be the most extreme type of bullying because of its potential to lead to fatalities (Litwiller & Brausch, 2013; Martocci, 2015; Wang et al., 2012). Nonetheless, as Olweus (1978) identified, physical bullying was more prevalent among boys; however, girls were more likely to engage in verbal bullying and peer isolation (Smith & Ananiadou, 2003).

Physical bullying, including behaviours such as punching, shoving, and kicking, is one of the most overt forms of bullying often used by perpetrators to assert dominance and control (Litwiller & Brausch, 2013). It is considered the most extreme type because of its potential for serious harm and fatalities (Litwiller & Brausch, 2013; Martocci, 2015; Wang et al., 2012). Olweus (1978) found that physical bullying is more prevalent among boys, who may use aggression to reinforce masculinity and social status, whereas girls tend to engage in verbal bullying and social exclusion (Smith & Ananiadou, 2003).

For bullies, physical aggression can be a way to cope with feelings of insecurity or boost self-esteem through displays of power. This behaviour may be reinforced in environments where aggression is normalised or rewarded, further entrenching the bully's role within the social hierarchy. Additionally, Espelage et al. (2014) suggest some bullies might act out patterns of behaviour learned from their own experiences of victimisation or exposure to violence.

Engaging in physical bullying during adolescence, a critical period for identity formation, may shape a bully's self-concept and solidify their role as a dominant figure among peers. This reliance on physical aggression may reflect underlying vulnerabilities such as low self-esteem or emotional struggles, suggesting that their sense of self is more complex than it appears. Understanding these dynamics highlights the importance of addressing the deeper motivations behind physical bullying to support healthier social interactions and self-perception in bullies

Verbal Bullying Perpetration

Verbal bullying, which includes name-calling, teasing, and making jokes at the expense of others, is often driven by underlying emotional and social dynamics within the perpetrators. While these behaviours can lead to emotional destabilisation and shame in victims (Wang et al., 2012), the motivations for bullies are complex and may be tied to their sense of self and attempts to navigate social hierarchies.

Shame plays a significant, yet nuanced role in verbal bullying perpetration. In Western cultures, shame can drive individuals to demean others as a way of bolstering their own self-esteem and asserting dominance (Scheff, 2000). For bullies, this behaviour may be an attempt to reclaim perceived lost status or project a sense of power and control, thus reshaping their social identity and managing feelings of inadequacy (Tangney & Dearing, 2003). In collectivist cultures, shame is more communal and might drive bullying as a means

of diverting attention from personal shortcomings or restoring perceived social harmony (Fung, 1999). Stevens (1973) posits that within Latino cultures, verbal bullying is observed as a strategy to safeguard masculinity. This suggests that perpetrators may engage in such behaviours to manage culturally induced shame and uphold social norms, particularly those related to gender.

The role of shame extends to cyberbullying, where the anonymity of the Internet allows bullies to project their internalised shame onto others without immediate social repercussions, transcending cultural and geographic boundaries (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). This projection can be seen as a defensive mechanism in which bullies seek to elevate their own social standing or self-image by targeting others. Moreover, while shame is often about the perception of others, guilt, more prevalent in Western cultures, relates to personal standards, leading bullies to reconcile their actions with societal expectations (Choi & Park, 2018).

Research suggests that verbal bullying is not only a mechanism for bullies to exert power and control but also a way to assert their identity in social contexts. Bullies may use name calling and harsh words, often targeting vulnerabilities that are private or deeply personal to the victim, as a strategy to dominate social interactions and reinforce their own sense of authority and self-worth (Kieffer, 2013). Martocci (2015) discusses how these verbal acts of aggression, particularly among females, can lead to negative self-concepts in victims but also reflect the bullies' efforts to influence social dynamics and assert dominance. This indicates that verbal bullying is not merely about harming others but also serves as a tool for bullies to navigate their own social roles and manage their identities.

Additionally, the developmental stage of bullies plays a critical role in the development of their self-concept. As children and adolescents are highly influenced by peer feedback, engaging in verbal bullying may reflect or shape their sense of self in response to

social feedback and their perceived status (Martocci, 2015). Bullies often articulate persuasive arguments to justify their actions, entrenching their self-perception as assertive or dominant individuals within their peer groups (Wang et al., 2012). This ability to navigate social narratives reinforces their role and self-identity, highlighting verbal bullying as a social positioning strategy.

While verbal bullying undeniably harms victims, it also serves as a lens through which to understand the bullies' self-concept and their interaction with the social world. This perspective allows us to see bullies not only as perpetrators of harm, but as individuals navigating complex social landscapes, where their actions may be reflective of deeper struggles with identity, power, and belonging.

Sexual Perpetration of Bullying

Rivers and Duncan (2013) found that sexual BP is a violent form of bullying that needs to be addressed in contemporary times. Sexual perpetration of bullying consists of harmful and humiliating actions that directly target an individual's sexuality. For example, crude comments on nude photos are shared, as well as inappropriate touching and even rape (Eisenberg et al., 2015; Espelage et al., 2014). It falls within the categories of sexual harassment and prejudice towards individual self-assigned gender and sexual preferences. Related but also distinct from rape, assault, and abuse. These are severe forms of sexual violence that involve coercion or force, while sexual bullying encompasses repeated unwanted sexual advances or remarks. Both contribute to the spectrum of sexual violence, with bullying often serving as a precursor to more severe acts (Brown & Walklate, 2011; Espelage, Low, & Anderson, 2014). Sexual bullying is pervasive in UK schools, especially through name calling being sexualised in reference to peoples’ perceived, though sometimes not their true, sexual orientation (HMCI et al., 2018; Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). This

indicates that forms of bullying may overlap, such as incidents of bullying involving name calling, but may also involve later physical, sexual, or cyber bullying.

Espelage et al. (2014) indicated that homophobic teasing was a significant predictor of homophobic sexual harassment over time. Moreover, sexual harassment, teasing, and perpetration could contribute to cyberbullying and inappropriate sharing of sexual content (Aboujaoude et al., 2015). Additionally, family adversity, such as sexual molestation and abuse, has been linked to BPs, who are more likely to abuse other children sexually (Bannister & Gallagher, 1996). In the UK, bullying in schools is mostly resolved by school anti-bullying policies; however, where extreme bullying leads to physical assault, rape, and abuse, the school has a duty of care to activate safeguarding procedures, but also reports such incidents to the police (DfE, 2017). Individual students may also press on criminal charges. However, further studies are required to shed light on such vulnerabilities.

Cyber Bullying

Cyberbullying has risen in recent years, particularly among teenagers, as internet and social media use increases (Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015). Perpetrators can now anonymously harass, threaten, and embarrass others through means like sharing embarrassing images or sending hurtful messages. It has become the most generic form of bullying, especially following relationship ruptures (Valerie, 2006), often raising safeguarding concerns in schools. Cyberbullying differs from traditional bullying due to its pervasive nature, leading to constant online harassment and significant emotional effects, such as anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal (Cowie, 2013). Cowie (2013) notes the challenges in identifying and addressing cyberbullying due to its anonymous nature. Olweus and Limber (2017) argue that cyberbullying does not replace traditional bullying, as one often leads to the other.

Inter-Cultural Perspectives on School Bullying

School bullying manifests differently across cultures and is influenced by varying norms concerning gender, sexuality, and behaviour. In Western contexts, bullying includes physical violence, verbal teasing, and social exclusion, with consensus on its harm (Olweus, 1993). Western communities emphasise individual rights and children's psychological well-being, leading to comprehensive anti-bullying policies, although it may be imperfectly implemented in UK schools (Bhopal, 2018).

In contrast, many cultures, including Asian ones, prioritise group harmony and authority, viewing public shaming or ostracism as severe forms of bullying, while physical aggression is less stigmatised, especially among boys (Kanetsuna, 2016; Smith et al., 2016) Gender norms heavily influence perceptions of bullying. In patriarchal societies, aggressive behaviours by boys are generally tolerated or even encouraged as expressions of masculinity, while similar behaviours by girls are discouraged as noted by Connell (2005). This discrepancy further perpetuates gendered bullying, with boys targeting peers to assert dominance and girls using relational aggression to navigate social hierarchies (Smith, 2016).

Sexuality complicates this picture, as intolerance toward non-heterosexual orientations can lead to severe bullying, particularly in conservative cultures (Meyer, 2009; Poteat & Espelage, 2005). Religious beliefs about moral justification also impact bullying along with sexual orientation (Scherr & Larson, 2010). Inter-cultural contexts exacerbate bullying, highlighting the need for further research into normative conflicts in multicultural educational settings and further understanding to develop relevant interventions (Kosciw et al., 2018; Smith, 2016b).

Impact of Bullying Perpetration in Childhood

The only qualitative data on BP negative consequences, has been documented by Lines (2008), whose book to some extend differs from this thesis as he reported below: “My interest is in those who arguably are ‘drawn into’ aggressive behaviour, almost helplessly, as a reaction to relational conflict. We shall consider primarily those who are judged harshly by senior staff through exclusion or dismissal, or by society through the criminal justice system and periods of internment for violence against friends, family or colleagues”. (Lines, 2008, p13). Lines’ (2018) book, though relevant in some respects, seems selectively biased, as not all forms of bullying were considered, nor were participants randomly or knowingly choosing to participate. Consent was sought to use the information only after data collection during the treatment sessions. Physical bullying represents one of the many forms of bullying, as noted above in the types of BP. Therefore, the book differs from the aims of this study in understanding the experiences of all BPs using the qualitative method of IPA from a counselling psychology perspective. Additionally, the Lines study was conducted in one secondary school in England, which may not be representative of all schools’ circumstances given the differences in anti-bullying policy and training provisions in schools (DfE, 2017).

As a school counsellor, Lines (2008) documented the psychosocial difficulties faced by children who bullied others, including school exclusion, regular detention, family rejection, relationship issues, and mental health difficulties. He also noted that some former bullies were at risk of future criminality based on follow-up observations. Lines (2008) further revealed a pattern of generational aggression from fathers to sons attending the same school. The APA (2016) and Olweus (2011b) support this suggestion. They noted that BPs face behavioural problems such as vandalism, truancy, alcoholism, smoking, school dropout, carrying weapons, risk of gun ownership, and

other anti-social behaviours. Given his sampling method, these findings seem to confirm the narratives of the children he treated.

Although there are few statistics on school dropout rates due to bullying in the UK, Borgwald and Theixos (2013) argued that zero tolerance to bullying in the USA and occasional school expulsion could be a double-edged sword. For instance, they explained that children might be abused at home only to be sternly punished at school when externalising their pain. Rodriguez (2013) posited that school expulsion due to bullying could result in psychological issues, leading to substance abuse, underage sexual activity, and delinquent behaviour. UNESCO's (2018) research on global violence and bullying, showed that children who are BPs and BVs between 14 and 15 years old in Europe and North America often engage in early sexual activity. Mendez (2003) warned that BPs placed in care may experience further emotional distress, which may prevent them from meeting their developmental needs. Moreover, uprooting such children from their community networks has long-term anti-social implications.

A longitudinal study by Mendez (2003), observing children from kindergarten to age 12, identified lapses in school suspension programs in the USA, reporting their inability to serve as a deterrent to BPs. Disadvantaged and vulnerable children were penalised and left without any support. Similarly, Renda et al. (2011) suggested that these factors could lead to future anti-social behaviour and increased criminal behaviour in adults. In his review of family law documents in the USA, Rodriguez (2013) confirmed this trend, identifying a correlation between children's school expulsion, increased incarceration rates, and involvement of the criminal justice system. The 2017-2018 House of Commons report by Long et al. (2020) found that bullying resulted in permanent school exclusions in 0.4 per cent of children. The latest data indicate that bullying accounts for approximately 1.5% (118) from the 7894 permanent exclusions and 1.8% (7,889) of 438,300 fixed-period exclusions in the

2022/2023 academic year (DfE, 2024). Not all excluded students were willing to pursue support from pupil referral units (PRUs). In England, PRUs are specialised schools designed for students who are unable to attend mainstream school. Those who manage to stay in education may acquire lower grades because of class disruptions and concentration issues (Lines, 2008). However, despite the high incidence of bullying, especially reported by victims, the exclusion rates are extremely low which might be related to the identification and reporting challenges faced by schools. The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, 2014) suggests that teachers generally report low-level school disruptions for various reasons. However, “for those who experience the most disruption in school, significant damage can be done to their chances in life” (Ofsted, 2014, p.1).

Impact of Bullying Perpetration in Adulthood

The health consequences of BPs, both in the short and long term, have not been comprehensively documented in the literature. Copeland et al. (2013) longitudinally investigated the psychiatric outcomes of 1,420 participants across 11 counties in Western North Carolina, USA.The participants, who were involved in bullying and aged between 19 and 26 years, were followed up from 9 to 16 years of age. In contrast to the findings of Olweus and others, the researchers did not identify any negative health outcomes for bullying perpetrators (BPs) over time (Farrington, 2012; Olweus, 2011a; Olweus et al., 1986; Ttofi et al., 2012). However, they did observe an increase in anti-social behaviour among the participants. Similarly, McVie's (2014) study involving 4,300 young people from Scotland indicated that persistent bullying during early adolescence (ages 13 to 16) led to a heightened risk of violence in later adolescence (age 17+ years).

There are suggestions that bullying behaviours can emerge as early as in preschools. All perpetrators were also more likely to have a psychiatric diagnosis of antisocial personality, substance abuse, and social anxiety. Concomitantly, a Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development by Farrington (1993) suggested that individuals who had been BPs at 14 years of age were more likely to have children who also bullied others. This view also appears to confirm Vanderbilt and Augustyn’s (2007) observation of BPs in schools. Kellerman (1999) ultimately suggests that, although the antisocial nature of BPs could lead to involvement in gangs and potentially unscrupulous financial success, some BPs may nevertheless end up with lower earning potential.

Longitudinal evidence of the consequences of BP also produces unfavourable results. For example, a New Zealand study over 30 years associated childhood bullying with violent offending, arrest, and conviction in adults when separating the effects of childhood conduct and attention problems (Fergusson et al., 2014). Similarly, in a longitudinal study of 650

adolescents in Australia, bullied students aged 16–17 had over four times the likelihood of involvement in nonviolent antisocial behaviour, whereas those aged 19-20 had twice the odds of engaging in violent antisocial behaviour (Hemphill et al., 2014). This study has some limitations, particularly regarding the use of a generic measure for assessing bullying involvement. For instance, infrequent harassment reports over a year might not represent bullying behaviour. Additionally, this study focused on the role of bullying rather than on specific BP actions. Other studies have documented that sexual harassment and future sex offenders are significantly aligned with BPs (Connolly et al., 2000; Eisenberg et al., 2015; Espelage et al., 2014). A study conducted by Connolly et al. (2000), on the later dating lives of adolescent BPs revealed the likelihood of social and physical aggressiveness towards partners, as well as difficulties in cultivating positive romantic relationships.

Impact of Bullying on Victims

Victims of bullying are children who are targeted by perpetrators. Victims are living proof of their perpetrators' actions. Extensive literature exists on the impact of bullying on their lives, as compared to BPs. Victims may endure emotional, verbal, and sexual abuse and, in some extreme cases, be killed by perpetrators (ABA, 2024).

Those who experience bullying at school experience significant and lasting consequences for their mental, emotional, and physical health (Da Silva 2012). Victims frequently feel a pervasive sense of fear and helplessness, which affects their academic performance and social interactions (Da Silva, 2012). Emotional trauma caused by bullying can lead to long-term mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and suicidal thoughts (Baiden & Tadeo, 2020; Holbrook et al., 2005; Lereya et al., 2015). Moreover, those who are bullied often suffer from somatic symptoms, including headaches and stomach aches, in addition to their distress (Gini & Pozzoli, 2013). The long-term effects of these experiences can result in diminished quality of life, emotional strife, and difficulties

fostering healthy adult relationships. While the consequences of bullying warrant research and support for its victims, it is equally important to extend understanding and support to perpetrators to curb their anti-social behaviour and ultimately maintain a reduction in bullying for the benefit of all children.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the Humanistic model by Rogers (1961), sharing close similarities to the chosen phenomenological method of IPA (Smith et al., 2022). It is also underpinned by the developmental life span theory (Baltes et al., 2007) and psychodynamic theory pioneered by Sigmund Freud in the 1800s and Beck's (Beck et al., 1979) cognitive-behavioural model. Furthermore, it is underpinned by the social-ecological diathesis-stress model through the perspectives of Espelage & Swearer (2004) and Swearer & Hymel (2015). While these theories address childhood personality development, they differ in their approaches; thus, they offer varied insights into understanding bullying behaviour in children from a CoP perspective.

Humanistic Model

As explained by Rogers (1961), the Humanistic perspective on personality emphasises individualised experience, optimal well-being, and utilisation of human potential to enhance relationships in pursuit of self-actualisation (self-worth) or achievement of life goals. According to Humanistic explanations, all children are born with a clean slate and possess a self-directed zeal to foster cooperation among groups while maintaining their autonomy. As such, all children need genuineness (congruence), understanding (empathy), and acceptance (unconditional positive regard; UPR) to naturally develop organismic values, which are considered appropriate environments for promoting innate self-actualising tendencies. However, conditions of worth due to circumstances such as bullying could result in incongruence, development of a false self, and a high external locus of evaluation for

victims and perpetrators. Thus, a child who perpetrates bullying may not have control over their circumstances to reach full potential (optimal psychological or social functioning). This might be a result of abuse or neglect, which might become destructive with a low or high self-concept (Cooper et al., 2013).

In psychological therapy, Rogerian principles (Rogers, 1961) aimed to promote psychological well-being through relationship development (Bland & DeRobertis, 2019). As a doctoral CoP trainee, the humanistic model serves as a professional anchor and foundation for accessing other theories. In addition, it is crucial to pursue any form of research in CoPs due to the hermeneutic and phenomenological nature of such an enquiry (Kasket, 2013). Thus, this model allows the assessment of BP's personality development without making any preconceived judgments. The Humanistic model and IPA both emphasise understanding individuals' subjective experiences and personal meaning-making; self-concept and growth through self-actualisation, with IPA exploring how individuals interpret their worlds (Rogers, 1961; Smith et al., 2022). Both approaches employ non-directive, empathetic methods; Rogers' client-centred therapy facilitates self-discovery without imposing views, while IPA uses open-ended enquiry (see Appendix D) respecting participants' perspectives (Rogers, 1951; Smith & Osborn, 2007). They recognise individual agency and the capacity for self-reflection and growth (Smith & Nizza, 2021).

Developmental Life Span Theory

Developmental life span theory, as explained by Baltes et al. (2007), suggests that a person's upbringing impacts their developmental construct of the world around them. As such, BPs who might have experienced adverse life circumstances in the early developmental stages might be vulnerable to developing anti-social behaviours (Ball et al., 2008a; Espelage et al., 2014). This theory has shifted from the biological or genetic explanations of Kellerman (1999) and Lines (2007) to the child's social setting. De Vries et al. (2018) linked family

adversities such as strict parenting, mental health issues, and abuse to children's involvement in bullying. This literature review attempts to utilise this theory by addressing how the form and content of a child's life are ordered and affected by individual transitions during life.

Psychodynamic Theory

Among the various frameworks used to explore bullying behaviour, psychodynamic theory offers unique insights into the internal dynamics of children engaged in such behaviours. The psychodynamic perspective, rooted in the pioneering works of Sigmund Freud (1905) and subsequently developed by theorists such as Carl Jung (1933), Melanie Klein (1932), and Donald Winnicott (2006), posits human behaviour is driven by unconscious forces often originating from early childhood adaptations and experiences. It asserts that a child's interactions with primary caregivers, particularly during formative years, play a pivotal role in shaping children's psyche. This perspective contends that unconscious processes, often rooted in early childhood experiences, significantly influence human behaviour, including bullying. The nature of interactions between children and their primary caregivers during their formative years are pivotal in shaping their psychological makeup, manifesting in various social contexts (Bowlby, 1988; Freud, 2020; Jung, 1992; Klein, 1932). For instance, a core element of psychodynamic theory in the context of bullying is the employment of defence mechanisms, such as projection, displacement, and denial. These mechanisms serve as unconscious strategies that individuals might use to manage internal emotional conflicts and psychological distress (Freud, 1937)

Psychoanalytic theory posits that individual development is marked by discontinuity, with individuals encountering conflicts between their biological impulses and social expectations at different stages (Jung, 1933). According to Freud's theory, during these conflicts, individuals employ psychological defence mechanisms, such as displacement of anger, to cope with overwhelming distress (Freud, 1937). Despite short-lived benefits of such

defence mechanisms, they might also maintain harmful behaviours including bullying other children. These defence mechanisms often involve projecting personal insecurities and fears onto victims, thereby providing a psychological outlet for internal conflict (Da Silva, 2012).

Thus, psychodynamic theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex psychological processes underlying bullying behaviour. Focusing on unconscious mechanisms, family dynamics, and individual personality constructs, this theory provides invaluable insights into children's bullying as a coping strategy, shedding light on potential avenues for intervention.

Cognitive-Behavioural Theory

This perspective originates from Beck's (1964) cognitive–behavioural model, which focuses on the interaction between personal experiences, thoughts, emotions, and behaviour (Bailey & Pico, 2024). Kalodner (2011) explained that therapy is evolving from theoretical writing and empirical studies to clinical experiences to achieve cognitive and behavioural changes. According to Greenberger & Padesky (2012), the thought process includes presenting views about the “here and now”, the self, others and the world, and views psychological misinterpretation as negative cognitions. Hence, with relevance to BP, an insecure child's environment might result in internalised self-deprecating beliefs. Reasonably, cognitions impact one’s emotions, behaviours, and bodily sensations, with psychological ill-health developing from unhelpful cognitions such as impulsivity, violence, and low self-esteem issues (Krahé, 2020). According to Choi and Park (2018) and Lines (2007), such children might attempt to assert their position against other children deemed weaker, resulting in BP.

To determine the utility of cognitive behavioural theory in the context of bullying, a case study by Lines (2008) explored how Philip, a disruptive child, talked about his abusive stepfather, Alexander. Philip recalled Alexander (his stepfather) as an ex-pupil who was also

physically abused by his father and bullied at school. Lines (2008) observed that, although not all BPs are aggressive, the environment might impact children's behaviour and sense of self, as explained by the cognitive model. Although aggression features in most BPs narratives, the profiles of those who bully are more nuanced (Plexousakis et al., 2019), leading to Sarin and Wallin's (2014) argument for the significance of understanding BPs through this model's lens.

