The Witness Experiences of Bullying in High School Students: A Qualitative Study

Lise Öğrencilerinin Zorbalığa Tanıklık Yaşantıları: Nitel Bir Araştırma

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ABSTRACT

Bullying is a common problem in today's schools. Bullying affects not only victims and bullies but also the other students who witness the bullying. The purpose of this research is to examine the behaviors shown by high school students who have witnessed bullying and the processes that have led them to these behaviors. By with this purpose, the research benefits from grounded theory design. In-depth interviews have been performed with 36 people who voluntarily participated in the research. The qualitative findings of the research show the witness experience of bullying to be a complex process. As a result of the research, firstly school counselors need to do awareness studies on bullying. Because it is seen that students' definitions of bullying are limited to physical bullying. Secondly, situational conditions seem to change the behavior of individuals who witness bullying. Therefore studies will need to be done directed at school administrators', teachers', and school psychologists' development of positive class climates and formation of anti-bullying norms, as well as at increasing peer relations. Thirdly, this study has demonstrated the importance of cognitive empathy. Cognitive empathy should be added to anti-bullying programs. Research has shown that bullying should be handled as a system that includes teachers, victims, bullies, witnesses, and parents.

ÖZET

Zorbalık, günümüz okullarında yaygın bir sorundur. Zorbalık sadece zorbaları ve mağdurları değil, aynı zamanda zorbalığa tanık olan diğer öğrencileri de etkiler. Bu araştırmanın amacı, zorbalığa tanık olan lise öğrencilerinin gösterdiği davranışları ve onları bu davranışlara yönlendiren süreçleri incelemektir. Bu amaç doğrultusunda araştırmada, gömülü teori tasarımından yararlanılmıştır. Araştırmaya gönüllü olarak katılan 36 kişi ile derinlemesine görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Araştırmanın nitel bulguları, tanıklık deneyiminin karmaşık bir süreç olduğunu göstermektedir. Araştırma sonucunda ilk olarak okul danışmanlarının zorbalık konusunda farkındalık çalışmaları yapmaları gerektiği görülmektedir. Çünkü öğrencilerin zorbalık tanımlarının fiziksel zorbalıkla sınırlı olduğu görülmektedir. İkinci olarak, durumsal koşullar zorbalığa tanık olan bireylerin davranışlarını değiştiriyor gibi görünmektedir. Bu nedenle, okul yöneticilerinin, öğretmenlerin ve okul psikologlarının olumlu sınıf ortamlarını geliştirmelerine ve zorbalık karşıtı normların oluşumuna ve ayrıca akran ilişkilerini artırmaya yönelik çalışmaların yapılması gerekecektir. Üçüncü olarak, bu çalışma bilişsel empatinin önemini ortaya koymuştur. Zorbalıkla mücadele programlarına bilişsel empati eklenmelidir. Araştırmalar, zorbalığın öğretmenleri, mağdurları, zorbaları, tanıkları ve ebeveynleri içeren bir sistem olarak ele alınması gerektiğini göstermiştir.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is the ongoing actions of a stronger person or persons toward a weaker person or persons that are repeated over time with negative consequences (Çınkır & Karaman-Kepenekçi, 2003; Olweus, 1994; Pişkin, 2002; Rigby, 2007). Moreover, bullying is seen to be more complex when examining the events, victims, bullies, and witnesses. Discussing bullying individually has misled researchers (Olweus, 2001; Perdew, 2015). Bullying does not just take place between the bully and the victim; it also affects those who witness it (Pozzoli, 2010; White, Hammonds, & Valkyrie, 2014) and at the same time is also affected by the witnesses (Rigby, 2003; Salmivalli, 1999).

In the case of bullying, witnesses can be seen able to exhibit behaviors in various ways, such as watching (Coloroso, 2011); getting away from the environment (Craig, Peppler, & Atlas, 2000; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996); doing nothing (Tapper & Boulton, 2005); belittling the victim, admiring the bully, actively encouraging the bully, and joining the bully (Rigby & Slee, 1991); laughing (Tapper & Boulton, 2005); helping the victim (Rigby & Slee, 1991); actively confronting the bully, talking with the bully, defending the victim, and talking with the victim (Coloroso, 2011); comforting the victim, informing an adult, and trying to resolve the situation (Tapper & Boulton, 2005); and consoling the victim (Salmivalli et al.,1996; Tapper & Boulton, 2005). So, bullying incidents include students who have different roles (González-Cabrera et al. 2020).

