

The Nature of Bullying in Higher Education: A Comparative Study of Students' Experiences in Ghana and Norway

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was twofold: (a) to identify the negative behaviors that constitute bullying in higher education as reported by students, and (b) to explore differences in student experiences in two markedly different national contexts. A sample of 1,189 respondents from two universities in Ghana (n = 751) and two universities in Norway (n = 438) answered the same questionnaire. Approximately 40% of the Ghanaian students and 20% of the Norwegian students responded that they had been bullied. Although less frequently observed than in Ghana, relational forms of bullying (e.g., being excluded) were more prevalent in Norway compared to other behaviors. In contrast, direct and verbal forms of bullying, such as name-calling and being taunted, were most common in Ghana. The findings provide insights into cultural and national variations with respect to negative social

Introduction

Human variation can be seen in all aspects of life, from social class, gender, physical characteristics, race, religion, sexual orientation, and so on. These differences are sometimes linked to differences in power dynamics, where some individuals or groups perceive themselves as superior to others, and those with less power are often mistreated. In the course of research and prevention efforts in both schools and other social contexts, this phenomenon has become known as “bullying.”

Although the definition of bullying varies in the literature, there is a large degree of agreement with respect to the central tenets of the phenomenon. It comprises a situation in which the target or targets find it difficult to defend themselves from a superior or stronger perpetrator who repeatedly misuses their power to harass and cause them harm (Einarsen, 2005). Bullying is not about random aggression or intimidation, arguments, disagreements, or fights between equals. However, according to Olweus (1993), in extreme cases, a single instance of intimidation and unfair treatment may have long-lasting effects on the victim. Bullying can include a range of aggressive behaviors, either directly (e.g., threats, kicking, name-calling, and hitting) or indirectly (e.g., excluding, ignoring, and spreading rumors) (Cowie & Myers, 2016).

Literature Review

Bullying research has largely focused on children and adolescents. While studies of bullying in higher education are limited, emerging evidence suggests that it is a significant challenge faced by many universities around the world (e.g., Gómez-Galán et al., 2021; Pörhölä et al., 2020). Yet, several authors have observed that bullying takes on subtler forms in higher education than it does in compulsory schools (Chun & Feagin, 2020; Hodgins & Mannix-Mcnamara, 2021; Rayner & Hoel, 1997; Rayner et al., 2002). For example, Cowie and Myers (2016) report that bullying after adolescence includes spreading spiteful, mean, and malicious rumors about personal characteristics such as religion, race, gender, or sexual orientation. Other bullying behaviors among adults include social exclusion, mocking or humiliation, unwelcome sexual advances, threatening others, stalking, and violations of privacy (Einarsen et al., 2011).

Universities are workplaces too, and many of the challenges related to bullying and harassment in such settings also occur in higher education (Smith &

Coel, 2018). University leadership, staff, and administrators may lack cultural sensitivity or make unwarranted criticisms and demeaning comments (Twale & De Luca, 2008). Heffernan and Bosetti (2021) studied a university workplace and found that bullying among university faculty manifests subtly, including derogatory comments, intentional misinterpretation of instructions, and rumor spreading. In a recent study of bullying among students at 17 universities in the United Kingdom, Harrison et al. (2020) found that bullying takes the form of active exclusion from group projects; rumor spreading or ostracism; racist, sexist, and homophobic comments; unwanted sexual remarks and groping; and efforts to degrade the status of others.

In one of the few cross-national studies in the literature, Pörhölä et al. (2020) investigated bullying in higher education among students and personnel in Argentina, Estonia, Finland, and the United States of America. The findings revealed considerable differences in the prevalence and forms of bullying across the countries, with rates of victimization varying from a low of 2% in Estonia to a high of 25% in Argentina. Students' bullying of their colleagues at least occasionally occurred, with the highest rate in Argentina (5.5%), followed by the USA (3.5%), Finland (2.3%), and Estonia (1.7%). At the same time, denigration of academic performance was identified as the most frequently reported form of bullying in all four countries.