Social-Ecological Diathesis-Stress Model

The social-ecological model considers a systemic approach towards understanding bullying within the context of social networks (Espelage & Swearer, 2004), whereas the diathesis-stress model focuses on the stressors and risk factors impacting their involvement and intervention in bullying (Swearer & Hymel, 2015)**.** In practice, both models suggest that an understanding of bullying through engagement with families, the community, and peers could assist in sustainable prevention programs informed by the distress involved in bullying, as well as effective intervention and prevention strategies (Swearer et al., 2017). Ferguson and Dyck (2012) suggested utilising the diathesis-stress model to explicate the genesis of aggression in minors by employing the social-cognitive and social-learning theories (Bandura, 1980). According to Chatal et al. (1997), the model has heuristic value in explaining intricacies of aggression. Factors that might act as diatheses for externalising problems in adolescence include, but are not limited: to divorce, bereavement, poverty, disability, mental health issues in parents, and childhood abuse (Brendgen et al., 2015). It is essential to note that genetic susceptibility to mental distress has been reported to impact social and peer group bullying behaviours (Brendgen et al., 2015). However, current study does not rigidly support the genetic disposition of the aggression debate in children due to the Humanistic and Phenomenological stance of this research.

Summary and Knowledge Gap

A review of the literature above explains the significance of the proposed study by illustrating the motivation for studying BP. Furthermore, it appraised relevant literature and theories of BP that have enabled the determination of the current state of the field and how scholars have investigated, analysed, and conceptualised BP. The rise in the rates of children's mental health difficulties and suicide domestically and globally attests, in part, to the prevalence of bullying, particularly cyberbullying, where traditional bullying continues online (Martin et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2018). Thus, perpetrators hide behind electronic devices to reach millions of people. Over the past 40 years, governments and social activists have commissioned numerous studies and interventions at legislative, school, and community levels. Global interventions vary; however, there appears to have been little success, and bullying continues to manifest and persist in myriad forms: physical, verbal, sexual, and online (HMCI, 2018; Litwiller & Brausch, 2013; Martocci, 2015; Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017; Oakes, 2019; Wang et al., 2012; Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015).

The majority of studies and interventions prioritise victims, arguably based on implicit presuppositions that their need for empathy and support outweighs that of the perpetrator and that perpetrators have a choice to be antisocial and aggressive (Ragatz et al., 2011). Thus, most studies have portrayed perpetrators as all-powerful, callous, confident, and peer-admired psychopathic children who should be stopped (Álvarez-García et al., 2015; Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Jansen et al., 2011; Lines, 2008; Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017; Nelson et al., 2019; Rigby, 2002; Rupp & McCoy, 2019; Salmivalli et al., 1996;).

Given a humanistic position, this view ignores the critical element that BPs are also children who should be equally protected and supported in a nurturing environment. Perpetrators of bullying tend to be victims of challenging psychological and abusive ecological situations regardless of their social background (Baldry & Farrington, 2000; Dijk

et al., 2017; Ditch the Label, 2019; Huitsing & Veenstra, 2012; James, 2010; Lines, 2008; Lodge, 2014; Olweus, 2013; Salmivalli et al., 1996). To effectively promote the well-being of all children, it is essential to prioritise understanding and to address the challenges faced by those who inflict harm. Psychological theories provide compelling explanations for the development of bullying and the treatment of the underlying issues in BPs (Baltes et al., 2007; Beck, 1964; Bland & DeRobertis, 2019; Bowlby, 1988; Jung, 1992; Cooper et al., 2013; Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Klein, 1932; Rogers, 1961; Freud, 2020; Swearer & Hymel, 2015). However, the qualitative literature on bullying to inform CoP therapy sessions seems to be lacking from my personal experience, as testified by other therapists, such as Lines (2007). Since these challenges point to a lack of knowledge of the experiences of BPs, this study aimed to seek perpetrators' views on their experiences of their sense of self and role in bullying.

IPA offers a means for BPs to share their experiences in a subjective and non-judgemental manner, which is claimed to be absent in the literature. By using IPA, this study sheds new light on adults who self-identify as bullying perpetrators during their childhood. How do they perceive their sense of role and self, retrospectively? Formulating this research question is driven by the dearth of knowledge on the lived experiences of bullying perpetrators and perceptions of themselves and their role, since most studies on bullying have focused on victims and potential interventions for them.

Research Question and Aims

The research question and aims are as follows:

What are the lived experiences of adults who perpetrated bullying during childhood at school?

Aims:

a. To better understand their lived experience - their role and "sense of self"

b. To understand BPs from a CoP perspective
c. To contribute to the bullying literature and propose further studies on prevention, support and therapeutic interventions.

Research Relevance to Counselling Psychology

Counselling psychology, with a focus on alleviating mental distress through a humanistic and person-centred approach, emphasises self-efficacy, empathy, non-judgemental attitudes, and unconditional positive regard (Bland & DeRobertis, 2019; Rogers, 1961). Understanding bullying from this perspective disseminates knowledge on perpetrators, aligning with CoP's humanistic and person-centred principles. By using phenomenological enquiry (Smith et. al., 2022) helps to explore participants' lived experiences, which aligns with the CoP's person-centred (PC) subjective experiential ethos (Cooper et al., 2013). In addition, bullying research relevant to CoPs speaks to the contemporary expectation of therapists to develop evidence-based practice by scientifically evidencing the choice of therapeutic endeavours as scientist-practitioners where interventions are backed by empirical research. Similarly, clinical practice may inform future research (Hanley et al., 2013; Woolfe et al., 2010).

Bullying, an antisocial phenomenon, negatively impacts mental well-being and incurs significant social costs, such as violence, school disruption, and potential dropout, which may lead to adult criminality and socio-economic disadvantages (Gaffney et al., 2019; Olweus, 2011). Research into bullying perpetrators is particularly aligned with CoP's social justice (Ratts, 2009) and humanistic ethos (Rogers, 1961) by centring marginalised groups and highlighting their plight for further support in schools and within the communities. Social injustice is embedded in bullying due to the power dynamics involved, including its prevalence, but not exclusive to marginalised minority groups whose individual differences seem to perpetuate the act (Cacali, 2018). On the other hand, BPs may also bully others due

to fear of being targeted for their difference along social class, race, disability or sexual orientation, as highlighted to them within their families or community (Álvarez-García et al., 2015). Therefore, ecological understanding from CoP perspective might help to prevent aggressive coping strategies in children at the developmental stages. Additionally, owing to the overall negative impact of bullying on children's emotional development, the American Psychological Association (APA, 2016) designated bullying and its prevention as top priorities from 2016 onwards, and this designation remains in effect at present. Therefore, this research on BPs benefits CoPs, clients, researchers, families, other clinical professionals, educators, and charities in understanding, preventing bullying, and treating related psychosocial challenges.

Part 3. Methodology and Procedures

Introduction

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of adults who perpetrated bullying as children. The research procedure involved conducting semi-structured interviews to assess participants' experiences and identify personal experiential themes (PETs). These PETs were then consolidated to form general experiential themes (GETs) that apply to all participants (Smith et al., 2022). This section provides an overview of the relevant qualitative perspectives underpinning the methods and procedures used in this study. It further rationalises the methodology (IPA) and epistemological stance chosen and its compatibility with the CoP's philosophical position. Furthermore, ethical considerations are presented, along with the significance of reflexivity in qualitative methods. Finally, a summary of how data was collated, handled, and analysed using IPA approach is provided.

Rational for Qualitative Method and Counselling Psychology Relevance

This study used a qualitative approach to understand the experiences and meanings of participants' narratives (Willig & Rogers, 2017). A qualitative method fosters the collection of heuristic, holistic, and deeper narratives about BPs rather than seeking causation or quantitative data in a limiting deterministic positivist approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Mukherji & Albon, 2018). It is also valuable for collecting nuanced, in-depth narratives about the experiences of study participants. Although quantitative methods might provide vast amounts of generalisable data, this often lacks the capacity to capture the specific and holistic story of a single individual (Smith, (2011). Thus, a quantitative approach was not suitable for persons involved in bullying whose experiences could be complex and multifaceted. According to Swearer et al. (2014), although most research on bullying relies on quantitative methods, it could lead to a lack of understanding of the individual’s subjective experiences. Smith (2011p.)

posited that there is room for "more qualitative" methods to be employed in bullying research. Additionally, issues regarding the definition of bullying and its nature, assessments, and measurements have been criticised for inconsistencies by Nansel et al. (2008) and Smith (2011), which means that these constructs remain poorly characterised and indistinctly conceptualised, particularly in quantitative studies. Qualitative research also resonates with CoPs' appreciation of shared processes, value of individual perception, social justice, non-judgmental stance, and self-determination. Thus, qualitative methodology was the most suitable for this study. This study aimed to bridge the knowledge gap by offering an in-depth understanding of children who bully and their perspectives on their role. It intended to guide intervention strategies and provide suitable support for both perpetrators and other vulnerable children.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the six participants to create a safe space for sharing. The qualitative framework allowed the collection of information on the intricacies and subtleties of childhood bullying, which may not have been accessible through quantitative methods. Perpetrator experiences of bullying may vary according to their background, culture, and language (Willig & Rogers, 2017). Interpretations facilitate access to retrospective descriptions and promote a deeper understanding of BPs (Larkin et al., 2006; Shinebourne, 2011).

Reflexivity about Qualitative Methodology

In this dissertation, I align with Willig (2013) and Smith et al. (2022) by asserting that methodological choices must be theoretically and methodologically congruent with the research aims, necessitating reflexivity regarding my personal stance. I selected the qualitative method, specifically interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), as it aligns with my worldview and desire to understand participants' lived experiences without imposing any suppositions (McLeod, 2015). My initial inclination towards qualitative research was hindered by the prevalent quantitative bias in the social sciences, leading to a compromise of a mixed

method approach in my undergraduate study on menopausal women mislabelled as witches and banished from their communities in Ghana. This experience, characterised by empathy and disappointment, accentuates the inadequacies of quantitative methods in capturing the nuanced narratives of these women. As a proponent of the humanistic perspective, I contend that the positivist viewpoint overlooks a crucial aspect. The fact that BPs are children who, like these women, require protection and support in a nurturing environment.

During my master's studies in England, I employed quantitative methods, as psychology was often equated with quantitative research, which seemed to establish our scientific credibility (Leahey & Hardy, 2004). Embracing my curiosity and empathy, I now see qualitative research as equally rigorous and essential, particularly in my work within the NHS, where I combine outcome measures with individual narratives (Kroenke et al., 2001; Spitzer et al., 2006) to gain a holistic outlook on client presentations. This approach is informed by my humanistic stance as a Trainee CoPs (Etherington, 2004; Watt, 2015) and my transferable knowledge of participatory methods as an international development practitioner. In the past, project monitoring considered the narratives of local communities without imposing subjective views (Chambers, 1997). I understand the value of both designs. Hence, I now embrace the complexities and unpredictability of qualitative methods as a rigorous means of understanding phenomena from the perspective of those who experience them. My commitment to understanding individual stories, especially regarding bullying perpetrators, aligns naturally with my humanistic stance and professional development as a Trainee CoP.

While acutely aware of the my inability to disassociate myself from the research process due to personal experiences, I dedicate attention to reflexivity by journaling the process, to be transparent about the inevitable impact of personal material (Watt, 2015). As such, I kept a written record throughout the research process. The journal included descriptions of what I

thought, felt, or did while collecting and analysing the data. These thoughts were subsequently condensed into the reflective sections of this thesis.

Epistemology and Ontological Positioning of IPA

McLeod (2015) and Denzin and Lincoln (2017) identified three primary factors that guide the selection of qualitative methods: research questions, methodological history, and philosophical stance. In psychological research, understanding one's ontological beliefs (i.e., beliefs about what exists) and epistemological principles (i.e., beliefs about how and whether we can know what exists) is fundamental to determining the appropriate methods (Willig, 2017). In this study, the adoption of the IPA approach was primarily driven by the research question and epistemological stance.

The ontological position underpinning this study is critical realism (Bhaskar, 2020), which asserts that bullying is a real, objective phenomenon that exists independently of individuals' awareness or perceptions, yet our understanding of it is always mediated by social, cultural, and contextual factors. In contrast to a positivist stance focused on hypothesis testing and numerical data, critical realism recognises that knowledge of bullying is shaped by the lived experiences of individuals and the broader social context in which it occurs (Burr, 2015).

From an epistemological perspective, the study aligns with a relativist worldview (Guba, 1992) which holds that knowledge about bullying is subjective and constructed through interaction, perception, and context. This relativist stance underpins the use of IPA, as it allows for the exploration of individuals' subjective experiences of bullying and perpetration, without presuming a single, objective truth. The epistemological approach emphasises that knowledge is context-dependent and can vary between individuals and cultural settings (Madill et al., 2000; Smith et al., 2022).

Critical realism acknowledges that bullying has real, tangible impacts on mental and physical health, as recognised by UNESCO (2018). However, it also contends that these

impacts are contingent on a variety of factors, including individual experiences, cultural backgrounds, and societal norms (Gredler, 2003; Harper, 2011; Smith, 2016). These factors influence the way bullying is perceived and described, highlighting the importance of considering different viewpoints when interpreting bullying behaviours (Eatough & Smith, 2022; Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Shinebourne, 2011).

Rationale for Adopting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

IPA was adopted for this study, driven by the epistemological alignment with relativism and the research question, which aimed to explore the lived experiences of adults who self-identify as childhood BPs. According to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) and Smith et al. (2022), IPA is a qualitative research approach focused on how individuals use their own language to make sense of significant life events. IPA aligns with phenomenology, a psychological approach centred on human lived experience, making it particularly suitable for examining the subjective experiences of BPs. This method resonates with the study's research question and fits with the CoP's humanistic values of openness, empathy, and a non-judgmental stance.

The central aim of IPA, as described by Smith et al. (2022), is to interpret the complexities and subjective meanings of individual experiences. IPA is underpinned by three theoretical foundations: phenomenology, ideography, and hermeneutics (Smith et al., 2022). Phenomenology explores how individuals experience situations within specific contexts, rejecting objective reality in favour of understanding each person's subjective account (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). IPA, rooted in Husserlian phenomenology, focuses on the meanings of everyday life and offers a reflective exploration of these meanings, without trying to impose pre-existing classifications or predictability.

Husserl's principle of eidetic reduction encourages researchers to bracket their biases and preconceptions, striving for an objective understanding of consciousness (Shinebourne,

2011). This method, which allows for the reduction of bias, was followed in this study, ensuring my potential biases were minimised throughout the process.

IPA's dual emphasis on interpretation and meaning making is central to its approach (Larkin et al., 2006). In his seminal work *Being and Tim*e, Heidegger, building on Husserl's ideas, introduced the concept of *dasein* (meaning being there). This notion refers to human existence as fundamentally being-in-the-word, where one's perception and awareness of being, shaped by both subjectivity and intersubjectivity, define how individuals engage with their surroundings (Heidegger, 1962). IPA's hermeneutic stance reflects this interpretivism, wherein I engaged with participants' interpretations within their social contexts. The goal is to understand how BPs interpret their experiences of bullying within their environments, through double hermeneutics - interpreting participants' interpretations (Smith et al., 2022).

IPA's idiographic stance focuses on individual experiences rather than generalising across groups (Smith et al., 2022). This approach ensures that each participant's subjective meaning is fully explored before comparisons are made across the sample. As Smith (1996, 2004) notes, each respondent receives equal attention, ensuring that their individual experiences are given full consideration before being contextualised alongside others.

IPA and other Qualitative Methods

Before choosing IPA, other qualitative methods were considered but not pursued because of the need to focus on the experiences of BPs rather than generating theory as in grounded theory or generating descriptive themes as in thematic analysis (TA). Indeed, TA was not chosen for the proposed study because it is interested in identifying descriptive themes across datasets in a homogenous group in more exploratory studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). TA could have been relevant if the aim of the study had been to describe broader exploratory themes instead of interpreting the in-depth holistic experiences of each BP's sense of self and role in childhood (Giorgi, 1992). Equally, Grounded Theory (GT) does not align precisely with

an epistemological focus. It aims to engage in continuous comparisons of codes to generate multidimensional dynamic theories and significant concepts (Charmaz 2006; Glaser & Strauss 1967). However, this study did not seek to develop a theory.

Consequently, IPA was deemed more appropriate for this study, as the research question and the ontological and epistemological positions - critical realism and relativism, respectively - favour a phenomenological exploration of individual bullying perpetrators' (BPs) subjective narratives (Bhaskar, 1978), rather than collective theoretical reflections on group experiences (Tie et al., 2019). The study aligns more with IPA's epistemological stance, which focuses on individual meaning-making, rather than grounded theory's (GT) emphasis on social constructivism, where reality is understood as derived from contextualised social constructs (Willig, 2013).

Research Design

Recruitment criteria

During the recruitment process, participants were thoroughly informed about their role in the research, ensuring that they could give informed consent and were willing to reflect retrospectively on and share their experiences. Below is the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion

- Adults who self -identify as bullying perpetrators in childhood (focusing on self-perception)
- Aged 18 and above (focusing on adults)
- English speaking- UK based (to strengthen homogeneity in the sample)

Exclusion

- Below 18 years and above 60 years old (focusing on adults)

- Do not have any experiences in other bullying roles (ensure homogeneity in IPA)
- Bullying experiences outside of school context (focusing on school bullying)

Participants and their Profile

A purposive homogenous sample of six participants (see details in appendix K) was recruited via email from participants expressing interest in the study. Five females and one male aged 18 and above who self-identified as bullying perpetrators responded to an advertisement for the study on social media and leaflets distribution. According to IPA, the most important criterion while recruiting the study participants is their experience with the phenomenon being studied; however, the participants could vary in their individual characteristics (McInally & Gray-Brunton, 2021). All the participants self-identified their roles and aligned themselves with the phenomenon of the study- bullying perpetrators in an initial telephone screening call arranged via email. Participants could be of any gender, aged 18 to 60. The cut off at 60 years was to enhance coherent recall and relevant analysis of retrospective bullying experiences, as recommended by Da Silver (2012). Salthouse (2019) also suggests that both episodic and working memory decline progressively with age, thereby impacting the reliability of long-term memories. Below are the participants' demographics:

Table 1

Demographic Distribution of the Six Participants based on Self-identification (see appendix K for further information about participants)

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Age Range	Self-identified Bullying Role	Ethnicity
Meera	Female	35-44	Bullying perpetrator	Asian British
Anna	Female	45-54	Bullying perpetrator	White British
Michael	Male	25-34	Bullying perpetrator	Black British
Sophia	Female	25-34	Bullying perpetrator	Mixed British (multiple)
Joanna	Female	25-34	Bullying perpetrator	Black British
Rachel	Female	24-34	Bullying perpetrator	Mixed British

Homogeneity was ensured through shared experiences of bullying in UK schools (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Participants' self-identification as bullies permitted the interchangeable use of bullying perpetrators (BPs) or bullies. Pseudonyms were chosen by the participants to reflect their original names, maintaining consistency with IPA's subjective interpretation approach (Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

To mitigate barriers such as time or transportation costs, I offered £10 Amazon vouchers to all volunteers, following BPS guidelines (Oates, 2021). Two participants declined the vouchers but expressed gratitude for the opportunity to share their experiences. Participants who self-identified with other bullying roles were excluded during the preliminary calls. Recruitment of the six participants was not without challenges, as discussed in the following section on recruitment and data collection.

Recruitment and Data Collection Steps

The recruitment process was conducted through multiple channels. Approximately 60 flyers were printed and distributed at train stations and posted on community boards in local supermarkets, as well as in GP surgeries. Flyers were also shared with undergraduate psychology students after a class presentation and distributed through colleagues on the same doctoral programme. The study was advertised on social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter/X, LinkedIn), through academic groups, bullying and parents support pages. Group administrators were contacted for permission before flyers were posted, and I also registered on the recruitment site ‘WeParticipated’.

The recruitment flyer (Appendix A) included eligibility questions (e.g., 'Are you 18 years or older?', 'Would you like to share your experiences to help in our research?'), emphasised anonymity, and offered a £10 Amazon voucher for participation. It also included contact details for the researcher and supervisor and confirmed ethical approval from LMU. Interested individuals were asked to email or call directly. All participants initially contacted me by email.

Despite receiving approximately 53 responses, several applicants were found to be fraudulent. These included individuals using disposable American numbers with state identifiers and instructions to leave a message if not contacted within a specified time. Some applicants, particularly from Africa, posed as Americans, assuming I was based in the United States. Other suspicious signs included discrepancies in contact details and refusal to participate in screening calls. One individual, using multiple aliases, admitted to providing false information after being confronted.

Telephone screening was crucial to verify eligibility, gather demographic information, build rapport, and ensure that participants understood the study's objectives (Appendix C). This process also helped confirm the participants' location, interview time and suitability. While in-

person or online interviews were offered, all participants opted for video interviews via Microsoft Teams.

The recruitment period extended beyond the initially planned five-month timeframe, primarily due to challenges associated with engaging a hard-to-reach population of BPs. The stigma surrounding this topic may have contributed to a lower response rate and reluctance to participate. Recruitment was conducted over a period of eight months, ultimately resulting in the enrolment of six participants, in accordance with the recommendation by Smith et al. (2022) for doctoral IPA studies. This number was deemed sufficient to achieve the necessary idiographic depth within the constraints of time and scope. Initially, I considered concluding the recruitment process after enrolling four participants; however, I was fortunate to secure two additional participants before the recruitment deadline.

Pilot study

A pilot study of one participant was conducted to improve the interview schedule and answer the research question. The participant identified as a BP, and their data was later included in the study. Smith et al. (2022) recommended a pilot study to practice and appraise interview schedule in IPA. The pilot study enabled revision of the interview schedule to include an initial general overview of bullying before diving into sensitive subjective experiences. This approach fostered a comfortable atmosphere for an open conversation. Additionally, I learnt not to follow strictly the question in order but rather allowed participants to voluntarily share information which led to a more natural conversations that answered the research questions.