In the case of witnessing bullying, various studies have examined the reasons for changes in people's behaviors. As a result of qualitative and quantitative research, demotivating factors on the issue of helping the victim have emerged as a lack of self-confidence (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2005); fear of the bully taking revenge (Coloroso, 2005, 2011; Rigby, 2007), making the situation worse (Coloroso, 2005, 2011), and losing status (Coloroso, 2005; Forsberg et al., 2016); not knowing how to intervene (Coloroso, 2005; Lodge & Frydenberg, 2005); low empathy (Demaray, Summers, Jenkins, & Becker, 2016; Pozzoli, Gini, & Thornberg, 2017); not feeling responsible (Tornberg et al., 2012); thinking it does not concern them (Coloroso, 2005; Rigby & Johnson, 2005); thinking that helpful behaviors will not be beneficial and drawing pleasure from the sight (Rigby & Johnson, 2005); not interpreting the bullying situation as damaging and being used to bullying (Forsberg et al., 2016; Tornberg et al., 2012); being friends with the bully, hating the victim, and believing the bully (Tornberg et al., 2012); blaming the victim, not being friends with the victim (Forsberg et al., 2016; Tornberg et al., 2012); low self-efficacy on the issue of intervention (Tornberg et al., 2012; Thornberg, Wänströma, Hong, & Espelage, 2017); the victim being confident (Sokol, Bussey, & Rapee, 2015); performing verbal and relational bullying (Tapper & Boulton, 2005); uncertainties about the situation and intervention (Coloroso, 2005; Craig, Peppler, & Atlas, 2000; Oh & Hazler, 2009); not knowing the bully or the victim (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2005); and believing teachers and peers will not show support while intervening (Forsberg et al., 2016). However, victims try to seek support primarily from peers (Hamby, Weber, Grych, & Banyard, 2015; Rigby & Johnson, 2006).

When investigating supporting the victim, girls are found more than boys to exhibit attitudes that defend (Lamb, Hudson, Craig, & Pepler, 2017; Pozzoli, 2010) and support (Jenkins & Fredrick, 2017; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013) the victim. Additionally, findings have been obtained on behaviors supporting the victim related to high social self-efficacy (Gini et al., 2008; Rigby & Johnson, 2005, 2006); feeling responsible (Jenkins & Nickerson, 2017; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010, 2013); the victim being a friend (Rigby & Johnson, 2005; Tornberg et al., 2012; Thornberg, Landgren, & Wiman, 2018); the expectations of parents and teachers on the issue of helping victims (Rigby & Johnson, 2005; Rigby & Johnson, 2006); the desire to

gain adults' approval, thinking to draw the bully's attention when helping (Ross, Lund, Sabey, & Charlton, 2017); group norms on the issue of helping peers (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010, 2013; Pozzoli, Gini, & Vieno, 2012); knowing how to intervene (Jenkins & Nickerson, 2017; Rigby & Johnson, 2005); perceiving the bully as hurtful (Forsberg et al., 2016; Tornberg et al., 2012); empathy (Pozzoli, Gini, & Thornberg, 2017; Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2010); believing that bullying is wrong, intervention self-efficacy (Tornberg et al.,2012); having bad relationship with the bully (Song & On, 2018; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013); perceiving support from the teacher and friends (Eliot, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2010; Forsberg et al., 2016; Jenkins & Fredrick, 2017); the victim appearing sad (Sokol, Bussey, & Rapee, 2015); bullying that occurs in the form of physical bullying (Tapper & Boulton, 2005); moral perceptions on protecting (Forsberg et al., 2016; McLaughlin, Arnold, & Boyd, 2005); and perceiving the victim as innocent (Forsberg et al., 2016).