With respect to the current study, evidence of bullying in higher education in Norway and Ghana is sparse, particularly for the latter. In Norway, Sivertsen, Nielsen, et al. (2019) collected data from over 50,000 participants, comprising 69.1% of women and 30.9% of men between 18 and 35 years of age, in a national student health survey. They found that 24% and 17% reported incidents of sexual harassment within their lifetimes and within the past year, respectively. Sexual harassment occurred in the form of suggestive sexual comments about the body, sexual expression, and unwelcome hugging, touching, and kissing, with fellow students being the most prolific perpetrators (18%–29% of the cases) and university staff being culprits in 0.6%–4.6% of the cases. Lund (2017) surveyed 3,254 university students in Norway and found that 9% of the participants experienced acts of exclusion, such as being ignored or purposefully left out of group activities.

In Ghana, Sam et al. (2019) studied cyberbullying among high school and university students and found that 83% of the 476 university students (i.e., 221 male and 255 female students) who participated in the study had received “nasty text messages” at least once in the past six months. As many as 96.4% of male and female students experience cyberbullying at least once in their studies.

To the best of our knowledge, no previous studies have focused exclusively on bullying in higher education in Ghana. However, Chan et al. (2020)

studied stalking among 371 university students (i.e., 188 females and 183 males of an average age of 24.09 years) in Ghana. They found that over half of the participants reported having experienced such behavior, most frequently in the form of death threats, vandalism to property and criminal damage, verbal abuse, and unwanted communication.

Types of Bullying

Given this varied background, bullying in higher education reflects both person-related and work-related acts (see Einarsen et al., 2009), including physical, verbal, and relational bullying (e.g., Sinkkonen et al., 2014), sexual harassment (e.g., Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Karami et al., 2020), and cyberbullying (e.g., Akbulut & Eristi, 2011; Vismara et al., 2022).

Generally, “person-related bullying” refers to acts directed at a victim. Verbal forms of bullying include audible acts like cursing, yelling, name-calling, degrading comments, unwanted communication, and other similar behaviors (see Pörhölä et al., 2020; Salmivalli et al., 2000). Physical acts may include punching or shoving, hitting, kicking, and vandalism to property (Pontzer, 2010).

Person-related bullying also takes indirect forms like social isolation (such as physically cutting off communication or excluding a person from social events), information manipulation (i.e., delaying the time a piece of information takes to get to a target) (see Escartín et al., 2011), backstabbing, rumor spreading, and gossiping (Einarsen et al., 2009; Van der Wal et al., 2003).

Some bullying is sexually oriented, which is termed “sexual harassment.” These may include unwanted sexual remarks, groping, and pulling off clothing (see Harrison et al., 2020; Pörhölä et al., 2020). Sexual harassment occurs in various ways, as outlined in our results, and may cover domains like gender harassment, sexual coercion, seductive behavior, sexual bribery, and sexual imposition or assault (see Till, 1980).

Indirect acts of bullying may target the victims through their work and are termed “work-related bullying.” These may include constant criticism or undermining of work performance, overloading a victim with work, intimidation concerning professional standing, or confusing the victim (see Rayner & Hoel, 1997). Other acts of work-related bullying are in our results.

With the advent of innovative technologies, bullying manifests by electronic or digital means and is termed “cyberbullying.” Cyberbullying involves deliberately hurting someone by using a cell phone or computer to text or transmit harmful messages or images. It may include emails or instant messages, posting messages in chat rooms and on social networks, such as Facebook and YouTube, and discussion rooms that repeatedly target the victim(s) (Kyriacou & Zuin, 2016; Zalaquett & Chatters, 2014).

Perpetrators of Bullying

The formal and informal positions of people in the hierarchical structure of institutions or society contribute to determining who falls into the role of perpetrator. Superiority enhances bullying, so “stronger” individuals or groups mostly carry out bullying (Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Olweus, 2005). In the academic sector, power disparities may occur between many different groups. Bullying can occur between academic faculty, superiors, administrators, fellow students, colleagues, higher-level students, other university employees, or subordinate staff. In all these social classifications, those who, for one reason or another, are in a subservient position become victims of bullying.

