

## The Psychological Impact of Students as Witnesses to Bullying in Islamic Boarding Schools: A Phenomenological Study

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** bullying is a problem that never ages in school. Bullying continues to occur in schools. Currently, only the victims and perpetrators are being looked at a lot regarding the psychological impact they face. However, witnesses to bullying also experienced negative impacts due to the bullying, including for students at Islamic boarding schools who faced their friends 24 hours a day.

**Purpose:** this study aims to explore the psychological impact of bullying witnesses on students in Islamic boarding schools.

**Methods:** This research is a qualitative study with a phenomenological approach. The number of participants was five students who were selected using snowball sampling, with the criteria of being students who had witnessed bullying at an Islamic boarding school. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and field notes. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on Colaizzi's method. The process involved extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, and validating the findings with participants to ensure credibility.

**Results:** this study produced 5 themes, namely the emotional reaction of bullying witnesses, feelings of guilt, sense of responsibility, coping mechanisms, and prevention strategies.

**Conclusion:** bullying has a psychological impact on students, so it is necessary to intervene efforts that must be given so that they do not fall to further stages.

**Keywords:** bullying, psychological impact, school, witness

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**BACKGROUND**

Bullying is a case that is still a problem in the school world. The prevalence of bullying in developed countries has a high percentage where victims and perpetrators of bullying are found at 41.0% and 31.7%, respectively, among school students (Kamal et al., 2023). Other countries are also experiencing the same thing, 1 in 5 or about 20% of students in the United States have experienced bullying (PACER'S National Bullying Prevention Center, 2020). Indonesia is also included in the top five categories in bullying cases, which is 41% of all students at the age of 15 who experience bullying at school (PISA, 2019). According to the results of the consultation of the Indonesian National Commission for Child Protection (KPAI), in a period of 9 years, from 2011 to 2019, there were 2,473 reports of bullying incidents in the world of education. Cases of violence continue to rise until in 2023 there are 810 cases of violence in schools (Wiryo & Santosa, 2023). Until now, there is still a lot of news related to bullying that occurs in schools that has a physical and psychological impact.

Bullying has a bad impact on a person's physical and mental health. The physical impact on the victim of bullying is manifested in the form of kicks, punches, pushes, and psychological weakening of feelings of insecurity, fear of dating and difficulty concentrating (Sharp et al., 2019). Bullying can make adolescents feel sad, angry, inferior and self-loathing, which may eventually lead to depression, reduced self-esteem, and even suicide (Zakiyah et al., 2017). The impact caused by bullying has a great impact on the victim so that it can threaten the victim's life, even the victim can become a perpetrator in the future so that the chain of bullying continues. Therefore, appropriate and sustainable handling is needed to overcome the problem of bullying in schools.

Handling bullying should not only focus on victims and perpetrators but also focus on witnesses, namely those who see acts of bullying. Pozzoli & Gini (2012) indicate the important role of bullying witnesses. In fact, 85% of perpetrators begin attacking victims in situations and places where their peers are present. Witnesses to bullying are part of the school community, so the actions of witnesses are also a major focus in bullying prevention (Wilson-Simmons, Dash, Tehranifar, O'Donnell, & Stueve., 2006).

Witnesses increase the intensity of bullying because they are considered to support the bully (Halimah, 2015). Witnesses who were present at the bullying incident acted as an audience that supported the perpetrator (Duan et al., 2020a). Based on the results of the research, witnesses who finally help victims of bullying are only a small part. Students who are active in stopping bullying and helping victims (defender) are no more than 20%, while about 30% choose to do nothing (outsider), 30% choose to become reinforcers and 20% become assistants. The results of the study stated that the presence of witnesses or observers in bullying will make the perpetrator more powerful because they are proud and feel great and feared by other students (Suaib, 2021). So it can be concluded that the more the perpetrator is seen and others do not help, the bullying will continue to occur.

Bullying is a rampant problem that affects students in a variety of educational settings, including Islamic boarding schools. (Pfeiffer & Pinquart, 2014; Cross, Lester & Mandel, 2015; Edling & Francia, 2017). In Islamic boarding schools, bullying can occur in various forms, including physical, verbal, and exclusionary behavior (Nugroho et al., 2020). Data analysis shows that 59% of students in Islamic boarding schools experience bullying (Nugroho & Ainyfardhana, 2018). Senior-junior relationships are an important factor in causing violence in Islamic boarding schools, where seniors who are perpetrators of bullying often become victims of bullying from previous seniors (Nuriana, 2015). Recently, there has also been bullying that resulted in the death of a student at the Islamic boarding school.

because he was tortured by seniors. It can be confirmed that the incident is observed by a few people, but it does not help to prevent the bullying from happening. The current decline in the pesantren is quite significant because the students are together for 24 hours in the dormitory.