The scope of the literature for those helping the bully shows those who feel supporting the bully to be a safer option (McLaughlin, Arnold, & Boyd, 2005; Rigby & Johnson, 2005), being scared of the bully (Ross et al., 2017), having admiration for the attacker or feelings of hostility like thinking the victim deserves it (Rigby & Johnson, 2005), they also being a bully and having aggressive behaviors (Oh & Hazler, 2009), high moral indifference (Thornberg & Jungert, 2013), and being friends with the bully (McLaughlin, Arnold, & Boyd, 2005; Ross et al., 2017). Additionally, being male increases the likelihood of being involved in the role of supporting the bully (Ergül, 2009; McLaughlin, Arnold, & Boyd, 2005).

Doing a grounded theory design research has been felt necessary for addressing the behaviors of witness in the form of a process, focusing on high school students in the case of bullying. While studies on bully and victim behaviors are available, research performed in Turkey on students in the witness position is seldom observed (Ergül, 2009). This research intends to investigate the process high school students who have witnessed bullying experience in bullying events. High school, where peer relationships have become more important, is an important period in young people's life. The qualitative stage of the research will investigate where the participants do not focus on supporting bullies; due to their descriptions of this behavior more than others. It is thought that people's definitions of bullying are a fundamental factor in whether or not they will interfere with the bullying incidents.

METHOD

Research Model

The qualitative research method was used in this study. In this study, grounded theory, one of the qualitative research methods, was used. A model is felt necessary for portraying, explaining, and interpreting the state of the responses high school-aged children give in the case of bullying, the dynamics that lead them to behave differently, how they go through a decision-making process, and what they experience after their exhibited behavior. Therefore, the grounded theory design has been used, which indicates establishing close relationships among the data for research and producing theoretical ideas from the data (Goulding, 2001; Howitt, 2010).

Participants

Grounded theory is based on theoretical sampling, a type of purposive sampling. In theoretical sampling, the researcher includes participants in the study until reaching theoretical saturation (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). Guidance services have been consulted for choosing students who would be interviewed. Those who were selected as a witness to bullying events were identified as those who had not formed a

perception of the bully or victim in the bullying situation and who had contributed to the bullying process by remaining active or passive. Students with high observation and communication skills were directed to the researcher by guidance services. 36 high school students participated in the research, 21 girls and 15 boys.

Ethical Statement

The study was carried out within the framework of the Helsinki Declaration and all participants whose informed consents were obtained took part in this study as volunteers. Required permits were obtained to use the scales in this study. The participants were informed of the goals of the project and they were told that their identities would be kept confidential.

Data Collection Tools

Semi-structured interviews were carried out for collecting the data of the research. The researcher developed the Witness Experience Interview Form, consisting of open-ended questions. It was initially started with few questions due to the nature of the grounded theory method. Participants were asked if they know what bullying is, to begin with, and if they did not know what bullying is, the researcher defined the term. As the interviews progressed, new questions were added. Besides, short stories containing dilemmas prepared by the researcher were used.

Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews made using the data resources were voice recorded with the participants' permission. The records that were made were brought to a written state. MAXQUDA 12, a qualitative data analysis program, was used for analyzing the interviews.

In grounded theory design, data collection and analysis procedures at the same time (Creswell, 2012; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Strauss and Corbin's (1998) data analysis process of open, axial, and selective coding has been followed in this research. Besides, the researcher formed memos by noting the observations in schools from the first interview onward. The memos helped map the emerging theory and define concepts (Goulding, 2001).

Validity and Reliability

Persuasiveness is provided in qualitative research through methods such as having a long in-field process, expert confirmation, and intensive descriptions. Transferability is provided through methods like purposive sampling and for confirmability, methods like peer confirmation and performing simultaneous data collection and analysis. Consistency is realized through expert and peer confirmations and archiving the raw data (Creswel, 2013; Hays, Wood, Dahl, & Kirk-Jenkins, 2016). Observations in the research were provided by making in-depth interviews with the participants and spending time at school. Additionally, opinions were received in the data collection, analysis, and interpretation stages from experts who had performed grounded theory research. Dense descriptions and direct quotations have been benefitted from, and how the sample was selected has been explained in detail.