Effects of Bullying

While research on the effects of bullying in higher education is limited, studies have demonstrated how workplace bullying has adverse effects on mental health and well-being for victims, bystanders, and their families (Boudrias et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Muñoz et al., 2017; Sarwar et al., 2021). As in other contexts, bullying in higher education can negatively affect academic performance (Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010) and lead to more absenteeism and dropouts (Cornell et al., 2013). These effects are the outcomes of various emotional and social effects (i.e., upset or sadness, anger, aggression, lowered self-esteem, loneliness and embarrassment, social apprehension, isolation, and difficulty with concentration or learning) (Cowie & Myers, 2016).

Sources of Cross-national Variations in Bullying

With cross-national variations in the prevalence and types of bullying behavior cited above, we agree with Monks et al. (2009) that the acts that constitute bullying, how they are interpreted, and commitments to their prevention vary across regions. To fully understand bullying, one must look beyond individual behaviors and examine the societal and cultural dynamics and conditions in which they occur. Elements such as cultural predispositions, life conditions, attitudes toward bullying, and a community’s moral values and expectations concerning social behaviors are all likely to influence students’ experiences of bullying (Barratt-Pugh & Krestelica, 2019; Kyriacou et al., 2016; Salin et al., 2021).

A well-known framework for international comparisons of organizational culture was developed by Hofstede (1983) and emphasizes how national cultures vary in relation to differences in values that dominate people’s lives and are passed on from generation to generation. Taking Hofstede’s framework as a point of departure, bullying researchers have focused on examining societal differences with three primary dimensions: (a) power distance, (b) individualism versus collectivism, and (c) masculinity versus femininity (Ahmad et al., 2021), with power distance being most related to bullying.

Cultures that emphasize “high power distance” do not strongly frown upon the bullying of people in lower positions by their superiors (Vogel et al., 2015),

whereas “low power distance” societies are much more critical of inequality and the abuse of power (see Ahmad et al., 2021). Samnani and Singh (2012) argue that there is a greater risk of bullying in individualistic societies, in which power distances are high and the masculinity dimension dominates.

Given this evidence, there is a clear need for research to identify and compare the forms bullying takes in different societies to contribute to its prevention. Moreover, while studies on bullying in the workplace are informative, the knowledge base concerning bullying in higher education is lacking (Vveinhardt et al., 2020). Therefore, this study aimed to explore differences in student experiences of bullying in two markedly different cultures of higher education, namely Ghana and Norway.

Norway and Ghana as Cases

Citing Rayner et al. (2002), the egalitarianism of Scandinavian countries and their caring social values have placed this region at the forefront of efforts to increase awareness of bullying. Mikkelsen and Einarsen (2001) hypothesized that egalitarianism (i.e., low power distance), individualism, and “feminine” values in Scandinavian countries (like Norway) lead to low rates of bullying. For the individualism dimension, this perspective is somewhat contrary to that of Samnani and Singh (2012), who suggest that individualism is tied to competitive behavior and may lead to bullying and cite higher rates of bullying in the United States of America and the United Kingdom compared to Scandinavian countries. Nonetheless, this particular cultural dimension may have less impact than aspects of power and gender inequality.

In Ghana, studies suggest that gender inequality, socioeconomic disparities, and cultural norms associated with gender roles can create an atmosphere conducive to aggressive behavior and bullying. For example, a study by Leach (2003) on bullying in a sample of African countries, including Ghana, revealed that boys tend to bully girls and younger students. The authors concluded that such behavior reflects a cultural norm that endorses masculinity through male competition and sexual discrimination. Moreover, several studies (Adom et al., 2018; Anlesinya et al., 2019; Marbell, 2014) have referred to Ghana as having a collectivist, masculine, and high-power distance cultural predisposition. As noted above, these assertions are also consistent with the views of other authors, who speculate that masculinity is associated with power dominance and bullying (e.g., Ahmad et al., 2021; Samnani & Singh, 2012).

Policies and regulations to prevent bullying can be found in Norway and Ghana. In Norway, there are state laws for zero tolerance and the prevention of bullying and discrimination (Roland et al., 2010). The Norwegian Education Act (Ministry of Education and Research, 1998) mandates that school environments guarantee safety, health, and well-being. Offensive language, acts of bullying and

violence, discrimination, and racism based on ethnic differences, gender, sexual orientation, and religious or ideological beliefs are specifically forbidden, which we believe also applies to universities. The Ministry of Education also forbids harassment and sexual harassment in universities (Ministry of Education and Research, 2005). There are also procedures for reporting harassment in Norwegian universities (e.g., internet platforms and walk-in mental health services).