## **OBJECTIVE**

Based on this phenomenon, the researcher wants to find out how the psychological impact of students as witnesses to bullying in Islamic boarding schools. The specific objectives of this study are as follows to identify the responses of students when witnessing bullying in Islamic boarding schools. It also seeks to explore the various factors that influence these responses, providing insight into what shapes their reactions in such situations. Furthermore, the study investigates the efforts made by students to address or prevent bullying when they find themselves as witnesses to such incidents.

## **METHODS**

The approach that will be used in this qualitative research is descriptive phenomenology. This research explores, analyzes and describes the phenomenon directly and in-depth related to the psychological impact of students being witnesses to bullying in Islamic boarding schools. The participants in this study are students in Islamic boarding schools. The sampling technique used is *Snow Ball Sampling*. Participants are obtained from the person in charge of student affairs of the pesantren, who will later notify students who have been witnesses to bullying. The next participant is from the information from the first participant, the participants in this study are 5 students. The number of participants was limited to five because data saturation was achieved—meaning that additional interviews no longer yielded new insights or themes. The participants were 5 (five) students who were male. The age of the participants was in the age range of 14-16 years, all of which were in the age range of recombinant. There are 2 participants who are currently still in the 2nd grade of junior high school, 2 people who are in the 3rd grade of junior high school and 1 person who is in the 1st grade of high school. Based on the origin, 4 participants came from Pekanbaru and 1 person came from Banten.

This research was carried out in one of the Islamic boarding schools in the city of Pekanbaru. The data collection method used to explore the psychological impact of students as witnesses of bullying in this study is an in-depth interview method. The researcher is an instrument in this study using interview guidelines. The content of the interview guidelines is in the form of a guide to questions that are prepared based on the purpose of the research, including the student's response, factors that affect the response, the impact on themselves, the efforts made and expectations for future development. During the interview process, the researcher asked questions following the answers submitted by the participants, but still based on the interview guidelines. The data collection process uses a circular method, which is an interview process conducted on the next participant after the researcher completes the data analysis stage on one previous participant. Therefore, there are several additional questions in the interview guidelines given to subsequent participants based on the deepening of previous participants. The researcher also used a recording device or recorder as a medium to record the results of interviews with participants. This study uses the Colaizzi method as a data analysis method. Data analysis starts from carefully reading the transcript, identifying the main themes, compiling essential descriptions, and reflecting on the meaning of the subject's experience holistically. To ensure the validity of the qualitative data, the researcher implemented several strategies such as member checking, where participants were given the opportunity to review and confirm the accuracy of the interpretations. Triangulation was also applied by comparing data across different participants to identify consistent patterns. Additionally, the researcher

maintained an audit trail, documenting the research process thoroughly, and engaged in peer debriefing to validate findings through discussions with academic peers. These steps were taken to enhance the credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of the study.

For ethical consideration, this research has passed the stage of research ethics test at the Health Research Ethics Commission (KPEK) STikes Payung Negeri Pekanbaru with No.125/IKES PN/KEPK/I/2025.

## RESULTS

This research resulted in several themes. The response of students when they were witnesses to bullying was answered through several themes. The following is a description for each theme.

### Theme 1 : Emotional Reaction of Bullying Witnesses

Theme 1, namely the emotional reaction of bullying witnesses, consists of 2 sub-themes, namely 1) Emotional Response and 2) Fear. Each sub-theme consists of several categories. The first sub-theme is the emotional response, consisting of 2 categories, namely 1) Emotions and 2) Denial. Meanwhile, from the second sub-theme, Fear, consists of 2 categories, namely 1) fear of being affected and 2) fear of being accused.

The first sub-theme is emotional response with the category of emotion and denial, supported by the following statement:

*"...there is more anger..."* (P1)

Participant 1 expressed anger at the bullying incident he saw

*"...I have a thought, I'm afraid that I will be mistaken for a spy for this person if there is an Ustadz ..."* (P2)

Participant 2 revealed her emotional response when she saw bullying at the pesantren.

*"... I can't wait to see it..."* (P5)

Participant 5 also expressed his emotional reaction to his testimony of seeing bullying at the pesantren

Meanwhile, in the second sub-theme, namely fear which consists of 2 categories, namely fear of being affected and fear of being accused, supported by the following statement:

*"F is afraid to be taken to the older brother's class"* (P2)

The second participant expressed fear related to the fear of being taken to a senior student because of seeing bullying.