RESULTS

The study has focused on what kind of process high school students who have witnessed bullying situations have gone through, as well as the emergent behavior resulting from witnessing this by starting from the moment they witnessed the event. In the results of the performed analyses, the witness

experiences have been examined under the themes *Witnessing Bullying, Behavior-Directing Principle, Emotional Triggers, The Decision Process, Exhibited Behavior, and Self-Feedback.*

The participants mostly mentioned physical bullying as the most visible, together with being witness to different types of bullying. No matter what kind of bullying the students witnessed, they experienced a process that led them to support the victim, remain unresponsive, or support the bully. Values and emotions first come to the fore in this experience. *Behavior-directing principles*, which contained some basic values like the desire for due justice, were mentioned in the interviewed students' expressions. These values are seen as forming a basic foundation for their behaviors. The participants' basic behavior-directing principles and interpersonal values are based on self-protection and the value of power. Also, certain factors have been found that moved their emotions into action when first encountering the bullying situation. The perception of the victim, bully, and bullying; previous experiences; and conscience form the *emotional triggers.* The victim, bully, and bullying perceptions that took place in the sample participants' minds affected whether or not they took the bullying they witnessed seriously and the behaviors they would perform. When bullying came to be mentioned as physical bullying in the minds of the participants, they were able to intervene by taking the physical bullying they witnessed seriously. Therefore conscience comes into play as a result of this perception. The conscience can act with compassion and sympathy. *Behavior-directing principles* and *emotional triggers* form the targeted behavior in one's mind by being activated together. One student stated, "So that the victimized person does not victimize more people. Because if you do not respond once, it will continue. One day he gets infected with someone else and the next day he gets infected with another person. You will be infected last." about *behavior-directing principles.* Another student explained as *emotional triggers* "If I don't defend, I feel like I'm in trouble"

Following the targeted behavior that forms in one's mind, many factors are found that simplify or complicate turning this goal into action. One enters a decision process by considering the *simplifying* and *complicating* factors. One's decision process affects position monitoring, gains and cost predictions, and belief in the ideal intervention. The decision-making process includes taking a position, such as whether or not one justifies the victim, the victim's gender, having a negative relationship with the victim, proximity to the bully, and the strength of the bully. One student explained, "I find myself right, I will intervene, frankly, it depends on the event." "I intervene incident if I find him right in my way. Frankly, that depends on the situation." Another student stated, "I know men are more dominant. Even if the girl is wrong; I intervene…." Gains and cost predictions include some like gaining power and status, creating a good impression, and disrupted relationships. There are expressions of the students such as "…. I feel my sense of victory.", "I win the hearts and minds of the victim" "The bully can bear a grudge against you", "I can lose the friendship of the bully" Thus one can change the targeted behavior by re-deciding or can remain decided on this behavior. For example from interpersonal values, despite one with the value of maintaining social order also feeling empathy for the victim, one can remain unresponsive by taking the position of not being friends with the victim, predicting the bully will also mess with them, and ignoring the result of this behavior.

The result of targeted behavior transforming into action is observed apart *from an exhibited behavior.* Exhibited behaviors are seen in the form of supporting the victim, being unresponsive, or supporting the bully. Supporting the victim can take place in the form of direct intervention with the victim, direct intervention with the bully, intervening with both sides, or being unresponsive. Additionally, these interventions can behaviors that directly support the victim, like trying to calm the victim, or indirectly,