In contrast, Ghana has no specific national legislation to prevent bullying (Arhin et al., 2019). Sam et al. (2019) point out that exposure to bullying in Ghanaian secondary and tertiary schools is often considered a rite of passage. However, many Ghanaian universities have policies and provisions to inform and protect against bullying. These include websites, electronic billboards, and student handbooks, which provide general information about expected behavioral conduct, harassment protections, and avenues for redress. Nonetheless, these efforts are relatively new. For example, the first university to introduce a sexual harassment policy did so in 2007.

Differences in national wealth and living standards also make comparing these two countries worthwhile. According to the most recent statistics, the Human Development Index (United Nations Development Programme, 2020) shows that Norway ranks highest globally, whereas Ghana ranks 138th. Resource scarcity, which can create conditions that lead to bullying, is prevalent in Ghana. Economic differences also parallel the extent of research efforts in Ghana and Norway. Recent studies in Norway provide a picture of students' health and well-being in higher education (Sivertsen, Hysing, et al., 2019; Sivertsen, Nielsen, et al., 2019), whereas similar research along these lines is almost nonexistent in Ghana.

The current study represents an effort to remedy that deficit. In addition, these two markedly different national contexts can serve as valuable case studies for which comparative research can provide insight into how differences in national, institutional, cultural, and economic factors might influence both the occurrence of bullying and the understanding of what behaviors constitute bullying in higher education. Bronfenbrenner (1979)'s theory on the ecology of human development provides a window of insight into interpreting these phenomena.

Theoretical Framework

The Ecology of Human Development

Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed that environmental systems, ranging from interpersonal interactions to the broader culture, influence a person's development. These systems are referred to as the "microsystem," "mesosystem," "exosystem," and "macrosystem" (p. 22). The microsystem embodies the roles, activities, and interpersonal relationships people experience in a particular setting, which influence their growth. The mesosystem describes settings within which a

person actively participates, such as school and peer groups, places of worship, social life, and work, thus making the mesosystem a system of microsystems.

The exosystem describes external sources of influence where the developing person may not be physically present, yet events within it can still affect an individual's development. Examples include educational systems, community structures, mass media, medical institutions, shopping centers, transportation systems, and the workplaces of parents or other significant relatives. A country's educational system and leadership at all levels determine how schools are managed, which invariably affects the individual. At the same time, what happens in the mass media may affect a person's perception of violence or their reactions to it (Anderson & Bushman, 2001).

The macrosystem is particularly significant to the current study because it influences consistencies in the content and form of the micro-, meso-, and exosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) or shapes institutions and other social trends (Cross et al., 2015). The macrosystem comprises the cultural patterns, or "blueprints," political philosophies, economic policies, and social conditions that govern the lower microsystems and the entire social structure (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Thus, since political ideologies and laws reflect a nation's culture, they reinforce or endorse somewhat unconscious and concealed behaviors. For example, when state laws limit the rights of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ), these individuals may be more likely to suffer discrimination, prejudice, and bullying on university campuses (Formby, 2017).

Purpose of the Study

The current study has two main objectives. First, it seeks to identify negative behaviors and bullying experiences reported by students in higher education. Second, we explore differences in the experiences of students in Ghana and Norway. Analyzing Norway's and Ghana's structures using the same method provides a comparative design (Bryman, 2012) and an opportunity to gain holistic knowledge (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017) about bullying and related behaviors from an international and multicultural perspective, which few studies have considered to date (Lund & Ross, 2017). It also provides insights into how national, institutional, and cultural predispositions account for the prevalence and nature of bullying. To achieve these goals, we developed the following research questions to guide our investigation:

1. What are the most frequently experienced negative, bullying-related behaviors reported by students in universities in Norway and Ghana?
2. How do reports of negative behaviors and bullying among Ghanaian and Norwegian university students differ?
3. Who are perceived as the perpetrators of bullying in the two countries?

Methodology

This study applied a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design with an international comparative approach. Although multiple challenges arise in comparative research of this kind, the use of an identical, albeit translated, instrument can reduce the methodological error that occurs when comparing national databases or data previously collected for other purposes (Jowell, 1998).