Interviews

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted remotely via Teams, employing an open-ended interview schedule (Appendix D), complemented by preliminary demographic queries (Appendix G). The demographic data were collected or compiled alongside the consent forms prior to the interviews. Subsequently, they were further confirmed and validated in advance of the interviews. A pre-screening call was made to ascertain participants identified as childhood BPs, schooled in the United Kingdom (UK) and who do not identify with other roles in bullying.

Semi-structured interviews allowed for the nuanced exploration of individual stories, providing depth and personal context sensitively (Silverio et al., 2022). It also aligned with recommendations for rich data collection in qualitative research (Madill, 2012). The interview questions, developed to address the research gaps identified in the literature (Hymel & Swearer, 2015), facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences with bullying.

In adherence to the idiographic nature of IPA, the interviews were structured to capture the subjective meanings of participants' experiences, resonating with my humanistic values. The semi-structured format, as suggested by Smith et al. (2022), allowed for the premeditated consideration of the interview approach, ethical considerations, and risk management. Consistent with best practices, each interview was conducted within forty-five minutes to one hour (Smith et al., 2022).

Following the confirmation of participants' identity for the second time, participants gave their consent for the interview's commencement and for the recording. We discussed their experiences of school bullying, and to establish a rapport, they were posed with open-ended questions such as, "What are your previous experiences of participating in bullying at school?" followed by probes like, "How might you have perceived yourself and your role?"

This approach often pre-empts ensuing questions, facilitating a seamless transition to other topics and enabling participants to provide detailed accounts of their experiences. Semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility in questioning to develop rapport and facilitate natural conversations. This approach enabled a progression from general knowledge of bullying to specific questions addressing the research objectives. In keeping with Willig's (2013) suggestion of qualitative methods, the process remained flexible and open to adjustments and refinements when necessary to accommodate the participants' narratives and level of understanding. A few participants when offered, paused for a short duration when they were emotionally distressed, but were still willing to complete the interview in one sitting.

Analysing the Data

Changes to Terminology in IPA

Before delving into the data analysis process, I explain below the new terminology suggested by Smith et. al., (2022) in used throughout the thesis instead of the previous version (Smith et. al, 2009).

Table 2
Changes to IPA Terminology

(Smith et al., 2022) (Also see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_yUCTkvZRxQ (accessed 23/07/2024)

Old terminology	New Terminology
Emergent themes are clustered into ⬇ Superordinate themes (with subthemes and personal quotes in support) ⬇ Master table	Experiential statements (ES) are clustered into ⬇ Personal experiential Themes (PETs) clustered into ⬇ Group experiential Themes (GETs) (with subthemes and personal quotes in support)

All the recorded data were transcribed for analysis. To protect privacy and confidentiality, I safeguarded the data gathered for the research study throughout the undertaking. Consent forms (both paper and electronic), demographic information (Appendix G), and raw data field notes (Appendix J) from interviews were securely stored and kept on file in a protected location on my computer. The data analysis was able to go from descriptive to interpretive because of the IPA's flexibility. Markedly, the data were analysed to answer

the research question, as suggested by Smith et al. (2022) for an IPA approach. As Smith et al. (2022) elaborated, IPA research seeks to explore individual's engagement with a certain experience as they reflect on the meaning of what could have happened and how it impacted them. As Smith et al. (2022) recommended, the data was analysed to understand how each participant subjectively experienced bullying perpetration. In IPA, it is imperative "to engage in the analytic dialogue with each line of transcript, asking questions of what the word, or phrase, sentence means to you, and attempting to check what it means for the participant" (Smith, et al. 2022, p. 84). I held this in mind throughout the research process.

The data analysis procedure was conducted in a stepwise manner. I employed IPA method to analyse the transcripts, as recommended by Smith et al. (2022). In Step 1, I listened to the recorded audio and read through the transcript from the collected data twice, but without making any notations. Thus, I closely watched the video recording twice to ensure it matched the transcribed data and to familiarise myself with the text, paying heed to the participants' language, intonation, and nonverbal cues recalled during the interview, such as laughter, crying, pauses, and gestures. In the Step 2, while taking notes on the participants' understanding of the phenomena and highlighting areas of interest, I examined the language and substance of the transcripts. Niikawa et al. (2020) stated that understanding the general meaning of each description was a crucial step in the analysis since different participants might use various terms to convey the same idea. To familiarise myself with the participants' communicated meanings, I set up margins with numbered lines on a Word document and repeatedly scanned the transcripts. Colour-coded annotations were employed for precise quotes that aligned with developing experiential statements in the transcript right margin (Appendix J), working from left to right.

As Smith et al. (2022) directed, in Step 3, after the completion of the transcript's annotation, I revisited and clarified the annotation by grouping related topics together using

different colour themes and clustering on screen to construct and enhance the analysis to obtain a clear understanding of the viewpoint of the participants. In Step 4, I organised the experiential statements and exploratory notes. In Step 5, I identified experiential statements based on where the transcript's initial and descriptive themes was placed. The extracted and grouped preliminary personal experiential themes (PETs) from the experiential statements for each participant (Appendix I) were compiled in a separate document for easy accessibility. In Step 6, the themes were combined from all participants and abstracted before being assigned to general experiential themes (GETs). Abstraction was used to gain a better understanding of the patterns to identify the emergent subthemes and then group them into overarching topics or an umbrella. Therefore, the PETs were subsequently categorised into three broad GETs with corresponding quotes from the transcript (See Table 2). To provide a comprehensive representation of each subtheme, one illustrative quote was selected for each category. However, additional quotes were included in the results session to prevent repetition. Although not shared by everyone, themes such as racial differences were still valuable for the broader subject being studied.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the LMU Ethics Committee. (REC, 2023).

Confidentiality

Participants were apprised of confidentiality measures through the Participant Information Sheet (PIS; Appendix C), which outlined data protection protocols and indicated that my supervisor might access the raw data and select lecturers to also gain access for examination purposes. Participants acknowledged their understanding by signing a consent form (Appendix B). Interviews were conducted remotely, and the participants were

encouraged to locate a private space where they were unlikely to be overheard to preserve confidentiality.

Before conducting the interviews, a suitable period was established to ensure privacy and convenience. The PIS details were reviewed, and any questions were addressed before obtaining participants' consent. As an ethical measure and to strengthen the research process, interview transcripts and themes were shared with participants, which enabled them to request the exclusion of any information they do not want in the public domain or could compromise their confidentiality. Participants were involved in amendments to the language on transcripts that could reveal their identity. Moreover, all participants acknowledged that the output and themes accurately portrayed their understanding of themselves and their role during their childhood years.

Anonymity

The gathered data were anonymised by allowing participants to choose pseudonyms to alter identifiable details, including locations, to fulfil professional and academic obligations (BPS, 2014; Finlay, 2016; HCPC, 2016; Oates, 2021). Consequently, all personally identifiable information was modified or omitted to ensure confidentiality (Smith et al., 2022). Additionally, the ages of the participants were reported in a range bracket to further maintain their anonymity.

Data Protection

All data, including the participant consent forms and information, were saved electronically and encrypted in a OneDrive folder and on a personal laptop with password protection. Audio and video files were recorded via Teams and transferred to a password-protected OneDrive folder after removing any identifiable information. Participants were informed that authorised university lecturers would have access to the data for assessment reasons and publishers might request original transcripts for verification purposes.

At LMU, data protection is reinforced by ensuring compliance with the institution's ethical policies (REC, 2023). Following the thesis assessment and any necessary publisher verification, all original data no longer required will be destroyed, adhering to the stipulations of the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK Public General Acts, 2018), which permits the retention of research data for the duration necessary for the intended purpose.

Distress Protocol and Informed Consent

Considering the psychological sensitivities associated with bullying perpetrator (BP) experiences, the Serious Adverse Circumstances Guide (Appendix E) and a list of support services (Appendix F) were made available to participants during and after the interview. Post-interview debriefings were provided after interview support. As a CoP trainee, I promptly recognise and guide individuals towards psychological assistance during emotional distress. The psychological consequences of bullying, as highlighted by Lines (2008) were considered.

The participants were informed that this study contributed to my doctoral dissertation in CoP. Moreover, my earlier experience with the National Institute of Health Research (NIHR) and interviews with vulnerable populations within the National Health Service (NHS) were additionally helpful in navigating this emotionally charged topic-bullying. At the onset of the interview, participants reconfirmed their understanding of ethical provisions from the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) by signing a consent form (Appendix B). They were briefed further, emphasising the aim of the study to understand their experiences without assigning blame or judgement.

As post-analysis data retraction would be unfeasible, they were informed of their right to withdraw prior to, during, or after the interview until data analysis was completed (Smith et al., 2022). Ethical considerations were an ongoing process involving self-reflection and

regular well-being checks on participants to foster trust and comfort (Macfarlane, 2009). Remote interviews adhered to the BPS Internet-Mediated Research Protocol (BPS, 2021).

Debriefing

Special attention was devoted to protecting and safeguarding participants' emotional well-being during and after the study, particularly given the psychological sensitivities of qualitative interviews. All participants were asked how they felt before they left the interview to allow them to talk about anything to ensure that they were not distressed on leaving. All participants were given the research debriefing sheet containing names of available organisations to contact if they need it to process what was discussed (Appendix F). Consistent with Smith et al.'s (2022) perspective, consent was treated as a dynamic ongoing process.

PART 4. Analysis

Overview

This chapter presents the key findings from an in-depth analysis of six interview transcripts. The results highlight how the six childhood bullies (BPs) perceived their school experiences, focusing on their sense of self and role. The findings suggest that these individuals viewed themselves as victims, grappling with personal and familial vulnerabilities that often led to isolation, insecurity, and a diminished sense of agency. In response to these vulnerabilities, they may engage in bullying behaviour to assert agency and dominate others, either consciously or unconsciously, to regain control. Furthermore, the findings suggest that individuals may exercise temporary control and authority to avert potential victimisation, attain social status, and secure acceptance. This was often achieved through maladaptive strategies, such as BP, which can lead to adverse consequences for both the participants and their peers within the educational setting. Furthermore, according to the participants they might gain awareness of their actions during bullying or over time, experience feelings of remorse especially when disciplined or in therapy. From the six interviews conducted, three group experiential themes (GETs) and 10 subordinate (subthemes) themes emerged (See Table 3 below). Table 3 presents the three GETs clustered from the PETs, along with 10 subthemes derived from the collected data, each supported by corresponding quotes (further quotes will be provided in the analysis section to avoid repetition).

Table 3

Table of Group Experiential Themes for all Participants

GETs	Subthemes	Experiential Statements
Experiencing destabilisation of the 'self' due to chaotic and insecure home life	Unstable environs: feeling afraid	*"… so, I came from a very dysfunctional family. So, my father was an alcoholic, very violent. And I was afraid all the time at home. My mum was… had very serious…, quite untreated bipolar disorder." (Anna, p. 3)*
	Growing a "thicker skin"- Normalising intimidating situations	*"Like teasing is also part of the culture. Sometimes, like some cultures might tease you more than other cultures, like in the African culture …." (Sophia, p. 7).*
	Experiencing powerlessness and attempts to regain agency	*"… in my case it came with actually feeling or having that sense of power because I was … from a family where my father used to really abuse me and it kinda… I think my life experiences influenced the way, I would relate with other people, and I resorted to bullying to acquire that sense of power as a way of maybe coping …." (Rachel, p. 3)*
	Helplessly observing and internalising prejudice	*"So, she [white girl] was…she would always be using racial slurs. And in fact, she called my dad a Paki bastard to his face outside our house…" (Meera, p. 10).*
Experiencing Emotional Vulnerabilities from Family and Bullying	Need to bully to alleviate emotional pain	*"I was always sad at home.... But I was happy in school because of the way I treated people, too. I felt that I had exacted revenge." (Joanna, p.16).*
	Feeling sad carrying the burden of shame and guilt	*"Because there is this, enormous sense of, like, sadness and shame. Yeah. And guilt?" (Meera, p. 25)*
	Experiencing an unrelenting urge to dehumanise others	*"…there were times where, you know, like I wouldn't see him [victim]as a human..." (Meera, p.22).*
	Feeling 'cool' and powerful	*"… I continued being like part of this exclusive group and I thought that was what meant that you were cool..." (Sophia, p. 18)*
Lacking self-awareness and Support	Noticing an evolving self-perception and feeling accountable	*"… the perspective that I was getting of those things I was doing was different from how it used to be in my head then, because then I was more like getting by and I was flexing, and I was applying myself, then.". (Michael, p. 10)*
	Yearning to be saved by school and community	*"I think that the… the school also failed in in their safeguarding duties to protect me, probably from my own parents …". (Meera, p. 23)*

General Experiential Theme 1: Experiencing destabilisation of the 'self' due to chaotic and insecure home life.

The participants reflected on their past experiences, revealing a theme of a fragile sense of self, shaped by their challenging backgrounds. Most participants indicated that their personal and family circumstances negatively affected their self-perception, leading to emotional vulnerabilities, which in turn influenced their role as bullies. According to the participants, growing up in an unstable and abusive family environment characterised by neglect, teasing, and community and domestic violence made them unwilling or unable to associate with other people in a relaxed, genuine or friendly way. This, in their perception, may have contributed to their engagement in peer bullying behaviour. As they shared, bullying appears to serve as a coping mechanism and a means of surmounting personal and ecological obstacles. For instance, Joanna said,

> *I grew up in an environment where my dad bullied my mom a lot. You know, my mom went through a lot of torture. She was humiliated by my dad. I began to think that for one to be able to be a woman in particular, to be able to be independent you should … be strong and feel unintimidated. So, I just guessed that living like that, harshly on people, being harsh on people, harassing people, intimidating people was my kind of way of thinking that I will be able to escape a torture from a man. (p.2)*

Moreover, one participant reported prejudice against them, and two participants recounted bullying along the lines of disability, homophobia and racial bullying in schools and communities and consequently felt marginalised. As they recounted, the unsafe family and personal situation causing feelings of sadness; likewise, some of them felt stigmatised in their immediate society. Their powerlessness to assert themselves prompted them to pursue

agency, power, and control through bullying. Participants conveyed an insatiable urge to likewise disempower others to feel a sense of belonging and to regain control. The first GET identified subthemes related to the destabilisation of the 'self' caused by a chaotic and insecure home life. Thereby feeling unsafe and powerless, participants attempt to reclaim a sense of self by dominating others as detailed by the four subthemes below.

Subtheme 1.1: Unstable Environs: Feeling Afraid

All the participants shared a common experience of growing up in dysfunctional family environments, marked by neglect, and physical and emotional abuse by caregivers. These adverse conditions led them to perceive their surroundings as turbulent and unsafe, contributing to a fragile sense of self. Participants recalled living in chaotic households filled with uncertainty and self-doubt, resulting in a loss of agency and an inability to feel secure around those who were supposed to protect them.

Anna's reflection poignantly encapsulates this theme. She recounted:

"...so, I came from a very dysfunctional family. So, my father was an alcoholic, very violent" (p. 3).

Anna experienced extreme violence at the hands of her alcoholic father, which led to her and her siblings being taken into care at times. She described the terror she felt:

"You know, terrified of the key in the door and knowing that my dad will come up and just start kicking us, you know" (p. 16).

This incessant fear and violence may have driven Anna to develop maladaptive coping mechanisms, including bullying, as a means of self-protection. She reflected on her bullying behaviour at school as:

"...so, there's sort of I'm going to protect myself by being this supercilious and aloof... then in school I then replayed on other people" (p. 5).

Similarly, Michael's self-perception was deeply affected by the neglect he experienced due to his family's poverty and his parents' absence. He disclosed the hardships his family faced, exacerbated by his father's financial struggles and alcoholism, which led to feelings of neglect and emotional detachment. Michael stated:

"We were struggling to get by and then I had a drunk as a dad… nobody cared about our story" (p. 15-16).

Michael's indifference towards others' emotions appears to have stemmed from these family circumstances. He admitted to using bullying as a means to achieve his personal goals without considering the impact on others: *"If it's for your own benefit, then you don't think about the other person"* (p.4) For example, Michael coerced junior students into completing his assignments, disregarding their emotional well-being:

"I had a junior who I have him do my assignments" (p. 4).

This behaviour is a clear example of bullying, as the junior did not enjoy the task but felt compelled to comply with Michael, who exploited the power imbalance for his own benefit: *"He wouldn't enjoy it, but he had to, so I enjoyed it having him do my assignments" (p. 4).*

Furthermore, Michael felt neglected by his chaotic family and expressed feelings of invisibility during his childhood. He characterised this period as turbulent, noting that his parents were inaccessible even when he engaged in bullying at school, leaving him to manage the consequences on his own:

"So… somebody was gonna call up my parents and then say that I've done so and so, but then nobody was even going to pick up the call if you were calling my parents in the first place, so whatever, it was something that I have to deal with myself" (p. 16).

Michael's resignation is evident in his use of the phrase "so whatever," which resonates with the experiences of other participants who also felt alone in navigating their

difficult childhoods. This isolation may have led them to adopt antisocial strategies, such as bullying, as a means of coping. Joanna, for example, reflected:

"You know, I used to bully a lot. Ah… maybe I guess that was because of my background where I grew up, the people I grew up with, the parental orientation I have. That, uh, that made me to live more of a bully life, yeah." (p. 2)

Similarly, Rachel endured a difficult childhood due to an abusive family environment, which she identified as a catalyst for her bullying behaviour. She recalled:

"Well, I'd have called it bullying at that time because of the experiences that I was going through at home because I had to really go back home, especially in the evenings and my dad was always there hurling insults at me and finding all sorts of mistakes and trying to beat me up" (p. 7).

Rachel seemed to internalise these abusive experiences, feeling voiceless at home, and turned to bullying as a way to assert some control over her situation. She perceived herself both as a bully and as a victim of her circumstances, using bullying as a potential means to alleviate her own pain:

"Well, uh, in terms of emotional difficulties, it was really hard going through what my dad did to me at that point. And so, I had to bully the other kid" (p. 8)

Rachel's use of the word "had" suggests a compulsion to bully others as a direct response to the physical and verbal abuse she endured from her father.

Subtheme 1.2: Growing a "thicker skin"-normalising intimidating situations

The participants reported that normalised, but intimidating situations influenced their self-perception and bullying role. Some of the participants unconsciously associated their involvement in bullying and subsequent resilience with their upbringing and the challenges they encountered in life, such as familial teasing, wherein they appeared to lack agency in preventing such behaviour within their families. This environment significantly affected their self-worth as they faced degrading labels, criticism, and ridicule. For instance, Sophia associated her normalised teasing behaviour towards others with the bullying she experienced within her family environment. While she found this distressing, she also perceived that it enabled her to develop resilience and cope more effectively with similar adversity. The familial teasing she experienced exemplifies verbal and emotional abuse, and she explicitly acknowledges its detrimental nature due to the targeting of individuals' vulnerabilities, as evidenced in the following:

> *Yeah, because of my family… like the teasing in the family wasn't helpful, actually as a child because they would tease you about things that you would be insecure about. It wasn't nice actually to receive the teasing. Some of these experiences were normalised in my family. And so…. So, I think that's why I thought it was… umm okay. (Sophia, p. 20-21)*

However, due to its persistence she internalised it as normal. She later exhibited similar teasing behaviour towards others at school, where belittling others by exploiting their vulnerabilities was repeated by her (See Sophia's excerpt in GET3).

The extract from Sophia's interview indicates her minimisation of teasing as a problem for the victim but also justification for engaging in bullying behaviour was founded in her family experiences. Thus, despite stating above that teasing was unhelpful, she suggested her victims

to cope better with it, *"because I was used to it in the family, so maybe it helped me develop a thicker skin"* (Sophia, p. 23).

As other participants shared, there was growing evidence that normalisation of bullying was both a result of and a contributing factor to the cycle of abuse, with participants admitting to feeling victimised within their families thereby, perpetuating similar behaviours. Meera provided insight into the normalisation of physical abuse within her community:

> *"Those days you know and just like now a lot of the parents are from working class, ethnic minority, immigrant families. They didn't ever question (abuse), you know, it's just functionality"* (p. 28)

When Meera witnessed similar normalisation of verbal and physical abuse in school, she too joined. Meera noted that,

> *"Well, there was one boy in our class and everybody used to make fun of him and hit him and things and I joined in". (Meera, p2)*

Similarly, Anna discussed the minimisation and denial of abuse within her family due to the normalisation of abusive treatment, which she may have internalised and subsequently employed to engage in bullying behaviour towards others. She stated:

> *...My mom would always like. Umm…deny that there was anything going on with or anything dysfunctional about my dad? No, she'd make a joke of it…You know, like if my dad was up all night, like kicking us and beating us, then she'd say, 'ohh. Or is that Pavarotti time [jovially]?*

Recalling this excerpt, Anna sobbed as she described how such abusive situations frightened her and her brother, particularly how her mother could joke about such a serious matter, leading them to believe that it might have been normal. Thus, participants articulated how, during their school years, they might have normalised certain bullying behaviours, potentially rendering them unaware of their victims' plight.

Subtheme 1.3: Experiencing powerlessness and attempts to regain a sense of agency

All the participants, in their subjective experiences, described feelings of alienation, depicting themselves as outsiders without control or power over their lives. Their powerlessness hindered their ability to protect themselves or loved ones from abuse, prompting them to assert control over weaker school peers. Rachel's statement exemplifies this reaction to disempowerment:

> *In my case it came with actually feeling or having that sense of power because I was … from a family where my father used to really abuse me and it kinda… I think my life experiences influenced the way I would relate with other people, and I resorted to bullying to acquire that sense of power as a way of maybe coping. (p. 5)*

The desire to exercise power and control, exemplified the reality of aggression and resultant fear or alienation from others, was highlighted by Joanna. According to her:

> *Life for me in school was hard. Nobody wants to come close to me. Everybody knows me as someone that will always be in trouble, someone that will always want to beat you when we even…when you offended me and even when you don't offend me. (p. 15)*

Sophia shared a similar sentiment, focusing on the pursuit of dominance rather than the impact bullying would have on victims. According to her:

> *I wouldn't say happy. At the time of teasing, I was ignorant to her experience… How did I feel? I felt, I felt, maybe dominant. I felt like I was in power. And I felt like my friends were supporting me. (p. 19)*

Her comments unconsciously overlook the emotional impact on her victim, by prioritising the valuable endorsement of the group instead. Likewise, Michael spoke about seeking power to compensate for feelings of powerlessness at home. For instance, Michael shared that, *"...*

more about being there, being the revered one" (p. 21). Meera had a similar response, affirming that she bullied others to gain the power she lost at home. She posited:

> *Probably an element of, you know, power, you know one thing, because I'm pretty sure it was happening [bullying] around the same time [as abuse at home]. So yeah, that there was probably an element of this was about, yo*u know regaining some of the power that I think I was losing and that I'd lost (p.8)

Furthermore, Meera also reported seeking alliances with powerful groups to bolster her protection in school, indicating a strategic approach to maintaining their newfound power. She shared that *"and so, I guess I aligned myself with a group that err ...you know, that did have a relative amount of power compared to you know the group underneath" (p.8).* These narratives reveal alienation influenced the participants quest for belonging, control and power within social settings. All these seemed driven by the underlying experiences of disempowerment and abuse.