like telling a teacher. One student explained, "If she stays silent, then I make my voice instead." Unresponsiveness is seen in the form of distancing by being indifferent, watching, and being unwilling. One student stated, "I'm looking at what I am doing at that time." Supporting the bully can be exhibited in the form of being entertained by it, being near the bully, escalation, and reacting to those intervening. One student explained, "... they also push those who break the fight away from the classroom." One gives *self-feedback* as a result of the *exhibited behavior*. This self-feedback is realized affectively and cognitively. One student explained, "Human feels happy….. You feel comfortable when the incident stops" another student stated, "It makes me happy to stand victim side, to show the victim that he is not alone and to keep him stay strong." As a result of this whole process, the individual draws on the lesson, and this lesson especially changes one's *emotional triggers*. Thus one can develop an alternative reaction or maintain the same behavior for *future witness experiences*. As a result, the model shown in Figure 1 has been reached by establishing a link between these themes:
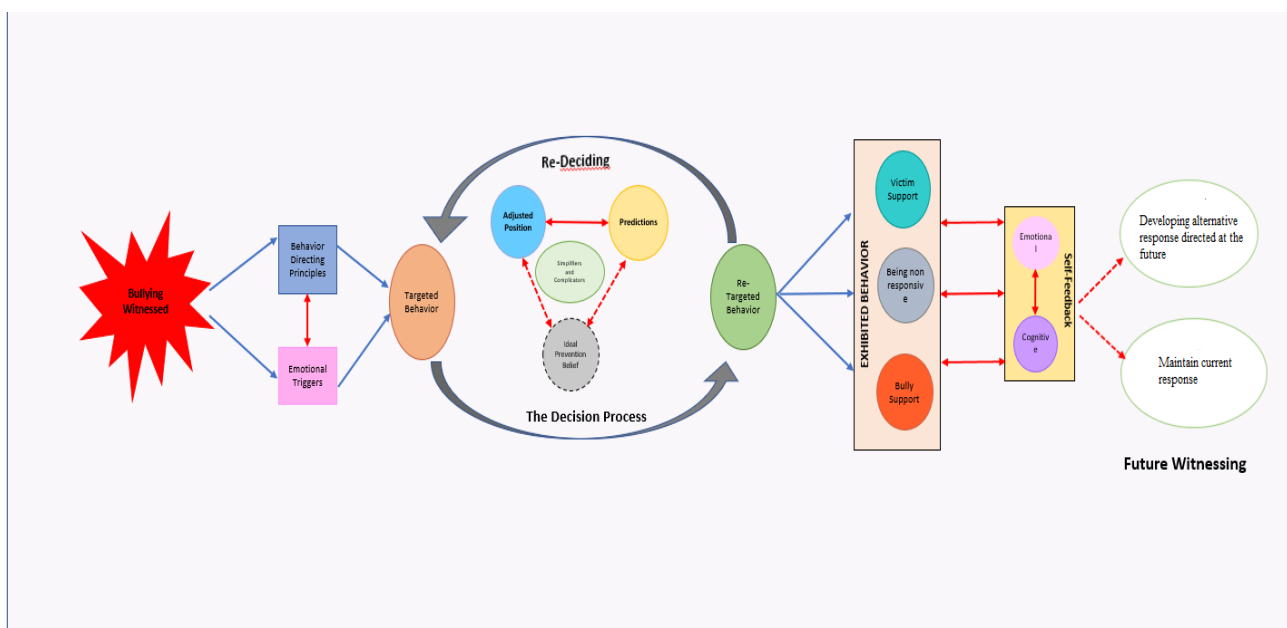

Figure 1: The witness of bullying experiences

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION & SUGGESTIONS

The model designed in the qualitative findings of the research comprehensively discusses the behaviors of the individual from the moment of becoming a witness to bullying. This developed model contributes to the literature on this subject through its different and similar aspects with previous models related to being a witness (Chen, Chang, & Cheng, 2016; Forsberg, Thornberg, & Samuelsson 2014; Thornberg et al., 2012).

When analyzing being a witness to bullying as the first finding of the study, the participants are seen first talking about physical bullying when bullying was mentioned. In this case, physical bullying is understood to be taken more seriously, as the results from other studies (Forsberg et al., 2014; Thonberg, Langren, & Wiman, 2018). Also, participants are seen mentioning behavior-directing principles and emotional triggers in the case of bullying. Just as one can appreciate the sense of justice about bullying being undeserved (e.g., Cappadocia, Pepler, Cummings, & Craig, 2012), so can one appreciate power because of the thrill created by the power bullying possesses (e.g., Elliot, 2002). Besides, research results exist on people's judgments also directed at bullies and victims in a way that overlaps with the findings of the