Participants

The participants comprised students enrolled in bachelor's, master's, and PhD degree programs at two universities in Norway ($n = 438$) and two universities in Ghana ($n = 751$). Bachelor's degree students were selected from those in their final year of studies to ensure that they had sufficient exposure to the learning environment. First-year students had experienced less than six months of exposure to the university environment, typically considered the minimum when assigning a pervasiveness prerequisite for determining whether negative behavior constitutes bullying (Leymann, 1996). The demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 1.

The two samples differed in a number of ways that are noteworthy. First, female students were overrepresented in the Norwegian sample, whereas the genders were found to be roughly equivalent in terms of the Ghanaian participants. Second, while the distribution of age groups did not differ significantly, the students in the Ghanaian sample were more likely to have studied for a longer period of time at the universities where the data were collected. Finally, a larger proportion of Norwegian participants were enrolled in master's degree programs, whereas the Ghanaian sample was comprised almost entirely of students at the bachelor's degree level.

The study procedures and instrument were registered with the Norwegian Centre for Research Data to ensure that ethical standards were met. Given the sensitivity of the topic under investigation, the ethics review board required much of the identifying information regarding students' demographics to be removed from the instrument. In Norway, the survey was completed in Norwegian and English, meaning that international students had an equal opportunity to participate, resulting in a relatively large percentage of students who said they were from a "minority background." This percentage was slightly higher in Ghana (Table 1). On a national basis, approximately 9% of students in Norway are considered international students, defined as citizens of other countries attending Norwegian universities (DBH, 2022). While data from Ghana is more challenging to obtain, previous studies have found that approximately 8%–10% of students were non-Ghanaian citizens (e.g., Adu, 2019).

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Ghana and Norway

	Norway (n = 438)		Ghana (n = 751)	
	n	%	n	%
Gender				
Male	161	36.8	391	52.1
Female	271	61.9	360	47.9
Other	6	1.3	0	0
Age group				
18- 22 yrs.	105	24	250	33.3
23 - 27 yrs.	200	45.7	406	54.1
28 -32 yrs.	62	14.2	76	10.1
33 -37 yrs.	37	8.4	12	1.6
38 - 42 yrs.	12	2.7	2	0.3
43 - 47 yrs.	12	2.7	4	0.5
≥ 48 yrs.	10	2.3	1	0.1
Years at university				
1 yr.	30	6.8	44	5.9
2 yrs.	100	22.8	71	9.5
3 yrs.	134	30.6	176	23.4
4 yrs.	50	11.4	431	57.4
5 yrs.	67	15.3	19	2.5
≥ 6 yrs.	57	13	10	1.3
Academic level				
Bachelor	195	44.5	708	94.3
Masters	211	48.2	25	3.3
PhD	26	5.9	5	0.7
Minority background				
Yes	93	21.2	207	27.6
No	345	78.8	544	72.4

Note. Some categories do not sum to 100% due to missing data.

Data Collection

Students in Norway were sent an internet-based questionnaire between October 2020 and February 2021, followed by three separate reminders. The administrative offices at the two universities provided 5,861 email addresses of students deemed eligible for participation. Of the responses, 285 were incomplete and therefore excluded. As noted above, this left 438 usable questionnaires. The data collection procedure did not allow for verifying whether the email addresses were active or whether the recipients had received the questionnaire. Anecdotal correspondence with students suggests that many invitations to participate were lost due to automatic email filtering.

Given that the data collection in Norway was conducted first, we sought to balance the comparison groups by recruiting a similar number of respondents from the two universities in Ghana. Due to Ghana's limited internet infrastructure, it was impossible to collect responses via email. Therefore, teaching assistants assisted in distributing and collecting paper-based questionnaires. Students were contacted in person in communal areas of the campuses. The selection process was based on convenience sampling, where we simply selected the most easily accessible students, and on purposive sampling, because we ensured that the participants met the criteria for inclusion in the study (i.e., the required academic level) (see Bryman, 2012). A total of 762 questionnaires were collected using drop-in boxes (446 from one university and 316 from the other), of which 751 were

sufficiently complete to be included in the analysis.