Anna also shared about her quest for power and control, which pushed her to bully others. Upon reflection, she confirmed that she was indeed aware, and attempted to explain it in terms of her family's situation, which influenced her to think being liked and dominating others as acceptable desirable characteristics as expressed*, "...and it was almost as if I was sort of trying to say and I don't know, trying to be Interesting or like show that I had some power over other people" (p.4).*

Subtheme 1.4: Helplessly Observing and Internalising Prejudice

This subtheme explores the intersection of prejudice and bullying within the context of personal and familial backgrounds. Three participants shared insights into how these factors influenced their bullying behaviour, highlighting the nuances of their experiences. According to the submissions, bullying due to prejudice was driven by the intolerance of personal identity differences with others. Meera discussed the racial tensions within her community, noting that her bullying of others was based on their differences and her family's victimisation.

> *It's hard to say ...no because most of the girls were Asian there were one, there was one girl who was white and if anything, I think she felt left out for not being in…. [paused to remember] You know, she'd find herself with this group of Asian girls and she got involved. So, she was…she would always be using racial slurs. And in fact, she called my dad a paki bastard to his face outside our house. (p.10)*

Meera implied that verbal bullying against her father was racially driven, since her family came from a different race. The reflective pause taken by Meera disclosed latent prejudice, which was prevalent in the narratives of some participants. Furthermore, Meera's reflection on targeting a boy perceived as “different” and “odd” (many times) highlights prejudice based on the victim’s identity characteristics (Meera, p.23). She said:

> *Basically, I'm not proud of it. He was an easy target, I guess. So, everybody used to, you know, he was a bit different to everybody else, [struggled to name difference] very different to everybody else. And he was just the go to person that everybody would make fun of. (p.78)*

Additionally, group differences also influenced Meera’s bullying behaviour. She targeted those outside of her peer group. Meera emphasised that:

Yeah, it's all about groups and I'm he's not in the same category as me... I was never gonna sit there and have a, you know, drink with him and share a joke with him. That was not ever gonna happen? (Meera, p.86)

Similarly, Anna also discussed that prejudice might have influenced her bullying behaviour in school. She betrayed her close friend's trust to members of a popular group because she wanted acceptance, very aware of the negative consequences for her. She shared:

That one girl who was a close friend to me told me a secret …. And I knew that telling others this secret would cause others to pick on her too. And so, I did that, you know, knowing that, you know, she told me this very personal secret in a school that was extremely homophobic, you know, school, where people would pick on you about anything, particularly if you said, oh, I think I'm gay.: And I… I know that that caused her, you know, a great deal of pain and isolation. (p.2)

Anna's accounts of bullying a South American girl, a friend, based on her looks was also prejudicial in nature and revealed her awareness of trying to put her down especially when she tried to settle into the school and may not need her. Most of the prejudice-driven bullying seems to arise from varied prejudices picked up from family and community views on others, and fear of others succeeding, or possibly being rejected. According to Anna:

Another girl who I bullied, who again had been a close friend … moved from overseas. And so, she came …didn't speak the language very well. I started to bully her I think it was because she had sort of started to settle in. So, her English had improved. She got a boyfriend, and suddenly she wasn't the same as me, I think. And I sort of wanted to take her down a peg or two. (p.4)

Like Anna, Sophia used prejudice to push her newly gained superiority complex when she left a friend to be in a popular group. That is, in pursuit of acceptance into this exclusive

group, Sophia bullied her old friend, reflecting below that she might have reminded her of her shy, old self

> *I think somewhat in some ways she represented me in the sense that she was very small, and she was very like quiet and shy. And I think that's why we bonded in the first place because we had that in similarity. Ahm… but yeah, I think how it then played out was me teasing her was me being exclusive. (Sophia, p.18)*

In a different situation of prejudice, Rachel narrates bullying other children with disabilities. She shared that:

> *There was a new kid who happened to have ADHD.…And she happened to join the school where I was attending back then, …we used to bully her.…We started taking her bag away…and even insulting her in the bathroom or even during breaks and for about a good two months.... Her dad came to report the matter to the principal because we'd really abused her, this little girl, and the headteacher made her dad talk to the entire class. (Rachel, p. 6)*

The selected accounts illustrate how ingrained prejudices, internalised by BPs, manifested in their bullying behaviours. These biases, whether inherent or learned through witnessing discrimination, resulted in negative self-perception and emotions with resultant bullying of others.

General Experiential Theme 2: Experiencing Emotional Vulnerabilities from Family and Bullying

During the interviews, participants recalled their sense of self during bullying in school was marked by pain and vulnerability in childhood, as expressed verbally and nonverbally through crying and emotional responses. Participants reported their feelings easily as they narrated their experiences of bullying others. Undeniably, all participants were

emotional about their suffering within their families and communities, which was engulfed by a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. Additionally, participants also became more emotional, reflecting on their actions as adults who had committed the act of bullying as children. Therefore, participants seemed to have reflected on their actions over time, which seems to have evoked some high level of remorse, shame and self-chastisement regarding their role. None of the participants reported feeling happy and good about themselves in childhood within their families except when they bullied for social and emotional rewards.

They identified different emotions at different life stages. For example, they expressed strong feelings about their home life, briefly felt remorse and empathy after bullying, but quickly dismissed these by focusing on the lingering traumatic emotions affecting their role and self-perception. Consequently, the second GET includes four subthemes as outlined below.

Subtheme 2.1: Need to Bully to Alleviate Emotional Pain

The participants expressed sadness, fear and uncertainty about their unstable family situation. They often tried to avoid or defend against these emotions using unhelpful methods, including detachment, displacement and bullying. Some used bullying as a protective shield against sadness, helplessness and victimisation. For instance, Joanna elaborated follows:

> *I was always sad at home. Sometimes, when I see the torture, my mom is going through. I was never happy. But I was happy in school because of the way I treated people, too. I felt that I had exacted revenge. (p.22)*

Joanna described precisely, a typical maladaptive coping strategy for her unhappiness at home that involves displacing her frustrations onto other children instead of acknowledging her father's role in it. However, this approach did not appear to be effective, as evidenced by her increased anxiety during instances of bullying. *"Sometimes when I'm*

bullying people, I used to feel anxiety." Joanna's emotions mirrored those of all the participants when reflecting on their childhood experiences as bullies. As they shared, they felt sad because of unhappiness at home, where adults were often abusive or engaged in violence. According to them, this experience resulted in feeling uncared for or unloved. The participants' environment was marked by uncertainty, fear, and distrust of caregivers, leading to a sense of hopelessness, self-blame, and consequently, sadness, which they unknowingly and knowingly try to overcome or avenge through bullying. Similarly, Anna reported sadness to the extent of feeling terrified when confronted with domestic violence and abuse directed at her and her brother. She noted that: *"... makes me so sad to think that anybody could have done that to me and my brother…. And it still is very, very painful."* Anna's frequent use of the word "very" emphasises the intensity of her emotional pain. On the other hand, Michael's narrative poignantly highlights sadness driven by a sense of helplessness and resignation to his fate within a neglectful family environment. Observing his emotional distress, he remarked:

> *"I've reflected on some things and then some sad circumstances that I know, you know, that actually I couldn't have done anything about then and I couldn't do anything about it right now, so that's it" (p.30).*

A sense of gloom descended in the interview as Michael seems to portray a self-resignation to his fate of hopelessness by looking down and holding his head. Therefore, feelings of sadness and hopelessness in childhood led participants to bully others as an outlet for managing their emotions, based on their reflections. For example, when Sophia's friend fell out of friendship with her, she started isolating her and teasing her until she left the school. She explained that *"maybe I was...I was also hurt because we were no longer friends. And that was my way of expressing my sadness."* As illustrated the participants reported

experiencing intense sense of loss and helplessness during childhood, bullying was an outlet to combat their difficult circumstances while at school.

Subtheme 2.2: Feeling Sad Carrying the Burden of Shame and Guilt

Most of the participants expressed what might be described as self-blame due to shame and guilt experienced about their family's abuse and instability. They would often try to avoid or defend against these emotions using unhelpful methods, including bullying others at school. Some used bullying as a protective shield against shame and sadness. For instance, Joanna elaborated that she derived happiness from bullying others at school (see sub-theme 2.1). She said, while some factors pushed the BPs to bully others, they too suffered adverse repercussions from it. As some of the participants expressed, they felt shame and guilt, which were conspicuously related to the inner pain and hurt they experienced after bullying others, which they choose to ignore or bully more to cope, which strongly maintains those feelings after a short relief. Some expressed how certain individual incidents were extremely violent and sexually abusive towards the victims which was traumatising for them. For instance, Meera narrated how she and her female friends, in conjunction with a group of boys, lured a victim to a secluded place to bully. She said:

> *Basically, most of the people that were doing the bullying in the classroom were boys. So, there was a few of us girls, that kind of joined. And then one day, we decided that there was a maze outside our school. And so, the girl's kind of coaxed him into there.… Anyway, the boys stripped him. They took all his clothes off and stripped him like naked. And threw all his clothes into the trees. Like really high. (p.54)*

Meera sobbed just like Anna as she revealed the *"shock"* (p.5), of seeing the boy being poked at. The victim subsequently left the school, but Meera reported knowing straight away it was extreme when the ordeal started but stayed despite her *"guilt"* and *"shame"* which

intensified over time. She also blamed herself as she felt *"weak"* to stop or intervene for fear of group reprisal (p.25). Meera said about living with the secret, guilt and shame after that incident:

> *I have… I've never talked about it in as much detail as I have with you, but I have disclosed it to a couple of close friends. Because there is this enormous [pause] enormous sense of, like, sadness and shame. Yeah. And guilt? (p. 25).*

Employing the term *"enormous"* conveys the substantial weight of sadness and shame she endured.

Likewise, Joanna expressed how she felt after bullying others and feeling good for a short while. She said, "*And then every day of my life as a changed person I regretted so much" (p.34).*

Rachel felt deep guilt for bullying other children and cried in private, but she justified her actions by citing her father's abuse, alcoholism and gambling as predisposing factors. Using the phrase *"when I had to bully"* below conveys a sense of helplessness to stop herself. She responded:

> *Well, uh, in terms of emotional difficulties, it was really hard going through what my…what my dad did to me at that point. And so, when I had to bully the other kid, I really felt guilty and at times I always… I almost resorted to crying a couple of times because I felt… I felt guilty in all sense. (Rachel, p.23)*

Subtheme 2.3: Experiencing an Unrelenting Urge to Dehumanise others

This study has shown that some of the participants shared their persistent desire to bully others. They narrated that their urge to dehumanise and objectify others was unrelenting. For instance, Meera said, *"There were times where I wouldn't see him as a human being" (p.22).* This quote summarises the participants' experiences at the time of

bullying. Most participants did not seem to acknowledge the victims as humans when they focused on their own negative emotions during bullying, despite awareness that it was wrong, as Meera explained:

> *"I mean, I... I knew straight away. I knew as soon as it happened when they'd, you know, took his clothes off. I knew that that was wrong. Even when I was hitting him, I knew it was wrong." (Meera, p. 80)*

The desire and reasons to bully others blinded the positive characteristics of their victims. Meera, for instance, noted one of her victims to be sweet and on occasions she recognised their vulnerability. This empathy was fleeting though as she found his cockiness a reason to bully. She shared:

> *... So, he was quite sweet. And then, there's this added layer of him being a little bit cocky. But like I said, there were moments where I would just see him and I just kind of feel sorry for him (p.24).*

Equally, the dehumanising effect affected not only the victims, but also the BPs. The bullies also felt like they were becoming non-human in that they could not recognise "others" as persons deserving respect and the proper treatment. Meera's tone shifted from tears to self-blame as she metaphorically referred to herself as an unrestrained predator in a *"pack"* that, when combined with the victim's arrogance, served as a reason to dehumanise the victim.

"So, I was dehumanising him [victim] in that at the same time as it was dehumanising myself because I was acting like an animal in this pack kind of behaviour…" (p.24)

This narrative was echoed directly and indirectly by participants who were so engulfed by their own difficulties that no thought was given to their victim's plight psychologically and physically. For instance, Joanna expressed:

So, when she didn't do as I said, I injured her. Every time I injured her, Uh, uh. Uh. So, I was expelled from that school. Series of events happened at that point until I was expelled from the school. (p.5)

Joanna was beating up another child regularly for not doing as she was told despite her lack of authority over her. She did not consider the victims' sense of agency and autonomy. Sophia also described not seeing the other child's pain prevented negative emotions, which also allowed for continuous bullying as if they were not human. The participant said:

I think the key thing is when you don't see that the person is hurt in response to what you do, you think that it's not causing them pain and that it's OK. So, I think the key thing ...I don't know. There's something about not seeing it. The person who feels bullied might not show their emotion, and so you might think it's because they're not crying. They don't look upset. (p.10)

Some participants reported that their inability to stop bullying arose when they perceived their victims as not exhibiting obvious signs of distress despite being aware of the harmfulness of their actions. This aspect affirms the dehumanising nature sense of self of the bullies practiced on others. Therefore, BPs lacking agency would continue to torment their victims for complete control without showing any sensitivity to their humanity. Dissociating emotionally also allowed the bullying to persist. For instance, when Sophia was faced with a relationship breakdown with her best friend, she teased and isolated her with the intention of humiliating her. Meanwhile she shared:

Unless you're on the other side, you don't see the other side. So, in that moment, I think when I ...I said to her that she couldn't sit next to me... I'm not thinking (then) how that feels to be told you can't sit next to me. That is like,

you know, you feel rejected. You feel like, you know, embarrassed, and humiliated because everyone else is hearing that. (Sophia, p.11)

Based on these excerpts, the BPs devalued their victims which may be how they feel themselves within their environment. They saw them as objects devoid of emotions or feelings. As such, the BPs' emotional deprivation pushed them to bully others without remorse. However, as one of the participants attested, control and a sense of power further prevented any sense of humanity for the victim. Rachel's statement sums up the socio-psychological benefit that maintains bullying. She said:

"Wherever we went, people would just make way for us, and we really felt at that point… it really felt good. Let me just describe it. It felt great having some sense of control over others" (p.23).

Subtheme 2.4: Feeling 'Cool' and Powerful

The interviewees revealed that they experienced isolation, disempowerment and not feeling accepted in their families, communities, and schools. Thus, they feel low self-esteem and yearning to belong which seemed 'cool' to them. The lack of adult reassurance and care considering these feelings led BPs to overcompensate, assert dominance through bullying. However, they later realised that this did not provide the desired outcomes. As a result, they further externalised their frustrations and anger towards others and the world. The participants also reported envying other children who they believed had everything. Participants seemed to either yearn for acceptance of peers badly or for others to experience their plight, as a revenge or to create a sense of connection which they lacked.

For Anna, lack of social skills, and assumptions about protection and being liked, she reported how her behaviour exposed her to being disliked and isolated, an experience that led her to bullying. According to Anna:

> *By trying to put across this [abuse] as a child who has gone all through this that I was perfect, that I was, you know, cleverer than everybody else, better than everybody else, more perfect than everybody else. And that meant that I was probably not a very nice person … so struggled to make friends. And so, in school because of that, I was very lonely myself when I came into a situation where I had friends of my own, I don't think that I knew how to relate to them. I didn't know how to be a good friend, and so there's sort of I'm going to protect myself by being this and aloof. I'm better than you person came out in me in bullying (p.3)*

Anna and other participants sought love and protection from adults, while grappling with the uncertainty of being truly loved. The pressure to present a 'normal' facade and to others the fear of being abandoned if they complained, led to a culture of secrecy and lying about abuse within their families. According to Anna:

> *"And it was because I came across like looking down on people, you know that this defence mechanism that I didn't, I didn't show them anything that was real or vulnerable about me because I, … felt, you know that because there was so much that I had to hide"* (p.8).

Hence, the lack of genuine interactions hindered healthy relationships, that increased manipulation and lies to prove oneself to others.

The participants viewed popular group membership as a desirable privilege granting social benefits, including protection, belonging, encouragement, and admiration for their bullying behaviour, as revealed in Sophia's personal account where she seems to be distancing herself from her role by referring to herself as *"she"* below:

> *Because I continued staying in popular groups, I continued being like part of this exclusive group and I thought that was what meant that you were*

cool … reflecting back, I think I was just you know a child she had just … recently moved to the UK…. Like couple of a few years before she had just moved to the UK and, just trying to find her, her space. (p.19)

Due to experiencing the feelings of isolation, BPs could turn to joining bullying groups to seek connection in pursuit of power. For instance, Sophia sought to join an exclusive group, believing membership conferred immunity. Her nervous laughter in the above excerpt may suggest her discomfort in admitting to her past bullying role.

Feeling disempowered and unhappy, Meera also expressed favourably how bullying enabled dominance and empowered her:

"But yeah, in that moment [of bullying] and you know I felt like I was better than him. I felt like I had the power to, you know, to hit him. I could do anything, you know, to this boy" (p.21).

General Experiential Theme 3: Lacking Self-Awareness and Support

The study participants shared that they lacked self-awareness, understanding and support about bullying. In indirect and coercive situations, they demonstrated a lack of awareness regarding whether their actions were causing harm to others, as they perceived themselves to be victims of their circumstances as well. Although they bullied others, some BPs were not aware that their actions constituted bullying. The interviewees shared that they were at times emotionally detached, making them unable to fully engage with personal or others' feelings. For example, Sophia stated:

And I wasn't intentionally trying to cause her harm, but she experienced my interaction with her as bullying and I can't even remember what I did to make her feel that way. I do remember that I used to be teasing her. We used to…we used to be friends.

(Sophia, p.1)

As indicated, Sophia confirmed teasing her peer, who consequently felt victimised, but Sophia appeared unphased and insensitive to her feelings, seemingly perceiving the teasing as harmless. Nonetheless, as the majority of participants noted, they did not receive the necessary assistance in understanding the meaning and impact of bullying while at school. The community, as well as schools according to the participants, lacked essential initiatives to counter bullying at the time, which further maintained their role as presented below in two subthemes.

Subtheme 3.1: Noticing an Evolving Self-Perception and Feeling Accountable

Although participants struggled to accept responsibility for their actions after the bullying, they felt occasionally some remorse, during bullying. However, accountability for their role developed over time. They noted that while bullying their peers, they were not aware in some instances whether their actions were hurting others or illustrated bullying behaviour. They were more concerned with personal satisfaction rather than the needs of others. For instance, Michael, who initially felt good about his bullying role as conferring high self-esteem as in *"flexing"* and *"getting by"* noted below, evolved from that view after reflection. He felt remorseful later and blamed his unsupported and unguided upbringing for his actions below:

> *I was doing a retrospective look, and then the perspective that I was getting of those things I was doing was different from how it used to be in my head then, because then I was more like getting by and I was flexing, and I was applying myself, then. But looking at it now, I understand that wasn't right, but then I didn't feel like it was bullying I just feel like I was you know getting by, I was just manoeuvring my way around things, you know. (Michael, p.10)*

Nonetheless, Michael tried to reflect on his actions and role later which he saw as manoeuvring around 'things' meaning his family's abusive situation and school experiences.

As his sense of self was significantly influenced by the ecological challenges experienced, hence he seems to focus less about his actions and the feelings of his victims. However, over time Michael proclaimed with a sigh that his actions *"wasn't right."*

Equally, Joanna was not aware of personal and other feelings during bullying. However, she would later reflect on what she did after seeing the harm she could have caused her victim. This aspect made her realise that her actions were not helpful, hence regretting. She expressed remorse after engaging in physical violence with a victim whose life was endangered. According to her:

> *The incident that happened… the last incident that happened that … the girl I injured almost died. But through God's intervention uhh…she survived it. Because I had to…I held her head and hit it on the wall. That was what happened, and then when that happened, and she narrowly escaped death I… started having a sober reflection*.

Joanna's realisation of her harmful bullying behaviour, being disciplined in school, along with finding God, marked a turning point for her changing perception about herself and taking responsibility. Meera, likewise, was detached from her actions during bullying. Nevertheless, she would later feel accountable for her actions and wonder why she and her group never faced any repercussions from the teachers. She noted *"When the teachers found out and got involved, you know, they treated us all as one and the same …we didn't get in trouble for it at all, which is terrible" (Meera, p. 7).* This statement indicates that teachers frequently overlooked instances of bullying, allowing the BPs to persist unimpeded without comprehending the potential adverse consequences of their behaviour. This phenomenon has significant implications for BPs and may also present safeguarding concerns for victims who are subjected to bullying.

Despite having different bullying experiences, each participant shared instances of extreme emotional and physical bullying that they struggled to repress, but later felt accountable and

sometimes traumatised, with a great deal of shame. Meera reported one of the bullying situations as her greatest mistake, which continues to be difficult for her to reconcile.

> *But my role, the fact that I went along with it. It makes me just as responsible as everybody else. I'm not gonna pretend …I feel just as responsible. You know when I think about that now, I think about what happened as a group erm... action. (p.6)*

Nevertheless, the need to belong blinded their ability to recognise bullying as abusive to others. The participants shared the group's influence on their bullying behaviour, seeing it as a collective action rather than an individual. Although the groups fostered a sense of belonging and power, they instilled fear in those who dared to challenge them. This aspect pushed them to bully others. For instance, Sophia responded:

> *"How did I feel? I felt, maybe dominant. I felt like I was in power. And I felt. Like my friends were supporting me. I felt in a weird way…I felt loved and supported." (Sophie, p19)*

As such, Sophia could not realise the problems, she caused others with pursuing her power and dominance over them. Rachel was equally affected by the group thinking and endorsement of bullying. Rachel shared: "… *back then I used to hang out with a couple of friends of mine, a group of girls who used to… we used to bully other people.* (Rachel, p.6)

As Rachel said, she only realised the humiliation she and her group caused the victim after the latter's father cried in front of the class.