current research (Thonberg, 2015; Thonberg & Knutsen, 2011). Empathy has been emphasized in this study by many participants. Those defending the victim have also been found to have higher empathy levels in different studies (Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2010; Mitsopoulou & Giovazolias, 2015; Williford et al., 2016; López-Pérez et al., 2017; Pozzoli, Gini, & Thornberg, 2017; Xie & Ngai, 2020; Wang, 2020). This is because activating empathy also raises one's sense of responsibility (Paciello et al., 2013). Despite being based on the process, these findings show that empathy can also change the direction of bullying just as certain facilitating and complicating factors enable maintaining targeted behaviors. People's behaviors in the role of witness show diversity according to the surrounding possibilities (Ross et al., 2017). Also prosocial (making promises for something in return etc.) and coercive (accessing resources by deceiving etc) resource control strategies attribute to the behavior of bystander, victim, and bully (Clark et al, 2019). The findings obtained on the witness' exhibited behavior patterns appear consistent with the literature in this field (e.g., Coloroso, 2005, 2011; Craig, Peppler, & Atlas, 2000; Rigby & Slee, 1991; Tapper & Boulton, 2005).

Emphasis is seen made in the qualitative section of the research on friendship and recognition for the theme of taking a position in the decision-making process. Friendship can make intervening in bullying easier. While witness tries and defends the victim when they are friends with the victim, when they are friends with a bully, the witness can find ending that friendship to be easier, such as being able to choose to remain unresponsive (Thornberg, Landgren, & Wiman, 2018; Wachs et al, 2020). On the other hand, being friends with a bully can also bring about supporting the bully (McLaughlin, Arnold, & Boyd, 2005; Ross et al., 2017). Positive class climates (Raskauskasa et al., 2010), positive peer group status (Pronk et al, 2018), peer norms (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010) have a relationship with supporting the victim. Social exclusion of peers can be determining bystander responses (Forbes, et al.,2020).

Those who defend the victim are seen to emphasize fair justice. Witnesses find intervening difficult when they see the victim is wrong. This result appears consistent with the literature (Forsberg et al., 2016; Thornberg, Landgren, & Wiman, 2018). Belief in a just world is considered able to trigger the justification of behavior by blaming the victim for bullying (Correia & Dalbert, 2008; Correia, Kamble, & Dalbert, 2009). So, emotions can be a major predictor of bystander behavior (Trach & Hymel, 2020).

A cognitive and emotional self-feedback is experienced concerning the process a person lives in the aftermath of the witness experience. As a result of this feedback, negative or positive cognitive and emotional feedback can lay the groundwork for trying alternative behaviors in the future or for maintaining the same behavior. The literature has also shown altruistic behavior to make people feel better; to rid them of feelings of guilt (Freedman, Sears, & Carlsmith, 1998); to increase self-esteem; and to be rewarded by the victim with gratefulness, praise, honor, victory, and so forth (Piliavin, Piliavin, & Rodin, 1975). Individuals become upset when unable to intervene, feeling anger, rage, helplessness, and anxiety (Elliot, 2002). Those who remain unresponsive damage their self-confidence and self-respect in their feelings of guilt and fear (Coloroso, 2005). The findings emphasize empathy and situational conditions in the process of witnessing bullying.

In the present study, the witnesses' experiences were discussed in parallel to bullying behavior. However, the fact that the research only covers high school students constitutes a limitation for the study. Further studies can be designed to include middle school and/or younger students, where bullying is common. Considering the current study was based on qualitative data collection methods, future studies can be carried out with mixed data collection method, in which both quantitative and qualitative data methods

are used together. In this way, it would be possible to access the subjective stories and experiences of bullying witnesses. Although this empirically designed study is enlightening for practitioners, psychoeducation programs can be organized to prevent bullying with witnesses. It is thought that in addition to potential bullies and victims; anti-bullying programs including witness students, teachers, and administrators can be added to school policies by taking the obtained data from the current study into account.

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The study was carried out within the framework of the Helsinki Declaration and all participants whose informed consents were obtained took part in this study as volunteers. Required permits were obtained to use the scales in this study. The participants were informed of the goals of the project and they were told that their identities would be kept confidential.