Instrumentation

The instrument comprised a questionnaire with 14 items from the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ-Revised) (Einarsen et al., 2009), eight items from the Sexual Experience Questionnaire (SEQ) (Fitzgerald et al., 1988), and six items from a survey of cyberbullying (see Akbulut & Eristi, 2011). Some items were adapted from the original scales to meet local and demographic conditions. We also adapted perpetrator categories from the existing literature to show the relationship between the bully and the victim. The strong reliability of the original scales has been reported. However, we also checked the items' reliability in terms of our samples. The Cronbach's alpha for the 30 bullying-related negative behavior items in this study was 0.94, and construct-specific groupings also produced reliable alpha values. All the items employed a five-point response scale (e.g., 1 = *not at all*, 2 = *now and then*, 3 = *monthly*, 4 = *weekly*, 5 = *daily*) to reflect the frequencies of occurrence.

The NAQ contains behavioral constructs and a self-labeling component (Einarsen et al., 2009; Salin, 2001). The self-labeling portion is given after participants have indicated the negative behaviors that they have experienced. The following definition of bullying served as a measure for participants to self-label their experiences as bullying:

We define bullying as a situation where one or several individuals persistently, over a period of time, perceive themselves to have experienced negative actions from one or several others. It is a situation that the target or targets find difficult to stop or in which they find it challenging to defend themselves from a superior or stronger perpetrator. This could be a fellow student, a lecturer, or an administrator who repeatedly and intentionally misuses their power, verbally or physically, to harm the target or targets. Bullying can happen in person or online. It can be obvious or hidden. Bullying is not a single incident of conflict, social rejection, nastiness, or spite. It is also not random acts of aggression or intimidation, mutual arguments, disagreements, or fights between equals. In an extreme case, there can be a single instance of intimidating and unfair treatment that the target or targets feel has a long-lasting and embarrassing effect on them.

Through behavioral and self-labeling components, information is obtained about the behaviors and subjective evaluations of the victims (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001).

Analysis

Initial screening identified skewness in the data, which is common in research on bullying (Notelaers & Einarsen, 2013). Given this concern and the

broad objectives of this comparative study, we chose to limit the analysis primarily to descriptive and non-parametric statistics. However, *t*-tests were performed to assess differences in the total number of negative behaviors within and between the countries. In this case, the responses were dichotomized (i.e., not at all vs. any occurrence) to allow measurement on an interval scale, and no problems were identified with regard to skewness. Mean ranks were calculated for the various negative behaviors in each country to determine which of these occurred most frequently, and the overall mean rank was used as a cut-off to define the “most common” behaviors.

The chi-square test of independence was used to examine bullying in relation to the students’ characteristics. In order to assess if demographic variables contributed to the frequency with which participants reported experiencing bullying, tests were conducted with respect to age, years spent attending the university, gender, and minority status. Marital status and academic level were not included in these analyses due to the low numbers in the sub-groups of these variables. In addition, given that there were high proportions of cells with very few or no expected counts, we collapsed levels of the bullying variable and some of the ordinal variables (e.g., age) when conducting the non-parametric statistical analyses. These adjustments are described in the results section below for each of the tests performed.

Results

Frequency of Negative Behaviors

Participants indicated the frequency with which they experienced 30 different negative behaviors on a 5-point scale (i.e., 1 = *not at all*, 2 = *now and then*, 3 = *monthly*, 4 = *weekly*, 5 = *daily*), grouped based on four broad behavioral constructs (i.e., person-related bullying, sexual harassment, work-related bullying, and cyberbullying). The mean ranks, frequencies, and percentages of the behaviors are provided in Tables 2–5. For the purpose of clarity, behaviors reported as occurring monthly, weekly, or daily were combined (> monthly) to calculate the frequencies, while “now and then” responses are listed in a separate column (< monthly) in the tables. Using the overall mean rank as a cut-off ($M = 15.50$), we identified each country’s “most common” behaviors. These comprise 10 behaviors in the Ghanaian sample and 13 behaviors in the Norwegian sample (*items in Tables 2–5).