*"... I'm afraid to look at him because I might get hit. "* (P5)

Meanwhile, the next participant felt scared because he would be beaten back by the bully.

*"I don't know anything, we just entered the accusation of being a mirror that is bullying meaningfully"* (P2)

The participant mentioned the fear of being accused of being a spy to complain

*"... afraid of being accused later, ma'am...."* (P4)

Other participants also stated that they were afraid of being accused of bullying at the pesantren.

Based on the explanation above, here is a scheme that explains theme 1 and its sub-theme derivatives and categories

### Theme 2 : Feeling Guilty

The second theme in this first specific purpose answers from several categories. The first category is (1) feeling sorry, (2) feeling guilty, (3) dilemma, (4) feeling of regret and the fifth (5) helplessness. The following are statements that support the themes and categories that appear as follows:

Here is a statement in support of category 1 feeling sorry:

*"... sorry lo bua nak that..."* (P5)

Then the statements in favor of the second category of guilt are as follows:

*"But R has apologized, sorry, I can't help, that's it"* (P4)

Then added again with the statement,

*"I feel guilty for letting my friend be ridiculed"* (P2)

The above statement stated that the witness felt guilty about the victim of bullying.

Next is a statement of support for the third category, namely the dilemma.

*"...If you want to help with that, you won't be able to..."* (P4)

Then it was added again with the following statement.

*"I want to help you..."* (P1)

Next is the statement for the fourth category, which is feelings of regret.

*"...also regret why you didn't get help"* (P4)

The last is a category related to helplessness. Here is the statement.

*"We don't want to be bullied, if we don't have a position, we will be oppressed"* (P1)

Then add it again with the question below

*"Because Radit is still a junior in the class too..."* (P5)

Based on the explanation above, the following is a scheme, which explains related to the second theme along with its categories as follows:

### **Theme 3 : Sense of Responsibility**

The theme of a sense of responsibility consists of several categories, namely (1) solving problems and (2) helping victims. The following are statements that strengthen each of the categories above.

The statement for the first category of solving the problem is as follows:

*"... When I'm in a higher grade, I will punish those kids who bully "* (P4)

Next is a statement for the category of helping victims of bullying

*"... I help those whose actions are not natural, just dare to be the same as those who are not strong"* (P3)

### **Theme 4 : Coping Mechanism**

The theme of coping mechanism flavor consists of Maladaptive sub-theme and Adaptive sub-theme. The first subtheme, Maladaptive is made up of several categories, namely (1) avoidance and (2) lying. Meanwhile, the adaptive sub-theme consists of (1) Trying to Fight and (2) Desire to help.

The following is a statement that strengthens the first sub-theme of adaptive malls with the first category, namely avoidance.

The statement for the first category of avoidance is as follows:

*"...Just go, later you will be a witness..."* (P2)

Then it is added with the following statement:

*"... shocked, I will go back ma'am., far from there"* (P5)

Next is a statement for the lying category

*"... When asked, Faraz said that it didn't look bang, that's it, ma'am"* (P2)

The second sub-theme is adaptive. Here are the statements in favor of the category of trying to fight and the desire to help.

The statement for the category of trying to fight is as follows:

*"... just fight it..."* (P4)

Then here is a statement for the category of wanting to help

*" I only help those who are being treated disrespectfully "* (P3)

### **Theme 5 : Bullying Prevention Strategies**

Bullying prevention strategy. This theme consists of three categories, namely (1) advising, (2) resisting and (3) desired expectations.

The following are the supporters for the first category, namely advising:

" *Just a lecture. Counseled.* (P1)

Furthermore, the following statement to support the category of fighting, namely:

"*But if you have got the position, Rando can manage it. Don't do this, don't do this. Those who are found out later, Rando will act*" (P4)

And supported again by the following statement

" *I want to disturb those who cry.*(P1)