> *And at that point, when her dad broke down in front of the whole class, I really felt guilty…. When I decided that this, this had to stop and this had to end because I was, I was really [pause] I had to rethink of my situation …. (p.6)*

Therefore, being detached from one's feelings and the emotions of other people seem to be a recipe for bullying, as the perpetrators seem to ignore any feelings of remorse during

the act but either sooner or later, they turn to show awareness and accountability when the harm has been caused.

Subtheme 3.2: Yearning to be Saved by the School or Community

This theme explores school and community available interventions as reflected by the participants. They shared, that the community and school had failed in their mandate to provide them with necessary support to mitigate bullying incidences. For example, when she reflected on the available support from school, Sophia said: *"No, I didn't have a... I don't think we had a session on what is bullying. How do you identify bullying? How do you, you know either manage bullies? It wasn't talked about." (p.14)*

The lack of school and community interventions at the time deprived the BPs of essential awareness of bullying indicators. Some of them could only recognise bullying incidences after their victims complained about it. For instance, Sophia, motivated by the desire for revenge after a friendship breakdown, targeted a peer with teasing and isolation. However, Sophia failed to consider the impact of her actions on her former friend, who later stated that she had left the school because she felt bullied. However, Sophia sarcastically quipped that she "felt bullied."

Likewise, Meera provided various insights that added depth to the understanding of school interventions. Accordingly, while schools should secure and protect students, her institution did not fulfil this mandate as required. She explained:

> *I think that the… the school also failed in their safeguarding duties. To protect me, probably from my own parents, because there was a lot of abuse happening at home as well, like physical abuse and emotional abuse as well…. They had no indication, but the fact that I was always distracted, that could have been an indication …. You know, I don't know, I think the school missed all of that. (Meera, p.30)*

Meera's quote represents how some participants felt let down by the educational system which maintained their bullying. Meera reflected on her bullying behaviour, and how disruptive she was in class, should have been investigated by teachers which might have led to the discovery of the domestic abuse she was experiencing. Meera was emotional also about how the school did nothing to help her stop bullying. There was a lack of educational programmes that specify the parameters of bullying and its consequences. Instead, she illustrated how her distraction and hyperactivity were linked to her domestic abuse yet missed detection by the teachers who seemed, at the time not to take bullying seriously, which was illustrated by them not even calling their parents. As Meera expounded:

> *The school didn't take it [bullying] seriously. You know, they never took it seriously. They should have ermm... they should have called our parents in because I... think the group that was doing the bullying to him. We would have stopped because I was scared of my parents. (Meera, p.15)*

Furthermore, several participants reported that teachers failed to intervene despite observing instances of bullying within the classroom environment. For example, Meera was upset by teachers' inaction towards school bullying which could have prevented its recurrence. Delving into extreme physical bullying witnessed by teachers, Meera recounted that: *"…it was physical. You know, people would hit him and things as well in class. And the teacher wouldn't… do anything. Teacher knew that. Everybody knew that this was happening to him…." (p.2)*

Michael emphasised that the community was aware of the ongoing abuse and bullying. He said:

> "*Yes, I think the community has a lot to do in that respect [in bullying intervention] of things like this because I think the community, other people are aware of what's really happening deep down" (Michael, p. 27).*

Although his school took punitive measures against bullying, it was all ineffective, as the students could not be deterred from bullying others. According to him:

> *I was caught sometimes [bullying] and definitely that they had to be some disciplinary measures. But then I was not shocked by these disciplinary measures… it was more like whatever you say I was still going to do what I want when I feel like doing it at any point in time. (Michael, p. 20)*

Michael's admission shows laxity within the school system, that by extension allowed bullying to persist since the educational institutions lacked proper interventions to counter bullying incidences. In addition, he explained frustratingly that his defiance and BP were directly connected to the absence of adult mentoring. He opined that, *"…the fact that I didn't have the guidance…"*

Like Michael, Joanna's bullying behaviour could not be stopped by any school punishments. This was exacerbated by the lack of guidance from home and school. She recounted an extremely unreasonable punishment, where she was isolated for several hours. She found it ineffective and felt angrier and bullied more. Joanna (p.25) shared:

… it is a particular punishment that my teacher gave to me, the last one, I was actually on the field. I was asked to lie on the field for a very long time, and even after that it didn't stop me.

Similarly, Anna's school lacked interventions to detect bullying amongst the students. She reported how higher academic achievement in school and her *"perfect girl"* attitude made it difficult for teachers to recognise that she could be a perpetrator of bullying. As she shared:

> *Yeah, I never got into trouble. Ever…ever. If I was bullied, I would never tell anybody and ever, you know, I think that there was this… Umm …Whether people were convinced, even at primary school, by this thing that I put*

> *across of this perfect little girl doing perfect work coming from this perfect family. (Anna p. 8)*

Despite the various responses from participants, Rachel was the only one who felt adequately supported by her school after being identified as a bully. Instead of imposing harsh punitive measures, the headteacher engaged Rachel and her entire class in a discussion about the impact of their behaviour, particularly in the incident involving the bullying of a new student with ADHD. This approach prompted Rachel to pursue therapy. She recounted:

> *"There was support offered uh, provided by the school because as much as other girls from the group all resorted to leave the school, a few of us who stayed, that is three of us who stayed, who took a moment to reflect about our lives and at that point we had the school principal talk to us and we saw it necessary to have a therapist."* (Rachel, 9)

Rachel's experience highlights the importance of schools showing empathy and implementing appropriate measures, such as raising awareness, to mitigate and prevent bullying among students.

The analysis of interviews with six participants identified three key GETs that highlight the complex relationship between childhood experiences, self-perception, and the roles of bullying perpetrators (BPs). First, participants consistently described a destabilised sense of self due to chaotic home environments marked by neglect, violence, and emotional instability. This insecurity led them to engage in bullying to assert control and cope with feelings of powerlessness. Second, emotional vulnerabilities were significant drivers of bullying, with participants reporting deep-seated feelings of sadness, shame, and guilt masked by aggressive actions. Bullying offered temporary relief from emotional pain but reinforced negative self-perception. Lastly, internalised biases and a desire to dominate those perceived

as different or weaker contributed to bullying behaviour, highlighting the role of prejudice and social hierarchies. These findings reveal the interplay between personal vulnerabilities, family dynamics, and societal influences in shaping the self-perception and actions of bullying perpetrators. This ensuing discussion will examine the psychological and social dynamics shaping the self-perception and roles of bullying perpetrators, comparing these findings with existing literature and theoretical frameworks to explore identity navigation, and emphasising this study's unique contributions and implications for addressing bullying behaviour from a CoP perspective. Part 5 covers the discussion of the salient study findings.

Part 5. Discussion

Introduction and Outline

This study examined the retrospective experiences of adult BPs to understand their perceived roles and sense of self during their school years. This thesis aimed to explore how adult bullying perpetrators (BPs) retrospectively understand their roles and sense of self during their school years. By adopting a counselling psychology perspective and using IPA, this study sought to fill a gap in the literature that often neglects the voices of those who bully. To develop effective interventions against school bullying, it is crucial to include BPs in anti-bullying initiatives. Although research has focused on victim experiences, this thesis explored the less-studied areas of BPs' self-perception and role at school. Children BPs were not interviewed due to ethical considerations involved in identification and researching child participants (Olweus, 1993). This discussion explores the implications of the findings above, addresses the research question and objectives, and examines their relationship to existing literature and theoretical frameworks. Although the study provides a detailed understanding of the lives of certain bullies, its findings are specific to the participants involved. Therefore, according to IPA guidelines (Smith et al., 2022), it is important to avoid generalising these results to all bullies.

The themes explored in this study are predominantly distinct, illuminating the participants' perspectives on their context and personality development. As a result, the main topics discussed primarily centre on the key findings that address the research objective, whilst also incorporating any notable factors highlighted by the study participants (Smith et al., 2022). The summary of the findings will be positioned below the discussion. It is crucial to acknowledge my role within the hermeneutic circle when presenting the findings in IPA, as the data is conveyed while capturing all aspects of how the participants shared their narratives. Given the inherently subjective nature of qualitative data analysis, other

researchers might uncover dissimilar themes and interpret these findings differently. Ultimately, a section is included discussing the significance of the study to CoPs, concluding with limitations and recommendations for future research.

Destabilisation of Self in Adverse Home Environments

The findings of this study indicate that a chaotic and insecure home environment may significantly destabilise BPs sense of self, potentially leading to maladaptive behavioural coping mechanisms in childhood. Participants recounted growing up in environments marked by neglect, violence, and emotional abuse, which contributed to a fragile sense of self. Hence, words like trying to "survive", "powerless", "chaotic" and "dysfunctional" describes the relationship dynamics with adults at home. They described how these unstable conditions fostered feelings of powerlessness and insecurity, prompting them to assert control and regain a sense of agency through bullying. These challenging background circumstances were among the first reflections participants shared after identifying themselves as BPs. In their formative years, they recognised their role as perpetrators but seemed unable to stop, which reinforced a cycle of negative self-perception. It is crucial to consider the context of helplessness and hopelessness in which they were situated - marked by domestic and community violence, emotional abuse, and verbal abuse - which they likely perceived as contributing factors to their behaviour.

These results partly align with the findings of previous studies on BP profiles by Line (2007). Lines (2007) described early experiences as a crucial determinant of who became aggressive and a bully later in life from his observations. It did not try to understand how BPs perceived themselves or role as revealed in this study. Lines (2007) highlighted that his findings on bullies were derived from clinical recordings and notes as a school counsellor, not from a specific research method.

While some studies suggest that certain individuals may be born with antisocial traits (e.g., Kellerman, 1999; Ball et al., 2008b; Eley et al., 1999), the participants in this study appeared to view their bullying behaviour as influenced by family and societal contexts, often linking their actions to the emotional or relational vulnerabilities they experienced during childhood.

Several participants described experiences involving parental alcoholism, gambling and significant illness, which they associated with familial risks such as neglect and physical abuse during the period of their bullying. While this cannot be generalised beyond the sample, it emerged as a notable finding, shaping how participants made sense of their bullying behaviour. For example, severe mental health difficulties of a parent leading to regular hospitalisation created uncertainty and fear for a BP who did not understand what was happening (see results GET 1). Parental alcoholism was revealed to drive aggressive tendencies, contributing to an unsafe and unstable family environment. Evidence suggests that family adversity influences bullying behaviour (Nocentini et al., 2019). Nocentini et al.'s (2019) meta-analysis of primarily quantitative studies identified family variables such as domestic violence, parental mental health issues, abuse, neglect, and maladaptive parenting as significantly associated with bullying and victimisation. Although this partially aligns with this finding, this study focuses on BPs self-perception which is unique. It also specifically links parental alcoholism and gambling to unstable family environment and negative self-perception that subsequently leads to bullying. Thus, Nocentini et al.'s (2019) findings capture pertinent broad ecological issues, but they lacked depth. Nevertheless, it is evident that significant illnesses and long-term conditions within the family, such as mental health issues, had a substantial impact on the child's upbringing and self-perception, which may possibly lead to bullying behaviour to overcome such vulnerability. This study did not

corroborate the relationship between an overprotective parenting style and bullying behaviour in children, as suggested by Figula et al. (2023).

Furthermore, family and environmental factors affecting BPs seem consistent with the psychodynamic and social ecological diathesis stress model (SEDSM; Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Freud, 1917; Rigby, 2003). Participants reported that they were unconscious of the realisation that their bullying behaviour was initially due to feeling helpless at home and projecting their negative emotions onto their victims. In the SEDSM, adverse social and psychological states of participants were apparent (Hymel & Swearer, 2015), which encompassed divorce, domestic violence, family mental health disorders, disabilities, and poverty.

The participants also noted some bullying practices within families were considered acceptable and contributed to the normalisation of such bullying behaviour by viewing it as a desirable character trait (see GET 1.4). They reported that normalised, though intimidating incidences influenced their sense of self and their bullying behaviour. They linked their involvement in bullying to their upbringing; they associated issues that they faced in life, such as teasing to bullying others. Specifically, excessive teasing about participants' personal insecurities and aggressive punitive behaviour at home have been reported to be part of showing love and care in certain cultures as explained by Sophia. Smith's (2016c) research confirms that some normalised practices influence the nature of bullying behaviour across various continents. The present study makes a significant contribution by demonstrating that bullying is not solely a result of participants witnessing violence in the domestic environment. Rather, it is a consequence of a combination of familial and community vulnerabilities, including internalised emotional distress (discussed below) caused by such abuse. According to participants, these vulnerabilities appear to alter their self-perception, leading to feeling different and low self-esteem, which they unconsciously or intentionally

attempt to alleviate through bullying behaviour that further perpetuates their negative self-perceptions.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that internalised prejudices, rooted in participants' family and community experiences, significantly influenced their bullying behaviour. Participants reported bullying others based on perceived differences, such as race, disability, and social class. These internalised prejudices were used to justify their actions and reinforce their sense of power and control.

This aligns with research indicating that visible differences, such as race and disability, are common triggers for bullying (Bhopal, 2018; Rose et al., 2011). However, this study contributes to the literature by specifically linking these prejudices to the self-concept of BPs. For instance, Meera's account of targeting a boy she perceived as *"different"* or *"odd"* highlights how these internalised biases can manifest in bullying behaviour. Similarly, Anna's betrayal of a close friend by revealing her sexual orientation to a homophobic school environment highlights how deeply ingrained prejudices can drive bullying. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) can help explain these findings by suggesting that the participants' need to belong and to assert their identity may lead them to target those perceived as different. This theory posits that individuals derive a sense of identity and self-esteem from their group memberships, which can lead to discriminatory behaviours against those outside the group. The present study elucidates how these dynamics manifest in the context of school bullying, contributing a novel perspective to the extant literature on othering and the impact of prejudice on bullying role. These background vulnerabilities and the subsequent use of bullying as a coping mechanism seem to perpetuate a cycle of emotional challenges and bullying, as outlined below.

Emotional Vulnerabilities and Bullying as a Coping Mechanism

Participants in this study experienced a spectrum of intense emotions - fear, shame, anger, guilt, and sympathy - before, during, and after engaging in bullying. Although bullying provided short-term social rewards like increased peer status, these effects were temporary and often led to a negative self-image. Participants were not devoid of empathy or guilt but were primarily focused on managing their own emotional distress. They reported conflicting feelings about their behaviour, shaped by low self-esteem, social awkwardness, and a need for control. To cope, they projected confidence and dominance, which paradoxically hindered the meaningful connections they sought. Although exerting power temporarily improved their social standing, it ultimately fostered hostility, damaging relationships, a realisation participant later acknowledged.

This study challenges earlier research by Olweus (1979), which suggested significant gender differences in aggressive behaviours, finding instead that both boys and girls exhibit such behaviours. While existing literature often describes bullies as dominant, charismatic, and lacking empathy (Kellerman, 1999; Lines, 2007; Perren et al., 2012; Stepanyan et al., 2022), this study adds nuance by revealing that bullying perpetrators may consciously suppress empathy, justifying their behaviour as necessary for maintaining social status and psychological balance. Their aggression and arrogance often function as compensatory mechanisms for deeper emotional wounds, frequently linked to childhood trauma, neglect, or unstable family dynamics. Participants' reflections exposed how their confident facades masked significant emotional vulnerabilities, revealing that some felt compelled to bully as a survival strategy to alleviate their distress.

These findings align with Kassis et al. (2018), who highlight the compounded emotional risks for children exposed to both domestic violence and direct abuse - a phenomenon Kassis (2003) refers to as the 'double whammy' effect. The American Academy

of Paediatrics also notes that childhood trauma, including abuse and neglect, can lead to emotional instability and aggression (Stirling & Amaya-Jackson, 2009). Neurobiological research supports this, indicating that early trauma alters stress responses and affects social interactions (Holbrook et al., 2005). Rost et al. (1998) suggest that bullies mask low self-esteem by dominating others, which may explain why they appear unempathetic even when experiencing guilt or shame.

Contrary to studies that suggest remorse emerges only later in life (Lodge, 2014; Menesini et al., 2003), this research suggest that guilt and shame can occur during and immediately after bullying and often persist into adulthood, highlighting the need for further investigation. Dambach (2003) observed that frustration and fear may drive bullies to target weaker individuals, providing temporary relief but leading to long-term psychological consequences. Swartz et al. (2019) used fMRI to show that adolescent bullies exhibit heightened amygdala activity when responding to perceived threats, contributing to their defensive and unempathetic behaviour. Thus, the apparent lack of empathy in bullies may stem from the conscious suppression of emotions during periods of heightened vulnerability, rather than from a complete absence of empathy.

This study challenges the idea, as suggested by Valliantcourt (2003), that bullies consistently possess positive self-perceptions and social assets like physical attractiveness. Instead, it uncovers that their confidence often conceals deep insecurities and a need for belonging. Consistent with the findings of Meland et al. (2010), this study suggests that bullies and victims may exhibit similar relational and emotional characteristics in childhood. However, it departs from Meland's conclusions by proposing that bullies may not necessarily experience greater social success or be less impacted by these issues. Furthermore, while Olweus (1993) posits that victims and uninvolved students experience more severe emotional outcomes, this research highlights the complex psychological processes in some bullies, shaped by

environmental adversity and internalised through cognitive-behavioural patterns (Beck et al., 1979). The socio-ecological diathesis-stress model further illuminates how formative family, community, and social experiences contribute to negative self-perception, which may lead to bullying as a maladaptive coping mechanism (Swearer & Hymel, 2015).

Participants indicated that their involvement in bullying was linked to their self-perception and often served as a maladaptive coping mechanism for socio-emotional vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities, typically rooted in familial or communal adversity, were exacerbated within the school environment. In retrospect, the majority of participants acknowledged a limited awareness during instances of bullying, recognising that their actions appeared to originate from a need to externalise distress and express their emotional turmoil.

This compulsion may have manifested in behaviours aimed at undermining peers and authority figures, possibly as retribution for personal suffering. Behaviours such as aloofness, over-competitiveness, perfectionism, and projecting superiority could have been used to mask feelings of inferiority. Participants suggested that these behaviours might have fostered in-group alliances and been rewarded with admiration, potentially reinforcing bullying tendencies. However, such behaviours seemed to hinder genuine relationships and were negatively perceived as disruptive by teachers. Furthermore, the defensive strategies developed to cope with low self-esteem made some individuals appear unlikeable or intimidating, while others were perceived as popular or feared. These social gains, however, came at a personal cost, as participants reported increased isolation and resorted to bullying more frequently to access social groups, rather than forming genuine connections. This vicious cycle hindered authentic relationships and exacerbated emotional challenges, resulting in bullying and antisocial behaviours as coping mechanisms. While the literature provides context for these outward behaviours (Fergusson et al., 2014; Jansen et al., 2011; Juvonen & Graham, 2014; Lines, 2007; Olweus, 2011), it often overlooks the negative self-

perception revealed in this study. Swearer and Espelage (2004) noted that children who engage in bullying often face various stressors, such as familial conflicts and dysfunction. Similarly, Rodkin and Hodges (2003) emphasised that bullies occupy a distinct social position characterised by both peer rejection and acceptance, which corresponds with the group affiliations identified in this study. However, in contrast, Olweus (1993) argued that bullies exhibit aggressive behaviours regardless of their emotional state, suggesting that emotional vulnerabilities are not the sole cause of bullying. Additionally, Gini (2008) explored moral emotions such as guilt and shame in relation to bullying behaviour, concluding that bullies tend to experience fewer adjustment problems in comparison.

The reflections of former bullies on their past actions, as reported in this study, provide poignant insight into the evolution of self-awareness and recognition of responsibility in the context of bullying behaviour. The regret expressed by the participants highlights a developmental trajectory from minimal empathy or lack of awareness during childhood to a more reflective and remorseful stance over time. This change could result from facing the consequences of their actions at school, parental discipline, or a realisation of the emotional costs of their behaviour. These studies above contrast with the findings of this research, which emphasise emotional distress, impaired emotional attunement, and a lack of prosocial relating and coping mechanisms as central to BPs self-perception. This, in turn, appears to drive bullying, leading to significant short- and long-term psychosocial consequences.

Experiencing Unrelenting Urge to Dehumanise Others

This study uniquely captures how bullying perpetrators (BPs), as adults, perceive themselves and their role in school bullying. Participants reflected on their motivations, highlighting the need to put others down to gain social acceptance, dominance, and emotional balance. However, the findings reveal that bullying was more psychologically challenging than previously suggested in the literature. To sustain bullying, participants reported

dehumanising their victims as a way to detach from guilt and moral conflict, often by dissociating from their emotions and focusing on their own pain to justify behaviour and avenging relationship conflicts among others.

While participants experienced short-term social gains and improved self-esteem, these benefits were fleeting, leading to enduring moral dilemmas and distress in both childhood and adulthood. The findings highlight the complex interplay between personal circumstances, self-preservation, and learned power dynamics. This study contributes to the literature by highlighting the strategic and protective aspects of the bully's personality, as well as the psychological mechanisms, such as moral disengagement and dehumanisation, that underpin their behaviour. The pursuit of power and control appears not only as an end, but serves multiple functions: reclaiming lost agency, protecting against victimisation, and replicating power dynamics observed in other areas of their lives, such as within the family or community.

The idea that bullies possess superior social skills, lack empathy, and skilfully manipulate others is supported by Sutton et al., (1999b, 1999a) who suggest that these individuals often use their social cognition in a Machiavellian manner. The quest for power as a strategy for self-preservation, social acceptance, and prestige (Juvonen & Graham, 2014) aligns with Adler's (1956) theory of individual psychology, which argues that a desire for superiority and power often arises from feelings of inferiority. Participants in this study reported experiencing brief instances of empathy during episodes of bullying, which stands in contrast to the perspective of Ansbacher and Ansbacher (1956) that the pursuit of superiority becomes detrimental when social connections are weak, as observed in BPs. In this study, bullying perpetrators (BPs) often appeared to engage in emotional avoidance and dehumanisation, focusing on their own distress as a means of justifying their actions. Such behaviours seemed to offer temporary social benefits, including popularity, control, and

power; however, they ultimately appeared to contribute to the development of a negative self-perception.