Table 2

Person-related Bullying: Percent, Frequency, and Mean Ranks across Countries

Behaviours	Norway (n = 438)					Ghana (n = 751)				
	< monthly		≥ monthly		M rank	< monthly		≥ monthly		M rank
	%	(n)	%	(n)		%	(n)	%	(n)	
1. Spreading of gossip and rumours about you.	13.9	(61)	2.5	(11)	16.78*	25.0	(188)	13.7	(103)	17.52*
2. Practical jokes by people you do not get along with.	11.6	(51)	1.4	(6)	16.23*	26.9	(202)	12.6	(95)	17.25*
3. You are called names, made fun of, or taunted.	8.4	(37)	2.5	(11)	15.99*	24.4	(183)	16.5	(124)	17.75*
4. Someone stares at you in a way that makes you feel intimidated.	11.4	(50)	3.4	(15)	16.65*	24.5	(184)	16.9	(127)	17.78*
5. You have been harassed or negatively treated because you were a new student.	5.5	(24)	1.4	(6)	15.38	16.4	(123)	10.5	(79)	15.31
6. You have been hit, kicked, shoved, pushed, or tripped.	0.5	(2)	0.0	(0)	14.41	9.9	(74)	8.1	(61)	14.13
7. You receive insults or offensive remarks about your person, your attitudes, or your private life.	10.3	(45)	3.4	(15)	16.47*	20.0	(150)	11.7	(88)	16.13*
8. You have had your property destroyed or taken forcefully.	0.9	(4)	0.2	(1)	14.54	18.5	(139)	8.9	(67)	15.30
9. Nasty, spiteful, mean, and malicious rumours are spread about your sexual orientation.	1.4	(6)	0.7	(3)	14.66	13.0	(98)	8.0	(60)	14.50
10. Being shouted at or being the target of spontaneous anger.	3.2	(14)	0.5	(2)	14.89	19.4	(146)	11.5	(86)	15.94*
11. Being ignored or excluded.	17.1	(75)	7.8	(34)	18.25*	16.5	(124)	11.7	(88)	15.46
12. Being ignored or facing a hostile reaction when you approach.	11.9	(52)	3.9	(17)	16.76*	20.9	(157)	12.9	(97)	16.48*

Table 3
Sexual Harassment: Percent, Frequency, and Mean Ranks across Countries

Behaviours	Norway (n = 438)					Ghana (n = 751)				
	< monthly		≥ monthly		M rank	< monthly		≥ monthly		M rank
	%	(n)	%	(n)		%	(n)	%	(n)	
13. Someone tells suggestive stories, makes sexist and offensive jokes, or displays offensive materials about you.	6.6	(29)	1.1	(5)	15.51*	14.1	(106)	11.3	(85)	15.04
14. You are being maltreated, ignored, or put down in a condescending or demeaning manner because of your sex	8.2	(36)	1.4	(6)	15.78*	15.2	(114)	8.9	(67)	14.77
15. Your body (breast, thigh, neck, waist, arm, sexual organ) is touched or kissed without your approval	4.6	(20)	0.7	(3)	15.16	14.4	(108)	9.1	(68)	14.83
16. You are harassed repeatedly for drink dates etc., despite you saying no.	1.6	(7)	0.0	(0)	14.55	15.0	(113)	8.9	(67)	14.88
17. Someone makes sexual advances, looks, gestures, jokes, or remarks towards you, which are sexually inciting and discomfoting.	6.2	(27)	0.9	(4)	15.43	18.0	(135)	10.7	(80)	15.54*
18. You are promised favours, rewards, or spared some form of punishment or exposure if you oblige to a sexual relationship	0.2	(1)	0.0	(0)	14.39	16.9	(127)	8.4	(63)	14.99
19. You are threatened with some sort of retaliation or bad treatment if you do not sexually cooperate	0.0	(0)	0.2	(1)	14.40	14.9	(112)	8.3	(62)	14.66
20. Someone repeatedly tries to remove part of your clothes without your consent or tries to sexually abuse you.	1.1	(5)	0.0	(0)	14.50	13.3	(100)	8.9	(67)	14.57

Note. *Most frequent behaviours using the grand mean for ranks across countries as a cut-off.