**Table 1.** Theme of Psychological Impact Of Students As Witnesses

Specific Objective	Theme	Sub-theme	Category	Keywords/Phrases
<b>1. To identify student responses when witnessing bullying in a boarding school</b>	Emotional reaction of bullying witness	Emotional response	Emotion	more angry, sad, just felt normal, also felt anxious, felt uncomfortable, my heart was pounding, nervous, panicked, anxious, disappointed
		Denial	Denial	"I couldn't accept it, Ma'am", "How can there be bullying in a pesantren?", "For the bully it's normal, for the victim it's too much"
		Fear of consequences	Fear	"Faraz was afraid he might be taken to the seniors", "Afraid Radho might get affected too", "Afraid of getting hit"
		Fear of being accused	Fear	"Afraid of being accused", "We were new and got accused of being spies", "Afraid they'd think I was a spy"
		Feeling sorry	Guilt	"I felt sorry, Sis", "Poor kid, Ma'am"
		Feeling guilty	Guilt	"Radho already apologized, sorry for not helping", "I felt guilty for letting my friend be mocked"
		Dilemma	Guilt	"Wanted to help, but didn't", "Really wanted to help"
		Regret	Guilt	"Regretted not helping", "Still regret it when I



Specific Objective	Theme	Sub-theme	Category	Keywords/Phrases
<b>2. To identify factors influencing witness responses to bullying</b>		Helplessness	Guilt	think about it", "Radho already apologized, sorry for not helping" "Radit is a junior too", "If we don't have a position, we'll get oppressed"
		Problem-solving	Responsibility	"If I get a position, I'll stop this", "When I'm a senior, I'll punish them"
	Coping mechanism	Helping victims	Responsibility	"I help those who were mistreated", "If you're brave, don't pick on the weak"
		Maladaptive: Avoidance	Coping	"I ran away", "Left immediately", "Left the location", "Ran far away", "Prayed not to be involved"
		Maladaptive: Lying	Coping	"Faraz didn't tell the truth", "Faraz said: 'I didn't see anything'"
		Adaptive: Resisting	Coping	"Just fight back", "If I get a position, I'll handle it", "When I'm a senior, I'll punish them"
		Adaptive: Helping	Coping	"I help those who were mistreated", "Don't pick on the weak"
	<b>3. To identify efforts made by witnesses to prevent bullying</b>	Advising	Strategy	"Just gave a lecture", "Advised the bully"
		Fighting back	Strategy	"Wanted to mess with the one who made them cry", "Just fight back", "If I get a position, I'll handle it"

## **DISCUSSION**

### **1. Theme 1 : Emotional Reaction of Bullying Witnesses**

The first theme in the results of this study is the response of bullying witnesses in Islamic boarding schools with the subtheme of emotional and fear responses. In the first sub-theme, there is a category of emotional response and denial. Bullying responses in general will have a negative psychological impact on the victim, perpetrator or witness of bullying (Eyuboglu et al., 2021).

In accordance with the sub-theme of emotional response in this study where witnesses have a psychological response when seeing bullying incidents (Hamburger et al., 2011) Where the response is in the form of emotional reactions such as anger, sadness, disappointment and others that will have an impact. This impact is a negative impact for bullying witnesses (Bauman et al., 2020) People who witness bullying can experience stress, guilt, and feelings of insecurity, and can influence their behavior in similar situations in the future (Oktaviany & Ramadan, 2023) They may become more anxious and more cautious in interacting with others, or they may become more passive and unwilling to engage in similar situations. The form of insecurity expressed by the participants was related to their fear of being accused as a perpetrator and the fear of being accused of being the same as the victim. The results of the research show that anger, fear and anxiety are a form of emotional reaction of a bullying witness (Nielsen et al., 2024) It can be concluded that bullying witnesses will experience an emotional response that has a negative impact.

Next is the feeling of denial felt by the witness. This study found that this denial was found in statements such as feeling unacceptable and feeling untrustworthy if bullying existed in the school. The results of the study stated that this unacceptable squeeze often occurs in bullying incidents that cause trauma (Duan et al., 2020b) However, in this study, participants did not mention in detail the distrust. The distrust in this study is only in the form of not accepting and not accepting bullying. The incidence of denial has not been found in many research results in which participants are witnesses. So that the researcher only discusses in general terms both for perpetrators, victims and witnesses of bullying.

The second sub-theme in this first theme is fear. Where this fear consists of two categories, namely the fear of being affected and the fear of being accused. Fear is a common response that occurs in bullying (Siligato et al., 2024) The results of the study are similar to the results of this study. Where the fear felt by a bullying witness is more towards the fear of being made the next victim because he has seen the bullying incident in a flashy (Rosander & Nielsen, 2021) Furthermore, it was also found that it turned out that fear was an unwanted experience for bullying witnesses.

In some studies, the psychological impact of bystander bullying in schools has been found to have a relationship with the level of care and the level of participation of people in similar situations. People who are more concerned and more active in similar situations tend to experience milder psychological impacts, while people who are more passive and unwilling to get involved tend to experience heavier psychological impacts.