The study's findings on the transient nature of individual dominance and the strategic importance of group affiliations resonate with social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), which posits that individuals are motivated to maintain group hierarchies that grant them higher status and protection. During their youth, participant's actions could also be seen as an attempt to navigate these social hierarchies to avoid victimisation and to assert lost agency. This aligns with the social-ecological diathesis stress model (Swearer & Espelage, 2004), which emphasises the systemic nature of bullying and its roots in the interplay between individual traits, relationships, and societal factors. The aim of restoring positive self-image through bullying or gaining a sense of agency is a distinct finding in this study.

Participants' accounts of dehumanising their victims to alleviate guilt reflect Bandura's (1999) concept of moral disengagement, where harmful behaviours are rationalised to avoid self-condemnation. By dehumanising victims, bullies bypass their natural aversion to harming others, a key point in psychodynamic theories on defence mechanisms and the unconscious (Freud, 1915). This challenges the notion that bullies are entirely cold to the suffering of their victims, as posited by Sutton et al. (1999b) and van Noorden et al. (2015).

The description of bullying as a trance or unconscious state (Meera) suggests a level of dissociation, identified by most participants. This dissociation can be understood as numbing and through psychodynamic theories that explore how the unconscious mind protects the ego by enabling behaviour that conflicts with moral judgement (Freud, 1915). Thus, dehumanisation and dissociation may serve as psychological defences, enabling bullies to reconcile their actions with internal moral conflicts.

Lack of Guidance, Support, and Awareness Impact on Self-Perception and Bullying Role

"I think the community has a lot to do." Michael shared.

Most participants highlighted how the absence of adult guidance, both at home and in school - significantly impaired their moral judgment (as noted by Michael above), ultimately contributing to their involvement in bullying. They described navigating the world and social dynamics with minimal support and understanding leading them to adopt bullying as a strategy for asserting control, gaining acceptance, and coping with their vulnerabilities. This lack of moral education and clear boundaries left them struggling to define their roles within social hierarchies, resulting in a distorted self-perception and maladaptive behaviour.

Participants recounted feeling unsupported during their formative years, both at home and in school. The absence of emotional support from their care givers led them to rely on bullying to establish identity and social roles. While most participants felt unsupported, two (Rachel and Anna) experienced some support. Rachel credited therapy (in school) with helping her stop bullying, while Anna's academic success gained her teachers' support, allowing her bullying behaviour to go unnoticed. Anna's case also demonstrates how targeted support can improve perpetrators' self-perception, empathy, potentially reducing bullying and leading to better life outcomes. These contrasting examples highlight how inconsistent guidance left participants vulnerable and reliant on bullying to navigate social dynamics.

Reflections as adults revealed a developmental shift from dismissal or minimisation of empathy (See GET 2) and lack of awareness in childhood to greater self-awareness, feeling accountable and remorseful over time. Although this may be attributed to growing up and understanding of socially acceptable behaviours. Regret emerged as participants recognised the harm they caused, often triggered by facing consequences, discipline, or unfulfilled emotional needs. This emphasises how inadequate support during critical

developmental stages prevented children from developing a balanced sense of self, resulting in the scramble to dominate or belittle others in social settings. They may either do this to relieve distress, gain control or re-enact similar power dynamics experienced.

No specific research aligns strictly with this finding regarding BPS. However, Ttofi et al. (2012) suggest that without early intervention, bullying behaviours can become entrenched and persist into adulthood, affecting relationships and workplace dynamics, which were reported by some of the participants as a long-term impact.

Participants also emphasised that their childhood lack of awareness about what constitutes bullying significantly influenced their role development. Behaviours like teasing and social exclusion were often seen as normal, not recognised as bullying. This reflects how the absence of moral education and clear guidance may contribute to children's confusion regarding social roles. In the absence of adult intervention, participants may resort to bullying behaviour as a means of survival or asserting dominance. They may subsequently realise these actions led to the perpetuation of their negative self-perceptions and long-term emotional consequences.

Participants also identified systemic failures within their communities and schools, where authority figures either selectively intervened or labelled them as disruptive without addressing underlying emotional needs. This lack of consistent support reinforced feelings of isolation and confusion, pushing participants deeper into maladaptive behaviours. The absence of clear boundaries and moral education left them to define their roles in ways that exacerbated their vulnerabilities. Research by Monks and Smith (2006) and Bauman and Del Rio (2006) aligns partly by highlighting how children may fail to recognise nonphysical bullying, which impacts on underreporting and ineffective intervention.

The study's findings can be explained by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which emphasises the role of external environments in shaping individual development.

In this context, the lack of positive adult support and moral guidance led participants to define themselves through bullying and to perceive it as a way of life, thus, unable to recognise the anti-social aspects. Even instances when they did recognise the negative aspects, they reported feeling confused, conflicted and thought everyone behaved like them. The narratives suggest that participants expressed a desire for support, which may be attributed to unmet needs for structure, unconditional love, guidance, and moral clarity. This deprivation can give rise to resentment towards themselves, their parents, community members, teachers, and peers. In the absence of the capacity to defend themselves in these roles due to power imbalances, they frequently displace their internalised negative emotions by engaging in bullying behaviour towards other vulnerable children as a coping mechanism.

This study offers a unique contribution by focusing on how bullies perceive their own roles and sense of self within social contexts. Unlike existing research (Lines, 2007), which often centres on motivations for bullying or the perspectives of victims (Da Silva, 2012), this study examines how systemic neglect, and insufficient moral guidance might have influenced identity formation in bullies.

The findings highlight the need for comprehensive education that goes beyond punitive measures to include all stakeholder training to provide nurturing environment for BPS. This could potentially be achieved through programs that encourage perspective-taking and emotional literacy, as well as restorative practice that allow BPs to understand and process their pain to ameliorate any harm they may inflict on other children (Gini, 2008). These findings fill a gap in current literature by presenting how unresolved vulnerabilities and unaddressed emotional needs from early years could drive children to define their role through bullying ending up with a negative self-perception which maintains the bullying cycle.

Summary of Findings

This research contributes to the bullying literature by examining the internal psychological struggles and motivations of bullies, providing a deeper understanding of how they perceive their role and identity. First, participants viewed themselves as vulnerable (victims) in childhood because of adverse family and community conditions, which led to low self-esteem and diminished agency. These findings suggest that they may use bullying as an emotional armour. To regain a sense of control lost in their backgrounds, bullies may try to dominate and undermine their peers to conceal their insecurities. This behaviour appears to be central to their self-perception. While participants recognised their actions as harmful, even earlier, they prioritised personal and social gain, normalised bullying, and consciously suppressed empathy towards their victims. The study suggests that girls may be as likely as boys to engage in aggressive behaviour, challenging previous research; however, the small sample size limits the ability to draw broad conclusions. Aggressive behaviours (e.g., hurting children hurt others) and superciliousness may serve to compensate for underlying negative emotions stemming from childhood trauma, potentially shaping their self-perception and roles as bullies.

Finally, participants reflected on their actions, occasionally justifying them and recalling the social benefits they perceived at the time. However, their mood often shifted to one of guilt, with many acknowledging the growing shame they attempted to overcome, but which persisted into adulthood (although this was not the focus of the study). Some participants appeared to have made peace with their past, while others continued seeking redemption, whether through efforts to reconcile with victims, behavioural change, therapy, or spiritual growth, signalling an evolving self-perception over time.

Reflections on Perpetrators Self-Perception as Victims of their Environment

In this study, some participants' roles as bully-perpetrators (BPs) were dynamic rather than fixed, aligning with Smith and Ananiadou's (2003) description of “aggressive victims” (p. 193). Although all participants identified as BPs, their stories and some experiences demonstrate they could be BVs (i.e. Anna and Meera). These, participants identified as BPs, reflecting their behaviour and self-perceptions, consistent with the phenomenological ethos of IPA (Lodge, 2014; Olweus, 1997; Smith & Ananiadou, 2003). Notably, two out of the six BPs reported feeling bullied in their families and communities showing unique emotional responses. Although participants were screened and admitted to being perpetrators before interviews, they later narrated situations that led to them feeling victimised (see details in reflections on results). Addressing the diversity of experiences is crucial for developing comprehensive and inclusive views that reflect the complex realities of human bullying behaviour. The participants also came from varied cultural, racial, and regional backgrounds in the UK. It is crucial to reflect on these participants as their views ultimately impact the study's findings, since their experiences in the past have been noted in the literature to be distinct from pure bullies (Olweus, 1993).

The participants were aged between 25-45 (i.e. Anna and Meera) and seem to find it hard to admit to their role as bullies to begin with and later tried to justify their bullying role. Like the pure bullies, they bullied during childhood to compensate for feelings of vulnerability. They often felt ignored by teachers due to disruptive behaviour, experienced rejection and isolation, and seem to feel regret and shame that persisted into adulthood. Notably, BVs appeared more uncomfortable with the label 'bully,' likely due to their experiences of victimisation. They also seem emotionally vulnerable and impulsive, exhibiting strong feelings of accountability and trauma, as supported by previous literature (Adrian et al., 2019; Bender & Lösel, 2011; Dervishi, 2019; Eisenberg et al., 2016; Estévez et

al., 2009). They were also more likely to regret their actions during bullying in school thereby carrying the guilt and shame for longer than the pure BPs. Further studies to understand this group or adding them to BPs may provide an all-round understanding about perpetrators.

Integrating the PETs on self-concept and family vulnerabilities of BPS and BVs suggests a common experience: the search for identity and belonging in view of their early experiences. Participants used bullying as a façade to project confidence while masking underlying vulnerabilities, consistent with Volk et al.'s (2012) findings. BVs and BPs both presented as compelled to bully others while focused on their own pain and dehumanising victims to cope with their actions. BVs in this study seemed more aware of their actions' negative impact during bullying than pure bullies, who might struggle to gain insight into their behaviour even later in life. Two of the bullies, for instance, only gained insight into their role when they reflected on it before signing up for the study.

Although I could have discarded this data to achieve homogeneity of experience as noted by Nizza et. al. (2021). However, both BV and pure BPs have both bullied. Thereby, including both pure bullies and BVs provided a comprehensive exploration of bullying dynamics, aligning with IPA's commitment to understanding nuanced experiences. However, the depth of information and limitations must be noted: while the diverse sample provided rich insights, it posed challenges in creating a straightforward, generalisable coherent narrative. The strength lies in the presence of BVs, which added depth, highlighting the complexity of bullying roles and associated emotional turmoil (Dulmus et al., 2006). The findings of this study indicate that the roles associated with bullying are predominantly fluid. It is essential to incorporate the narratives of BVs in any examination of bullying, as these narratives are intricately connected over time due to retaliatory actions by victims and the dynamic nature of all roles involved in bullying. Implications for practice and future research include tailoring interventions to address bully-victims' needs, considering both their

aggressive and victimisation behaviours. Understanding BPs' emotional vulnerabilities can inform more compassionate intervention strategies. Future research should explore how bullying roles evolve over time using longitudinal methods or thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), especially for individuals oscillating between bully and victim roles. The long-term emotional outcomes of these experiences warrant further investigation. The diversity within the sample provided a nuanced understanding of bullying, underlining the importance of considering multiple perspectives in CoP research.

Methodological Reflexivity

The data analysis process for identifying experiential statements was complex due to the need to cluster themes to prevent overlap and project participant' voices. The most challenging aspect was classifying these statements into PETs and GETs, partly due to the new revised terminologies for IPA (Smith et al., 2022). However, the theoretically stimulated process allowed for synthesising the six participants' stories. Balancing participants' direct quotes with interpretative analysis was meticulous and time consuming, especially when selecting the most experiential statements to explain themes. Nevertheless, following Smith's (2022) suggestions, I explored participants lived experiences while setting aside observed personal biases. I bracketed potential biases to capture the interviewees' intended meanings. The outcomes also revealed the fluidity of bullying roles, with participants identifying as BPs emphasising aspects most significant to them, adhering to IPA's phenomenological principles. Maintaining idiographic context was essential during analysis.

Embarking on this study, my aim was to understand BPs experiences to enable positive relationships among children. My interest stemmed from witnessing my family member's experience of being a victim of bullying, which challenged my perception of bullies as inherently strong, bitter, and self-assured. Initially, I formulated questions and narratives that portrayed perpetrators unfavourably; however, journaling (reflexivity) was

employed to maintain a balanced perspective. The findings contradicted this initial view, instead revealing a shift towards understanding the perpetrators' reality, which depicted them as vulnerable children with backgrounds almost similar to those of their victims. Through diary entries, I processed my discomfort, allowing me to stay aligned with participants' realities and often asking, “What does this mean to you?” My research revealed that bullies may often target peers whom they perceived to be better than them academically or socially, but also similar in isolation or vulnerability, a realisation also influenced by my family member’s experience and the school's initial disbelief. Through IPA, I explored the complex self-perceptions and roles of those involved in childhood bullying.

The research encountered significant challenges, particularly in participant recruitment, due to the stigma associated with bullying. During the interviews, responses to one question frequently provided insights into others, thereby facilitating more relaxed discussions. Nevertheless, the interviews, guided by IPA, exposed participants' vulnerabilities, many of which originated from experiences of abuse and neglect, comparable to those of their victims. This emotional connection to their narratives highlighted the complexities involved in addressing bullying.

Due to meticulous attention to the participant story, writing the results and discussion section was emotive and required frequent pauses. Additional impacts included experiencing a sense of being overwhelmed by the extensive volume of detailed data, engaging in excessive contemplation of themes due to personal challenges, and analysing data that depicted abuse analogous to the experiences of a family member. In all instances, highlighting the significance of bracketing was emphasised as a crucial aspect of phenomenological research (Giorgi, 2009). My subjective experiences inevitably influenced the analysis, reflecting the dynamic interplay in qualitative research (Finlay, 2016).

Verifying emerging themes and transcripts through participant validation provided genuine insights, consistent with IPA's phenomenological ontology and my epistemological perspective on the subjective nature of experience (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2003). Two participants removed identifiable information; however, they all agreed with the themes about how they felt about themselves and role in childhood.

The participants perceived themselves as BPs during the initial screening process, and during interviews, with some variation in their subjective experiences. Rachel reported experiencing teasing (classified as bullying) at home and at school, although this occurred within her friendship group and does not classify her as a BV due to the absence of power imbalance. Although bullying at home was not the focus of this study, it was important to report it, in line with Kasket's (2013) recommendation for transparency in research. Meera reported experiencing racial bullying outside of school by other children within her community, while Anna briefly mentioned a physical and sexual assault at school that made her feel bullied. Although these participants maintained that they were primarily perpetrators, their differing experiences suggest that further reflections were necessary. It is possible that their lack of receptiveness and identification with other roles in these situations was influenced by feelings of guilt and shame about their role.

This study's results are clinically useful for counselling psychologists and related professions, indicating early vulnerabilities that can lead to a distorted sense of self, insecure attachments, and a lack of unconditional positive regard from parents (Bowlby, 1969; Maté, 2019; Rogers, 1961). These factors seem to result in power struggles in their relationships and bullying ensued to reclaim control, thereby challenging stereotypes, including my own, of intentional, bitter perpetrators (Schwartz & Proctor, 2000). The study advocates for including BPs in anti-bullying initiatives, recognising their potential for positive peer

interactions. The results call for comprehensive strategies addressing the needs of all children involved in bullying, highlighting prevention and restoration.

Some individuals who engage in bullying behaviour may be unaware of their role as aggressors, even when their actions are intended to harm others. This lack of awareness contributes to the normalisation of such behaviour and challenges the misconception that all perpetrators are devoid of empathy and inherently callous. Therapeutic interventions and mentoring can foster self-awareness rooted in empathy and understanding. These approaches aim to mitigate the impact of neurodevelopmental disorders on bullying behaviour by promoting positive parenting and enhancing emotional attunement between parents and their children (Maté, 2019). By sharing their stories, the participants enriched the field of counselling psychology, offering new insights into the complex dynamics of bullying behaviour.

Implications for Research and Recruitment

Recruiting individuals who self-identified as school bullies presented significant methodological challenges, primarily due to the sensitive and stigmatised nature of the topic. The influx of fraudulent applicants (refer to recruitment steps in Method), likely attracted by the incentive, necessitated the implementation of screening calls and meticulous verification of participant authenticity, which proved both time-consuming and essential. These additional steps were crucial in safeguarding the integrity of the research and ensuring that participants genuinely aligned with the study's aims as much as possible. This experience provides valuable insight into the ethical and logistical complexities of engaging marginalised, stigmatised, or hard-to-reach populations in qualitative research, emphasising the need for adaptive and robust recruitment procedures.

Part 6. Conclusion

This research explored bullying perpetrators' sense of self and perceived role. Findings indicate a fragmented and loss sense of self due to insecurity and unstable environments resulting in bullying as a coping mechanism. (See detail findings in part 5). The remainder pages reflect on present study limitation and implication of studies for various stakeholders.

Methodological Considerations and Limitations

This study explored bullying perpetrators' retrospective experiences, focusing on their sense of self and role - an under researched area. A key challenge was the reliance on participants' narratives, which may be prone to memory biases, particularly with emotionally charged childhood events (Palamarchuk & Vaillancourt, 2022; Smith et al., 2022). While adult participants may offer more cognitively developed reflections, their recollections may still be fragmented or selectively interpreted. To address this, empathic interviewing and trust-building were prioritised, enabling participants to be at ease whilst exploring complex aspects of their identities, while remaining cognisant of potential biases.

The retrospective nature of the study posed limitations, as participants' current perspectives may have influenced their reinterpretation of past events. However, this approach offered valuable insights into how their sense of self and role evolved, providing a perspective rarely captured in studies focused solely on current behaviours. I tried to mitigate any potential memory impact by setting the cut off age at 60. The reliability of memories, particularly those pertaining to emotionally charged past events, may be compromised, as recollections can be fragmented or altered, with the degree of alteration potentially correlating with age (Palamarchuk & Vaillancourt, 2022).

The decision to update emerging themes with participants ensured alignment with IPA's phenomenological stance (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2003). This reflexive approach mitigated retrospective bias, allowing participants to validate and refine their interpretations.

Recruitment posed challenges which may be attributable to stigma and shame of admitting a history of bullying. Participants seem to minimise or reframed their actions, sometimes casting themselves as victims of their circumstances. However, IPA's emphasis on personal narratives, along with empathic interviewing, facilitated more candid discussions by allowing participants to express nuanced perspectives. Reflective journaling and bracketing helped manage any bias and emotional strain, ensuring the integrity of the findings (Giorgi, 2009).

Future Research Suggestions

Building on this study's findings and limitations, future research should consider larger quantitative studies to complement understanding and inform treatment approaches. Further exploration of family vulnerabilities, bullying impact on adults, self-identification in bullying roles, and the factors influencing bullying behaviour could enrich the findings.

Studies on individuals who identify as both victims and perpetrators could offer deeper insights into evolving bullying dynamics. Estévez et al. (2009) found evidence of role overlap in bullying, suggesting that shifts in bullying roles may be inevitable due to children's personal circumstances. Continuous screening to maintain sample homogeneity or reflect on shifting outcomes is recommended. Alternatively, thematic analysis, which accommodates such complexity, could be a more suitable approach.

An anonymous study design might reduce bias by capturing more honest reflections, potentially revealing less remorse among bullying perpetrators. Additionally, since this study did not address cyberbullying, future research should include this aspect to improve generalisability across different forms of bullying.

Application to Practice, Counselling Psychology, and Wider Society

This research offers critical insights for counselling psychologists and other stakeholders, highlighting the complexities behind bullying behaviours and their roots in personality development. Integrating humanistic values (Rogers, 1961) and the scientist-practitioner model for evidence-based therapeutic intervention (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; APA, 2004; BPS, 2018; NICE, 2011; WHO, 2019) is crucial. Cognitive behavioural therapy (Beck, 1991) and a pluralistic method of therapy has emerged as a valuable tool for addressing child bullying perpetrators with emotional vulnerabilities (Cooper & McLeod, 2010). The pluralistic approach allows for selecting and customising various methods to meet individual client needs. This collaborative perspective, grounded in humanistic and person-centred values, integrates various modalities. The core principle is that each individual's issues are unique and may require different therapeutic interventions, especially when addressing the complexities of bullying perpetrators (both adults and children), including self-worth issues, maladaptive cognitions, defences, and relational challenges (Cooper & Dryden, 2015). Counselling psychologist and related professional may find these guidelines and prevention strategies below helpful when supporting clients in therapy who have bullied.

Guidelines Suggested for Counselling Psychologists in Therapy

Comprehensive Assessments: Early adversities like trauma, insecure attachment, and familial risks should be central to psychological assessments. Evaluations must consider attachment styles, cognitive distortions, and family dynamics to inform tailored interventions.

Trauma-Informed Interventions: Employ trauma-focused methodologies such as Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR) and Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (TF-CBT) to address unresolved trauma that may contribute to

aggressive behaviour if present. Counselling psychologists may create safe nonjudgemental spaces for clients to explore and process these experiences. Integrative Therapeutic Approaches: A pluralistic method, combining humanistic, psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioural, and socio-ecological perspectives, is critical. This ensures flexibility and responsiveness to the unique needs of each child, fostering resilience and emotional regulation.

Empathy and Social Skills Training: Interventions should prioritise empathy development and relational skills through peer support as suggested by Cowie (2011), role-play and social-emotional learning. These approaches help to counteract the normalisation of aggression among peers and promote healthier dialogue and social interactions.

Family and Systemic Therapy: Involving families in therapy is essential to address dysfunctional patterns contributing to bullying behaviours. Strengthening family bonds through compassionate parenting (focusing on child's emotional needs) and modelling positive interactions can significantly improve children's self-perception and relational conduct.

Restorative Practices and Group Therapy: Facilitating group sessions and restorative justice practices can encourage self-reflection, empathy, and reconciliation between bullies and victims, fostering healing and a sense of accountability.

Prevention Strategies for Bullying Behaviour

Implement programs that integrate social-emotional learning (SEL), empathy, nurturing and bullying education, and anti-bullying policies.

Role of Psychological Therapists in Schools: Embed qualified psychological therapists in schools (NHS) to support vulnerable children and offer proactive mental health interventions based on the guidelines above and other evidence-based methods. This ensures early identification and intervention, reducing the risk of bullying behaviours developing.

Parental Involvement and Education: Educate parents about the importance of good bonds where their children feel safe and loved. Educate parents about existing resources to seek further support. Also, how to recognise signs of bullying, promoting positive parenting, and building secure attachments. Parental workshops and resources should focus on effective communication, listening and role-modelling healthy relational dynamics.

Creating Inclusive School Environments: Promote a school culture rooted in respect, diversity and inclusion. Activities that enhance community building and peer support are essential to prevent further isolation and the development of aggressive behaviours.

Peer Mentoring and Support Networks: Establish peer mentoring programs to provide at-risk students with positive role models and support systems, reducing the likelihood of them engaging in bullying.

These suggested guidelines, grounded in the study's findings, advocate for a holistic, empathic, and integrative approach in counselling psychology. By examining the emotional, cognitive, and relational factors that contribute to the development of bullying behaviours, psychologists can significantly contribute to both the treatment and prevention of such behaviours in children.

Implication for Bullying Perpetrators

This study identified school bullying perpetrators (BPs) as vulnerable children facing significant emotional and social challenges (see GET 2). Applying the life span theory, participants demonstrated vulnerabilities at various stages, which impacted the development of a stable, positive self-perception, leading to bullying as a coping mechanism for seeking power and control. This perspective highlights the importance of early experiences, family dynamics, and socio-cultural contexts in shaping behaviours. Previous research often highlights bullies' aggression and lack of empathy, which may be overshadowing their struggles with shame, guilt, and a deep-seated fear of isolation (Salmivalli et al., 1996; Smith & Ananiadou, 2003; Wang et al., 2012). This study suggests that bullying perpetrators (BPs) are in dire need of empathy and understanding, both crucial for prevention and breaking the cycle of pain they perpetuate. As evidenced in the study, their antisocial behaviours, often a cry for acceptance, are hindered by inadequate social skills, leading to further isolation and a negative feedback loop.

This study advocates a compassionate approach towards children who bully, emphasising the necessity of including them in school anti-bullying campaigns. This suggests the implementation of targeted interventions including pluralistic therapy (personalised), social skills training, school, family and community engagement. Such interventions could foster a sense of unconditional value, encourage personal growth, repair and foster balanced self-perception subsequently leading to healthier social interactions.

Teachers play a vital role in this process by identifying vulnerabilities and guiding children who bully towards appropriate support and positive changes. This includes monitoring children for signs of vulnerabilities such as domestic abuse, especially those who exhibit fear or reluctance to return home after school and may experience concentration challenges as found in this study. Therefore, an inclusive approach, mindful of socio-

economic, racial, disability and gender differences, should be considered to ensure that no child is overlooked.

Ultimately, the goal is for perpetrators to channel their energies into prosocial behaviours, such as sports and extra-curriculum activities to align their self-worth with their ideal selves, and pursue self-actualisation, free from the burdens of their past. This study emphasises the potential for transformative growth, advocating for a holistic approach that views bullies as not just perpetrators, but children facing personal battles, deserving of support, and the opportunity to change as suggested by the tenets of Rogers humanistic model (1961). Teachers, social workers, therapists and family's partnership could help BPs to feel 'seen' to prevent taking out their frustrations on other children.

Implications for Victims

The implications of this study extend beyond the bullying perpetrators (BPs) themselves and hold significant importance for those they bully (victims). By addressing the emotional and psychological vulnerabilities that lead to bullying, this research suggests that interventions targeted at BPs can indirectly protect victims and foster healthier school environments. The findings suggest that bullying often arises from feelings of powerlessness, low self-esteem, and unresolved emotional distress. Early interventions aimed at improving emotional regulation and empathy in BPs could reduce bullying behaviour, thus lowering the risk of victimisation.

A key point emerging from the study is the dismissal of feelings of empathy by BPs towards victims, often due to their own emotional struggles. Implementing empathy training and emotional literacy programs in schools could benefit both perpetrators and victims, promoting a culture of understanding and reducing the likelihood of harmful behaviours. By fostering emotional awareness in BPs, there exists the potential to mitigate future instances of

bullying, thereby creating safer environments for victims who would otherwise be subjected to persistent emotional and physical harm.

Additionally, the study highlights the importance of consistent accountability for bullying behaviour. Many participants noted the absence of clear adult guidance and intervention during their school years, which contributed to their lack of awareness of the moral implications of their actions. Schools, families, children and communities must play a proactive role in setting clear guidelines for acceptable behaviour and consistently holding perpetrators accountable within such framework. Effective accountability balanced with empathy - acts as a deterrent and helps foster a sense of responsibility, making perpetrators more conscious of the harm they cause. Ensuring that accountability measures are both fair and consistent would encourage BPs to reflect on their actions while simultaneously protecting victims from future harm.

Finally, the research emphasises the need for holistic interventions that engage parents, teachers, and the wider community. By fostering positive attachment bonds and providing psychological support for children displaying early signs of vulnerability, the cycle of bullying can be interrupted. This approach benefits not only the perpetrators by addressing their underlying issues but also victims and all children involved in bullying, who would experience fewer instances of bullying in a more supportive and emotionally cognisant school environment.

Implications for Current Government Laws and School Interventions

The participants in this study were aware that the times have changed and that safeguarding rules and policies are in place nationally, regionally, and in schools to curtail bullying. While this is a good progress, school bullying seems to have increased relentlessly and has become more complex to identify, partly because of cyberbullying (Modecki et al., 2014b; Olweus & Limber, 2017; Przybylski & Bowes, 2017; Zych et al., 2015).

In view of this trend, further investigation of BPs could be considered by the government and other stakeholders when developing effective anti-bullying programs. New perspectives provide insight into the unknown world of perpetrators, who are the main protagonists in the bullying world. Existing policies could be strengthened by teachers and adults working with children trained on bullying as part of the Department of Education's Relationships, Sex, and Health Education programs (RSHE)(DfE, 2023). The aim is to explicitly teach children about bullying types for detection and their consequences. Social skills training is provided, but it seems less detailed and irrelevant if underlying issues are not tackled. To improve RSHE, there is a need to pay equal attention to embracing individual differences, such as racial, class, and religious tolerance, to minimise bullying based on such differences. Hence, children from minority backgrounds, refugees, migrants, and LGBTq+ backgrounds must be helped and mentored when reporting bullying cases. Lack of understanding and much needed intervention might only lead to them repeating the cycle and perhaps being impulsive that could jeopardise the safety of the school community.

Children who engage in bullying behaviour should be considered potential victims of their environments. They may need support to transform their behaviour rather than criticism, harsh punishment, and blame, which can ultimately lead to further isolation. Others require assessment for neurodevelopmental disorders in cases that pose a barrier to theory of mind and hyperactivity which could lead to bullying or victimisation. Perpetrators might need extra time and support through mentorship and coaching from teachers, social workers, community engagement officers, religious networks, and peers. The intention should be to help them make prosocial choices and build trust.

Appointing qualified psychologists in educational institutions can be beneficial. They can proactively identify students facing bullying or home challenges. Currently, counsellors or mental health advocates may lack credibility with students, as they are seen as part of the

school system. Consequently, children might not feel comfortable divulging confidential information. In contrast, trained therapists who are not aligned with the school, but rather with their clients, could promote trust and facilitate better treatment outcomes. Given that bullying has been declared a public health problem by the WHO (2010), it is essential that efforts to prevent and protect children from its impact be coordinated at community, family, school, religious, and other levels. This is particularly important for BPs, who are often overlooked in conversations about bullying, but who can also suffer from its effects.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Research Leaflet

LONDON metropolitan university

DO YOU THINK YOU MIGHT HAVE BULLIED ANYONE IN SCHOOL?

- Are you aged 18+?
- Would you like to share your childhood bullying experiences with us to help in our research?

The psychological and general well-being of children who bully are underrepresented in the existing literature. Findings from your participation will provide valuable information towards understanding this area to improve relevant support to children who bully and all children impacted in schools.

Participation is confidential and anonymity is guaranteed.

*

The study is approved by the ethics committee of the London Metropolitan

University. Participation will involve a 60 to 90 minute interview via video or in person at a convenient time for you. Your contribution will make a difference and be very much appreciated.

You will receive a £10 amazon voucher for your time.

For additional information and if you wish to participate please contact:
Awula Sellick-Taylor (Trainee Counselling Psychologist)
Email: aws0061@my.londonmet.ac.uk
Teams Call: +44 1223 783825

Research Supervisor : Dr. Catherine Athanasiadou-Lewis
Registered Counselling Psychologist
Email: athanasiadoulewis@londonmet.ac.uk

Childhood bullying research

Appendix B: Participant Informed Consent Form

Title of the Study: 'I Was Afraid All the Time at Home': Exploring the Lived Experiences and Self-Perceptions of Adults Who Were Childhood Bullies – An IPA Study

This consent form ensures that you are happy with the information you have received about the study, that you are aware of your participation rights, and that you are pleased to participate in this study.

Please Tick Box to consent.

☐ **1.** I confirm that I have read and that I understand the information sheet for this study.

☐ **2.** I have had the opportunity to consider the information about the study, and to ask questions about it.

☐ **3.** I have received enough information about the study to enable me to decide whether I want to take part in it.

☐ **4.** I understand that all the information that I reveal will be kept confidential.

☐ **5.** I understand that the principle of confidentiality cannot be maintained if the information disclosed might cause serious and immediate harm to myself or others.

☐ **6.** I understand that this study has received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee at London Metropolitan University.

I understand that the study will be carried out in accordance with both the London Metropolitan University's Code of Good Research Practice and the British Psychological Society's ethical guidelines.

https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/bps-code-human-research-ethics

☐ **7.** I also understand that both I and the researcher have the right to bring the interview to an end at any time if undue distress is being experienced.

☐ **8.** I understand that I am free to decline to answer any questions that I do not wish to answer.

☐ **9.** I understand that participation in this study is entirely voluntary.

☐ **10.** I am aware that I have the right to withdraw at any time before interviews and any time after interviews up to the project analysis stage.

☐ **11.** I understand that I will participate in either a remote or face to face interview for approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded and later will be transcribed by the researcher.

☐ **12.** I understand that the researcher will use quotations from my interview in the writing-up and the publication of the study.

☐ **13.** I understand that my identity will be completely anonymous and that my name will not be revealed at any point in time.

I understand that for assessment and publication repurposes, both the recording of the interview and the transcript will be kept and only destroyed after thesis assessment and publisher's verification in line with UK General Data Protection Policy.

☐ **14.** . Please initial below if you would like to receive a Summary of the study results by email. _____

I hereby agree to take part in this study.

Participant Name: _____Signature: _____Date:_____

Researcher

Name: _____

Signature: _____Date:_____

When the consent form has been completed, one copy is retained for the researcher and one copy to participants for their records.

Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet

Title of the Study:

'I Was Afraid All the Time at Home': Exploring the Lived Experiences and Self-Perceptions of Adults Who Were Childhood Bullies – An IPA Study

I am a trainee Counselling Psychologist at London Metropolitan University, and I am currently researching childhood bullying perpetration from adult's experiences.

Many researchers have tried to understand the impact of bullying on children and adults. These studies have often concentrated on bullying impact on and experiences of victims instead of considering the views and perceptions of perpetrators. This study believes the opinions of those who perpetrated bullying are equally important. Data from such a study can enable understanding of bullying perpetration, perhaps bringing about further research and subsequent effective prevention strategies, including adequate psychological support for such children.

Therefore, this study aims to understand the experiences of adults who self-describe as bullying perpetrators during childhood; and how they made sense of themselves and their role at school. I hope you would be interested in helping this study by making time to share your experiences of bullying. Six participants shall be recruited on first come first served basis. Similar conditions will be observed among all participants. The interview will consist of open-ended questions conducted in person or remotely and lasting about 60 to 90 minutes. It will be audio recorded.

Data from your interview will be used for my Doctoral level counselling psychology project. Participation is entirely voluntary. Interviews will be strictly confidential, anonymised and untraceable back to you. If you choose to participate, you are free to

withdraw any time before the interview and up until data analysis is commenced afterwards. Therefore, all data collected at any time during the interview will be included unless the participant states otherwise. This is because it will be impossible to extricate your data from the group after the data analysis. All data collected, including audio, shall be destroyed after submitting and passing my doctorate course's research element and after the publisher's verification.

Before you decide to participate, you must understand that the interview will discuss sensitive topics and, therefore, may evoke some distressing and challenging feelings for you. Therefore, please take your time in deciding whether you wish to take part. You will have the opportunity to discuss any feelings evoked at length post-interview with me and referred to relevant organisations for further support.

Thus, if you feel distressed at the time of the interview, a list of organisations and their contact details can be found on the other side of this form (separate list attached). However, keep in mind to consider contacting your GP or a friend when you need support. If you are concerned or not happy about any aspect of this research, please contact my supervisor via this email: c.athanasiadoulewis@londonmet.ac.uk

Thank you so much for your time. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me by email:

.

On completing the interview, you will receive a £10 Amazon voucher for your time.

I look forward to hopefully hearing from you soon to arrange a remote or face to face interview.

Yours sincerely,

Awulatu Sellick-Taylor (Trainee Counselling Psychologist)

Supervisor: Dr Amanda Visick, London, Metropolitan University,

School of social sciences, Room TM1-66, Tower Building

166-220 Holloway Road, London N7 8DB, Tel: 0207 133 2669

Appendix D: Study Interview Schedule

Title of study:

'I Was Afraid All the Time at Home': Exploring the Lived Experiences and Self-Perceptions of Adults Who Were Childhood Bullies – An IPA Study

Based upon your role, what are your views or experiences of school bullying? For example, if I were someone who knew nothing about bullying, how would you describe it to me?

Prompts:

- Can you provide any example(s)?
- Upon reflection, how do you come to make sense of your experiences?
- How do you feel about your life at school in view of this role?

2. What are your lived experiences in light of your bullying participation?

Prompts:

- Can you tell me more, please?
- How did you come to make sense of yourself in childhood?

3. What are your reflections about your sense of self in your participation in bullying?

Prompts:

- Do you attribute any personal meanings or ideas to these experiences?
- What are your thoughts of your experiences of bullying at school?
- Can you provide me with any example(s)?

4. What did you make of your role in bullying during this time?

Prompts:

- How do you come to make sense of yourself and your previous role?
- Can you remember what it was like to live in this role in school?

5. Did you experience any emotions at the time in view of your role?

Prompts:

- Can you tell me more, please?
- How do you make sense of your emotions at the time?

General Prompts:

- Can you tell me more, please?
- Can you provide any examples of…?
- What does that mean to you?
- What are your thoughts, feelings, or associations here?
- In retrospect, how does that make you feel?

End of Interview Questions

How do you feel about taking part in this study?

Prompts:

How do you feel about what we have discussed? Do you have any questions? Do you need further assistance regarding what we have discussed? Is there anything that you thought was important that I did not ask you about, and if so, would you like to tell me about it now or later?

Safety Questions

Would you like to take a break now or stop? Are you feeling okay to continue? You can always ask me more questions about the study even after this interview. Take your time we can come back to it. All questions are not asked in order of the list, and schedule was only for guidance and answers to questions not asked, but relevant to study was pursued outside of this schedule.

Appendix E: Distress Protocol

Protocol to follow if participants become distressed during participation in the study:

'I Was Afraid All the Time at Home': Exploring the Lived Experiences and Self-Perceptions of Adults Who Were Childhood Bullies – An IPA Study

This protocol has been devised to deal with the possibility that some participants may become distressed and/or agitated during their involvement in the research into childhood bullying experiences (to be identified by outcome measures screening), as some participants might be suffering from psychological difficulties because of their previous experiences. Therefore, below follows a three-step protocol detailing signs of distress that I will look out for and action to take at each stage. I am a Trainee Counselling Psychologist with extensive experience as a Psychological Therapist with a membership of the British Psychological Society and accreditation of the British Association of Counselling Psychologist and works in this capacity in the NHS Psychological Wellbeing Service and so has experience in monitoring and managing situations where distress occurs. It is not expected that extreme distress will occur, nor will the relevant action become necessary. This is a precaution to safeguard participants who may have to recall their childhood experiences that might be distressing. Hence this is included in the protocol, in case of emergencies or if the need arises to provide extra support during and after the interview.

Mild distress:

Signs to look out for:

1) Tearfulness

2) The voice becomes choked with emotion/ difficulty speaking.

3) The participant becomes distracted/ restless.

Action to take:

1) Ask participants if they are happy to continue.

2) Offer them time to pause and compose themselves.

3) Remind them they can stop at any time they wish or become too distressed.

Severe distress:

Signs to look out for:

1) Uncontrolled crying/ wailing, inability to talk coherently.

2) Panic attack- e.g. hyperventilation, shaking, fear of impending heart attack.

3) Intrusive thoughts of the traumatic event- e.g. flashbacks

Action to take:

1) The researcher will intervene to terminate the interview.

2) The debrief will begin immediately.

3) Relaxation breathing technique will be suggested to regulate breathing/ reduce agitation.

4) The researcher will recognise participants' distress and reassure them that their experiences are normal reactions to reliving difficult past situations.

5) If any unresolved issues arise during the interview, accept and vSophiadate their distress, but suggest that they discuss with mental health professionals and remind participants that this is not designed as a therapeutic interaction.

6) Details of counselling/therapeutic services available to be offered to the participant.

Extreme distress:

If the participant is experiencing extreme distress (verbal or physical aggression, significant agitation, or participant is losing touch with reality and appears to be going into a psychotic breakdown), then the researcher will take the following actions:

1. Take necessary steps to ensure that both the researcher and participant are safe
2. In a situation where the researcher has a serious concern for the participant's safety or anyone else, they will remind the client of the confidentiality agreement and that it will be breached by contacting an ambulance service.

Appendix F: List of Useful Resources and Organisations

RESEARCH TITLE: 'I Was Afraid All the Time at Home': Exploring the Lived Experiences and Self-Perceptions of Adults Who Were Childhood Bullies – An IPA Study

Please consult these if you should need counselling or mental health support after this study:

Mind (They have regional branches)

15 - 19 Broadway

London E15 4BQ

Tel: 020 8519 2122

Email: contact@mind.org.uk

Website: www. mind. org. uk

Has a confidential help line. Local Mind Associations provide services such as counselling, advocacy, befriending and support on a wide range of mental health issues.

Samaritans

Offers a 24-hour help-line service.

Tel: 08457 90 90 90

British Psychological Society

St Andrews House, 48 Princess Road East

Leicester LE 1 7DR

Tel : +44 (0)1 16 254 9568

Fax : +44 (0)1 16 227 1314

Provides details regarding qualified psychologists trained in a variety of approaches in the UK.

Psychological Therapies (IAPT) with regional offices

https://www.nhs.uk/service-search

Local GP Surgery

Emergency helpline in England: 999 or 111 if in a severe emergency health situation

Appendix G: Demographic Survey

SCREENING SURVEY

Participant Demographics Screening Survey

The following questions will provide further insight into the research data and will be completely anonymous. This information will only be used to identify suitable participants for the research and will be handled securely, just like the other data from the study. All data will be destroyed according to the procedures outlined in the participant information sheet. Please can you answer the following questions (circle or highlight which one applies):

What is your gender?

Male Female Prefer not to say

Other (specify): ……

What is your age?

18-24 * 25-34 * 35-44* 45-54 * 55+ * Prefer not to say *

What is your Location?

UK Other (specify) ……

Appendix H: Email to Participants at Risk

Dear Participant,

Thank you for expressing interest in my doctoral research study. The study aims to explore the lived experiences of bullying perpetrators when they were in school. The research may cover some topics or incidents that may cause distress or evoke some difficult feelings for you. Based on your diagnosis or how you have reacted to the questions, I would like to suggest that you consider the risk involved before deciding to participate or resume the interview again. However, should you decide to proceed, there will be a distress protocol that would safeguard the process and you can pause and stop the interview at any time.

Please seek further help from the agencies listed below if you feel that you would benefit from further psychological support:

Mind (They have regional branches)

15 - 19 Broadway

London E15 4BQ

Tel: 020 8519 2122

Email: contact@mind.org.uk

Website: www. mind. org. uk

Has a confidential help line. Local Mind Associations provide services such as counselling, advocacy, befriending and support on a wide range of mental health issues.

Samaritans

Offers a 24-hour help-line service.

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British Psychological Society

St Andrews House, 48 Princess Road East

Leicester LE 1 7DR

Tel : +44 (0)1 16 254 9568

Fax : +44 (0)1 16 227 1314

Provides details regarding qualified psychologists trained in a variety of approaches in the UK.

NHS Improved Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) with regional offices

https://www.nhs.uk/service-search

Local GP Surgery

Emergency helpline in England: 999 or 111 if in a severe emergency health situation.

Appendix I: Individual Preliminary Personal Experiential Themes for Meera

PET	**Subthemes**
Self-identification and, and background to perpetration of bullying in school	Feeling scared and lost in an abusive family background
	Cultural differences impacted on bullying role
	Replicating power dynamics experienced
	Experiencing discrimination/racism
Feeling pain and indifference to victims suffering	Sad and hurting
	Experiencing shame and guilt during and after reflection
	Dehumanising victims to feel less better about their role
	Feeling isolated and loneliness
Self-Awareness and reflecting on role	Feeling accountable, reflecting on lack of support and guidance in view of role
	Yearning for school and community intervention
	Experiencing lack of mentoring/awareness about their bullying behaviour

Appendix J: A Section of Sophia's Transcript-Constructing Experiential Statements

Colours highlights meaningful verbatim quotes and experiential statements which are mapped to form experiential themes.

Below is the prelude to the Sophia's excerpt below:

This excerpt examines Sophia's attempt to understand her role and her sense of self as a BP. Initially, she found it difficult to admit her bullying behaviour and denied intentionality. However, she eventually acknowledged her coercive actions towards other children. During the interview, Sophia recognised that she aimed to make her friend feel bad and flaunt her dominance within an exclusive group, although she was unaware of the harm caused. She attributed this to her experience of teasing within her family, which normalised such behaviours and led her to perceive them as less harmful. She explained, *"Teasing was common in my family, so I developed a thicker skin. I thought it would be okay for someone else, but if you've never experienced it, you'll be shocked."* Over time, Sophia's perspective changed, prompting her to tell her story without defending her role. This ultimately illustrates the challenges and complexities involved in participants identifying as BPs.