### **2. Theme 2 : Feeling Guilty**

The next theme is Guilt. Guilt is one of the themes found in the results of this study. This feeling of guilt consists of several categories, namely compassion, guilt, dilemma, regret, and helplessness. Feelings of guilt based on the results of research are feelings that are often found in bullying witnesses (Shorenstein, 2007) The results of the study show that people who experience guilt when seeing bullying are a group of weak people (Nocentini et al., 2020) However, in this study, there are no direct characteristics about the individual who



will eventually see that this student feels guilty because he is a weak character or other factors.

Feeling guilty is supported by research that states that feelings of pity and regret are felt by witnesses and victims of bullying (Forsberg et al., 2014) Then there is guilt, dilemma, and helplessness caused by the pressure of what they see (Steinvik et al., 2023) Then witnesses often feel regret for not helping their friend who was bullied (Wang, 2020) This means that it can be concluded that the students who are respondents in this study are stressed and unable to help so that they cause feelings of guilt which are characterized by dilemmas, feeling sorry and helpless.

### **3. Theme 3 : Sense of Responsibility**

A sense of responsibility is the next theme in this study. This theme consists of categories of solving problems and helping victims. The sense of responsibility in this case is the sense carried out by a witness to help the victim of bullying in front of him (Coyne et al., 2019) The results of the study show that the average witness of bullying has less responsibility, because they do not want to help their friends who are experiencing bullying (Knauf et al., 2018) However, the results of this study obtained a statement stating that there are children who really want to help their friends who are victims of bullying. Especially as a sense of responsibility, the child wants to help other students at the pesantren who are being bullied by their own friends.

Furthermore, the sense of responsibility in this research is the desire to solve the bullying problem. The desire to solve problems is a characteristic for bullying witnesses who are defenders or willing to fight the bullies (Yang & Kim, 2017) This explanation is in accordance with the results of this study where students in Islamic boarding schools are eager to solve this bullying problem, but if they later become seniors. This means that there is a sense of responsibility from pesantren students to solve the problem of bullying at their school.

### **4. Theme 4 : Coping Mechanism**

Then there is the theme of the coping mechanism. The coping mechanism in bullying witnesses in this study consists of adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms. The adaptive coping mechanism in this study is the attempt to resist and the desire to help. A witness in a bullying incident will choose how they will act, whether they are against, care or side with the bully (Kubiszewski et al., 2019) In this case, adaptive coping is found in this research, namely trying to resist and the desire to help.

This study also shows that there is a maladaptive coping mechanism in bullying witnesses. The maladaptive coping mechanisms found in this study are avoidance and lying. Avoidance is the most common activity in a witness to bullying (Patrick et al., 2019) The reason they avoid and lie is so that they can survive and not become the next victim (Mauduy et al., 2021). This study has the same statement as existing studies, where witnesses will avoid or lie for fear of being victimized.

### **5. Theme 5 : Bullying Prevention Strategies**

This study found the theme of bullying prevention strategies. The prevention strategy consists of two categories, namely advising and resisting. Advising bullying perpetrators is one of the strategies that can be used to stop bullying (Paull et al., 2012) The results of this study show that the student is the one who will advise the bullying perpetrator. However, the results of the study show that the one who must advise the bully perpetrator is the parent or teacher (Grassetti et al., 2018).

Meanwhile, countermeasures are also one of the strategies to prevent bullying. The results of the study show that the action taken by witnesses to prevent bullying is to fight

(Allison & Bussey, 2016) The fight referred to in this study is to defend the victim so that he does not reach more action, far. However, this study did not explore what forms of countermeasures intended by witnesses.

## CONCLUSION

The response of students when they became witnesses to bullying consisted of two themes, namely the emotional reaction of the bullying witness and the feeling of guilt. Bullying emotional responses consist of sub-themes of emotional responses and fears. Each has categories for emotional responses, namely emotion and denial. Meanwhile, the fear subtheme consists of the category of fear to be accused and fear of being affected. The second theme is the feeling of guilt from the categories of feeling sorry, feeling guilty, dilemma, feeling sorry and helpless. Factors that affect the response of bullying witnesses in Islamic boarding schools are a sense of responsibility and coping mechanisms. A sense of responsibility consists of a category of solving problems and helping victims of bullying. Meanwhile, the coping mechanism consists of adaptive mall subthemes with categories of avoidance and lying. Then the adaptive subtheme for the category of trying to resist and the desire to help Efforts made to prevent bullying in pesantren are prevention strategies. This prevention strategy consists of the category of advising and fighting the bully itself.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding this manuscript.

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