Researcher: Yeah, but it seems there's hesitation. I notice hesitation in you. Like I might not still have bullied her?

Sophia: Oh, no, no, no.

Researcher: Do you get that sometimes?

Sophia: What the hesitation?

Researcher: From what she thinks, yeah.

Sophia: It's not really hesitation. I do admit that I bullied her. You know, as she said, she felt bullied by me and that's why.

Researcher: She left too [school]

Sophia: School so that isn't a lie. That's her experience. I think what I was saying is from the bully perspective. The person who has bullied someone else that it's like unless it is said, unless there is a sign that you're causing someone else harm. It's not there. It doesn't exist. So, all this time there were no signs that I was doing something wrong. I was doing something that was causing her harm, so just talking about the things that you can see, and you don't see and like the gap from me being in class with her. And maybe teasing her, saying she can't sit next to me to, then she's left school because of me. It was like, where was all the middle? Sophia don't talk to me like this or I'm gonna go to the teacher Sophia, you've done something wrong. Like no one told me that I was causing pain, or I was doing something wrong at the time. So, yeah, it's like unless it's spoken about, it's. It's not a reality if that makes sense.

Researcher: Yes, to the person who is meting it out because then to the other person they are hurting, but then we then have to unpack all these. So, for example, you may be very confident in talking to the teachers. Some children may not be.

Experiential Statements

Defending actions and bullying often occur due to a lack of awareness of victim's plight.

It feels unreal if there is no feedback about bullying impact from victims and teachers.

Researcher: Do you feel your experiences at home meant that you were very confident because you said you belong to the popular girls group?

Sophia: I was actually very shy.

Perceived herself to be very shy

Researcher: And what did that play into? How did that play into this bullying? The bullying accusation, you know, or your experience is what you did to this girl and others? If you were shy, you know, how did that happen? Did your shyness impact your behaviour to tease others?

Sophia: I mean this is secondary school. So let me give you a brief breakdown. I moved to the UK when I was so just about going to secondary school, I speak no English… English is very foreign to me. Also, I am the Spanish girl that doesn't speak any English.

Researcher: yeah.

Sophia: So in year 7, she was Spanish too. I didn't speak no English, so I like, even within my family, my family's very loud, very like that when there's like parties as a child, I hide my eyes when I'm dancing because I'm too shy, that is who Sophia is. And then you take her to to secondary school, where it's a new environment. She doesn't speak the language, but she's trying to survive in that environment. So I am still shy, but I think so. We were friends from year 7 to year nine and then I think it's around year nine when I may have become more confident because I was speaking now. I was speaking the language, I was making more friends. I think somewhat in some ways she represented me in the in the sense that she was very small, and she was very like quiet and shy. And I think that's why we bonded in the 1st place because we had that in similarity. Ahm… but yeah, I think how it then played out as me teasing her and as me being exclusive.

Bullying others was a way to survive and feel a sense of belonging in an unfamiliar environment.

Growing in confidence leads to a desire to assert dominance, and her friend reminded her of her old self

Researcher: Yeah, excluding her?

Sophia: Yeah, excluding her. I think it's….

Researcher: Did you have a need to belong to this other group that you, your newfound group, the popular girl's group or something? Because you said you were quite shy.

Sophia: Yeah, maybe I was. I was just trying to find my place. And then I was trying to to survive in a girls school. You know, you're either the one who's bullied or you are bullying. In the way. So I didn't want to be the one who's going to have people come for me .

Bullying was a way to place herself in a better social position for protection.

Researcher: So is to say way of asserting also some dominance to guard yourself?

Sophia: Ya

Relieved to reflect on her role and feel accountable for bullying.

Researcher: It's interesting because as the dynamics we're talking about isn't it that can actually impact on how someone like you said it for you, it was survival and trying to make sure that you're not the other who is less dominant. What about emotional issues? How are we doing? By the way, how are you feeling? Is everything okay, because you you've said a lot of things. How are you feeling?

Sophia: I feel …I feel good, I think. It's interesting reflecting back. On like your school experiences and like how you may have treated people badly [laugh]

Laughed to minimise the negative perception she felt.

Researcher: OK. So, emotionally, when you look back on this, I mean, at that time when you tease this girl, how did that make you feel? And now how is that making you feel? Or even when she revealed it to you? I mean, there was some sort of other emotions that you mentioned.

Sophia: I think at the time of teasing you feel like you're cool. Okay, so, you feel kind of good because you have your cheerleaders? That's cheering you….

Bullying felt 'cool' for her and personally and socially rewarding

Researcher: Of course, the bystanders, yeah.

Sophia: You're getting the encouragement. From the friends and you're like, yeah so in the moment it feels good, it feels like yeah, I'm so cool. And then looking back, I was actually so not cool.

Upon reflection later, she realised it was not that cool.

Researcher: Is that how you felt then? I'm not so cool, but on the outside you portrayed a different persona. Is that what you mean?

Sohia: And I really believed it I think I believe those people. Until recently, not, actually, because I continued staying in popular groups, I continued being like part of this exclusive group and I thought that was what meant that you were cool, but actually it. doesn't mean that at all and. So, reflecting back, I think I was just you know a child she had just, you know, recently moved to the UK like couple of a few years before she had just moved to the UK. Just trying to find her, her space. She was trying to not get bullied. In doing that, she cussed someone who used to be her friend.

Researcher: Yeah, and how did she feel, you know? What sort of emotions came out for you at that time? What would you say because at the time that you were teasing, to you, it was just a survival. You didn't care how she felt. So, at the time of teasing, how were you feeling about yourself?

Sophia: I wouldn't say happy. At the time of teasing, I was ignorant to her experience.

Researcher: Okay

Sophia: How did I feel? I felt maybe dominant. I felt like I was in power. And I felt. Like my friends were supporting me. I felt in a weird way. I feel loved and supported.

Researcher: Can I just ask you about that further? Did you say you felt good bullying? Because, if your friends see you as doing that, they will be cheering you on, and that make you feel good?

Sophia: Looking back, I feel sad that I did this. I feel ashamed. I feel guilty. And I hope that my children won't do the same.

Feeling socially elevated and accepted, which felt 'cool'.

Perceived herself and her role in a positive light due to friends' encouragement.

Finding her place to overcome insecurities without consideration for others in a new school.

Lacked understanding of bullying and was oblivious to the victim's feelings

Bullying and being supported by her friends enabled feelings of dominance, validation, and love from her friends.

Feelings of shame, sadness and guilt upon reflection later in life.

Researcher: You tell me that joining the popular girls' group doesn't mean you are the most, you know, confident in everything. So, it's personal, and that's the vulnerability we're talking about, isn't it? A lot of people who bully tend to have their own vulnerabilities. In your case, there was the move to England, which seemed very difficult for you to fit in. You can imagine, you were the Spanish-speaking girl who felt you might be excluded. You didn't want that to happen, so you preferred to be included. And by being included, you seem to exclude others.

Researcher: So, how was it like for you growing up in view of your bullying role? How did you come to make sense of what bullying meant? Did you ever experience things that felt like it was okay to tease others?

Sophia: Yeah, because of my family…teasing is the whole there's, like, the creme de la creme so, yeah, I experienced teasing in my family, which was normalised….And yeah, I remember thinking that I remember speaking to my cousin how to be…. We spoke about this as well. We were saying how, like the teasing in the family wasn't helpful, actually as a child because they would tease you about things that you would be insecure about like the way you look or I don't know. Anything like boys, they will just tease you and so it wasn't nice actually to receive the teasing. So, I think some, some of these experiences were normalised in my family and even actually within my group of friends, it was normalised. And and so…. So I think that's why I thought it was OK.

Teasing was normalised in her family and friendship groups; hence, it was perceived as unharmful.

It was neither nice nor helpful to be at the receiving end of family teasing.

Personal and family experiences normalised her bullying role and self-perception.

Appendix K- Participants information

The following is the context of each participant (names and places are all pseudonyms) during their childhood and their circumstances at the time of the interview, as narrated to me to complement the demographics information in Table 2:

Anna (white British): Raised in Northern England, Anna's childhood was marked by a stark contrast between her family's newly gained middle-class status and the emotional and physical abuse she endured. Her mother made significant efforts to maintain their middle-class image, avoiding fast food, owning many books, and playing an instrument at church. Despite their respected community standing due to their involvement in local school and church activities, Anna and her brother lived in constant fear. Their father was a high-functioning alcoholic, and their mother suffered from bipolar disorder, leading to neglect and frequent violence.

Anna tried to present herself well to mask the turmoil at home, once reading in the garage so the ambulance staff would see her during her mother's mental health crises. She blamed herself for her mother's outbursts and her father's beatings. Anna and her brother were placed in foster care multiple times due to physical abuse, but always returned home, normalising the abuse for her. Anna frequently lied about her family, which she attributes to shame even during university. She bullied other children, unable to relate to others, which sometimes led to physical assaults against her by her peers who felt she was condescending. Anna reported her academic excellence caused teachers and lecturers to overlook her bullying, which helped her gain admission to a prestigious university (pseudonym Oxford) and she is now a lecturer.

As an adult, Anna's bullying continued in relationships, leading her to seek therapy to confront her past and improve her ability to form personal connections. She participated in this study to share her story, as she still struggles to discuss her early experiences without

breaking down emotionally. Anna aims to aid in developing early interventions for similarly affected children. She is reportedly now married to a supportive husband and has a young son, whom she is determined to protect from experiencing similar hardships.

Meera (British Asian): Meera grew up with her sister and both parents on a council estate in Northern England. She was the daughter of Asian migrants. She experienced abuse, racism, and bullying, both at home and within her community, contributing to a sense of helplessness and a lack of voice. Additionally, Meera also struggled with undiagnosed ADHD in childhood, which hindered her school performance. Despite these challenges, including difficulty in maintaining relationships and employment, Meera expresses regret for her actions and seeks to understand and reconcile her past through her participation in this study

Michael (British African): Michael's childhood in London was marked by neglect, poverty, and alcoholism within a West African immigrant family. His father was an alcoholic who did not have the ability to care for the family; hence, his mother worked most of the time and therefore was unavailable. Left frequently as the oldest with his siblings unsupervised due to his parents' work, Michael felt sad, bitter, abandoned and let down by his parents and the system. Michael was later involved in drugs in his school years which led to poor academic performance and nearly being medically sectioned due to drug induced psychotic symptoms. Michael has since renounced drugs and employed at a launderette. Through this study, he aimed to highlight children’s vulnerabilities from similar backgrounds and to make sense of them for research understanding.

Rachel (British-Mixed White and Black African): Rachel, born and raised in Wales to a white British and African parents, experienced an unstable upbringing and witnessed domestic violence of her parents. At the time of the interview, she had just completed her first degree and was searching for a job. At a younger age, her mother fled from her abusive

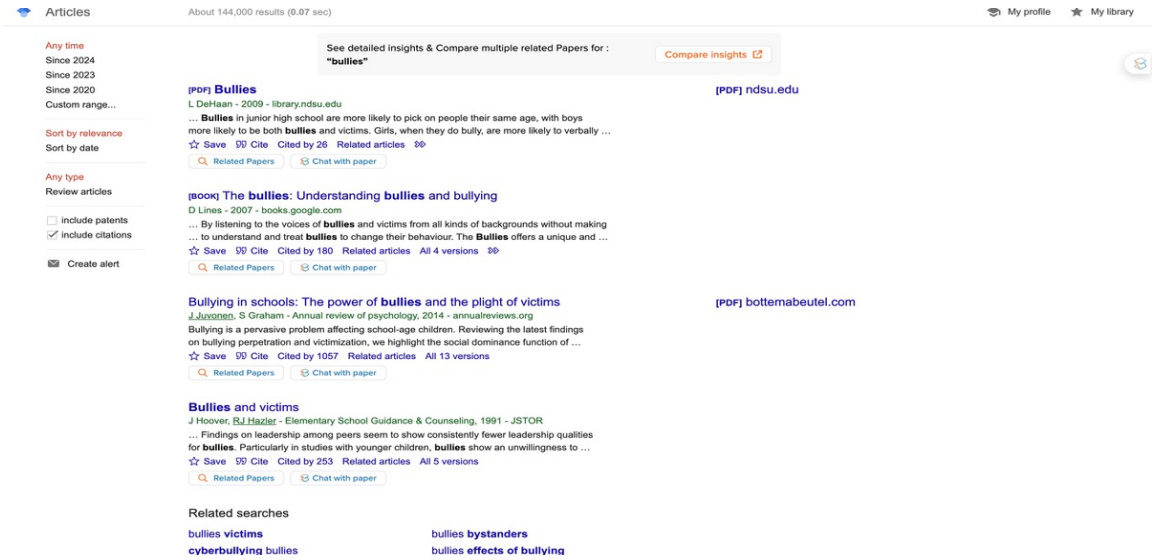
father, leaving Rachel and her siblings in a verbally abusive household where her father frequently drank and gambled. Rachel blames her mother for abandoning her, especially as she was forced to start working early to support her father and siblings. She attributes her own bullying behaviour to her experiences with domestic violence and abuse. Rachel now advocates for children's to be taught strategies to defend against bullying and joined this study to share her experiences and contribute to broader understanding and intervention efforts.

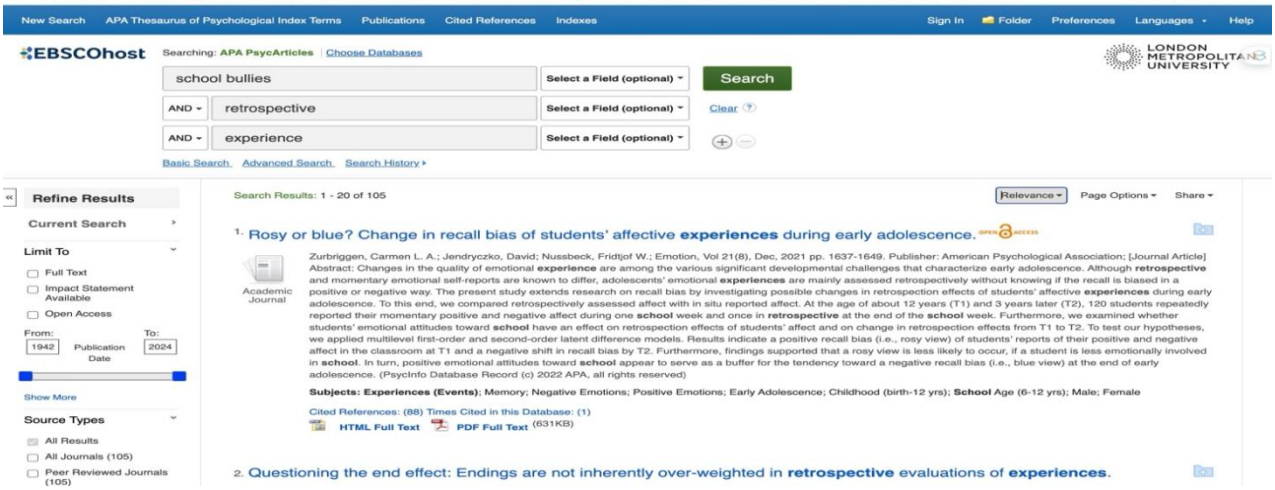
Sophia (Spanish, British and African): Raised in London by Spanish African immigrant parents, Sophia attended girls' schools for her primary and secondary education. Her mother, a busy businesswoman, is separated from her father, both parents lead a busy lifestyle. Despite coming from an upper-middle-class background, Sophia felt self-conscious early on, exacerbated by family jokes about others' insecurities. She recognises that this teasing culture negatively impacted her self-confidence and positively allowed her to grow a *"thicker skin".* Sophia reported she became involved in bullying as a pre-emptive defence against domination, not initially recognising her actions as bullying. Reflecting on her past, she later acknowledges her role as a perpetrator. Motivated by her participation in this study, she aims to promote self-awareness among children specially making jokes at the expense of others, thereby, aspiring to create a better environment for her future children. Sophia is educated to graduate level and lives with her partner. She took part in the research to make sense of her role and to alleviate her guilt about her experiences regarding bullying.

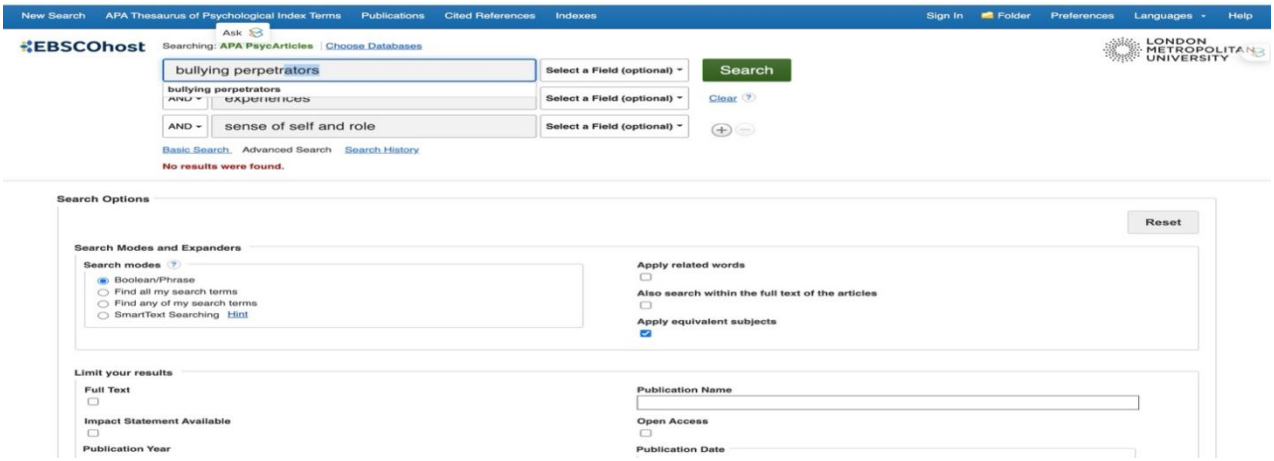
Joanna (British-Black African): Joanna was born and raised in London, where she attended school. She dropped out school earlier on and was unemployed at the time of the interview. Growing up in an African immigrant family, she witnessed domestic violence and verbal abuse against her mother, shaping her perception that men were stronger and experienced less pain than women. She disliked her mother's weakness for not standing up to

her father. Hence, Joanna grew up wanting to be a man to avoid being seen as weak and resorted to bullying as a form of self-protection. She took part in the study because of her guilt including finding God and want to help research that would alleviate the suffering of all children.

Appendix L: Examples of Literature Search Results



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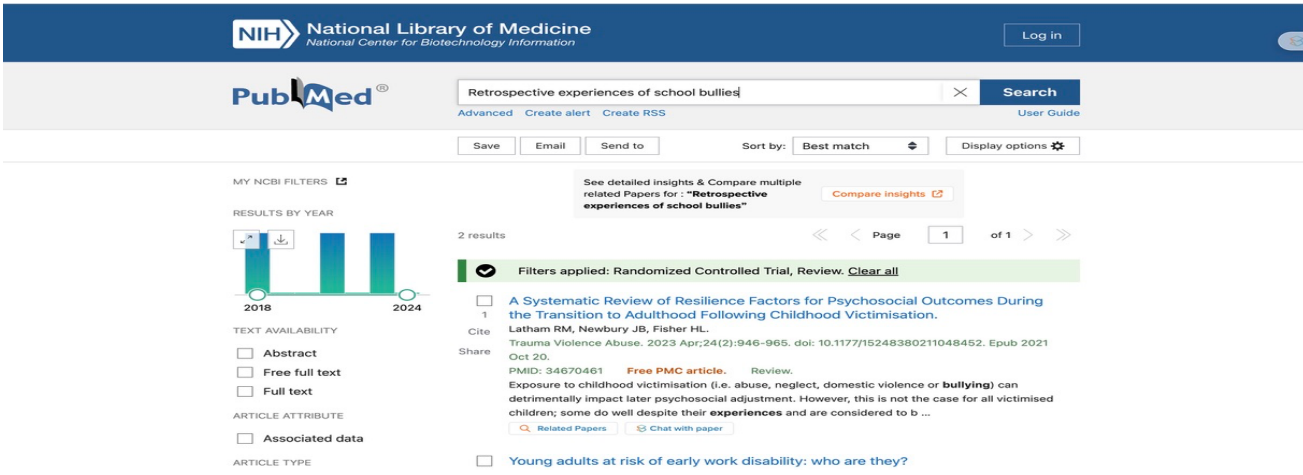
EBSCOhost
Searching: APA PsycArticles | Choose Databases
LONDON METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY
bullying perpetrators
Select a Field (optional)
Search
bullying perpetrators
experiences
Clear
AND
sense of self and role
Basic Search
Advanced Search
Search History
No results were found.
Search Options
Reset
Search Modes and Expanders
Search modes
Boolean/Phrase
Find all my search terms
Find any of my search terms
SmartText Searching
Hint
Apply related words
Also search within the full text of the articles
Apply equivalent subjects
Limit your results
Full Text
Publication Name
Impact Statement Available
Open Access
Publication Year
Publication Date


NIH National Library of Medicine
National Center for Biotechnology Information
Log in
PubMed
Retrospective experiences of school bullies
Search
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Create RSS
User Guide
Save
Email
Send to
Sort by: Best match
Display options
MY NCBI FILTERS
RESULTS BY YEAR
2018
2024
TEXT AVAILABILITY
Abstract
Free full text
Full text
ARTICLE ATTRIBUTE
Associated data
ARTICLE TYPE
See detailed insights & Compare multiple related Papers for : "Retrospective experiences of school bullies"
Compare insights
2 results
Page 1 of 1
Filters applied: Randomized Controlled Trial, Review. Clear all
A Systematic Review of Resilience Factors for Psychosocial Outcomes During the Transition to Adulthood Following Childhood Victimisation.
Latham RM, Newbury JB, Fisher HL.
Trauma Violence Abuse. 2023 Apr;24(2):946-965. doi: 10.1177/15248380211048452. Epub 2021 Oct 20.
PMID: 34670461 Free PMC article. Review.
Exposure to childhood victimisation (i.e. abuse, neglect, domestic violence or bullying) can detrimentally impact later psychosocial adjustment. However, this is not the case for all victimised children; some do well despite their experiences and are considered to b ...
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