Table 4

Work-related Bullying: Percent, Frequency, and Mean Ranks across Countries

Behaviours	Norway (n = 438)					Ghana (n = 751)				
	< monthly		≥ monthly		M rank	< monthly		≥ monthly		M rank
	%	(n)	%	(n)		%	(n)	%	(n)	
21. Someone withholding information that affects your performance.	8.9	(39)	2.5	(11)	16.12*	18.0	(135)	10.1	(76)	15.48
22. Repeatedly reminded of your blunders, errors, or mistakes	10.0	(44)	2.7	(12)	16.31*	23.3	(175)	11.2	(84)	16.39*
23. A persistent criticism of your work and your efforts	12.1	(53)	3.2	(14)	16.65*	21.2	(159)	12.8	(96)	16.45*
24. You are denied the right to claim what you are entitled to (e.g., grade)	5.0	(22)	1.6	(7)	15.41	16.2	(122)	10.5	(79)	15.31

Note. *Most frequent behaviours using the grand mean for ranks across countries as a cut-off.

Table 5
Cyberbullying: Percent, Frequency, and Mean Ranks across Countries

Behaviours	Norway (n = 438)					Ghana (n = 751)				
	< monthly		≥ monthly		M rank	< monthly		≥ monthly		M rank
	%	(n)	%	(n)		%	(n)	%	(n)	
25. Unwanted, derogatory, or threatening comments that you do not want to share is circulated about you online	1.4	(6)	0.7	(3)	14.63	16.0	(120)	8.9	(67)	14.96
26. Embarrassing and offensive pictures or videos of you have been spread online or sent to others without your consent	1.1	(5)	0.0	(0)	14.51	16.9	(127)	8.4	(63)	15.15
27. You are excluded from digital communication or social networks.	10.7	(47)	3.9	(17)	16.58*	11.5	(86)	8.0	(60)	14.25
28. You receive unpleasant digital messages or emails.	2.3	(10)	1.4	(6)	14.92	18.1	(136)	9.3	(70)	15.30
29. Unpleasant instant messages about you on social network sites and in chat rooms	1.3	(7)	0.2	(1)	14.59	11.7	(88)	8.3	(62)	14.13
30. Your credentials or identity information is appropriated	0.9	(4)	0.5	(2)	14.57	12.1	(91)	10.4	(78)	14.76

Note. *Most frequent behaviours using the grand mean for ranks across countries as a cut-off.

Concerning person-related bullying, seven items were identified as the most common behaviors in both Norway and Ghana (Table 2). One item in Ghana and two in Norway were ranked highest concerning sexual harassment (Table 3). Three items in Norway and two in Ghana were associated with work-related bullying (Table 4). Only one item, found in the Norwegian sample, was identified with regard to cyberbullying (Table 5). Eight items were ranked among the most frequently reported behaviors in both countries, six of which were in the person-related category:

- a) Spreading gossip and rumors about you (item 1).
- b) Practical jokes by people you do not get along with (item 2).
- c) You are called names, made fun of, or taunted (item 3).
- d) Someone stares at you in a way that makes you feel intimidated (item 4).
- e) You receive insults or offensive remarks about your person, your attitudes, or your private life (item 7).
- f) Being ignored or facing a hostile reaction when you approach (item 12).

In addition, two similar items appeared in the category of work-related behaviors in both countries: (a) repeatedly being reminded of your blunders, errors, or mistakes, and (b) persistent criticism of your work and your efforts.

Differences in Negative Behaviors

Ghanaian students reported experiencing more negative behaviors than Norwegian students across all 30 items. The differences between the countries varied from 4% to 14% concerning “frequent” exposure to negative behaviors (i.e., combined ratings of daily, weekly, and monthly occurrences). The difference was smallest regarding the “being ignored or excluded” item and greatest for “being called names, made fun of, or taunted.” Similarly, the total number of negative behaviors each participant reported in Ghana was higher than in Norway. Based on a dichotomization of the rating scale (i.e., not at all vs. any occurrence), we found that the Ghanaians reported experiencing, on average, 8.37 ($SD = 7.7$) negative behaviors per student. In contrast, the Norwegian students reported exposure to an average of 2.27 ($SD = 3.63$) negative behaviors, $t(1187) = -18.35$, $p < .001$.

Differences in Reported Bullying

The participants were asked whether they were being or had been bullied at their universities as per the definition provided above. Possible responses were (a) no, not at all; (b) yes, but only rarely; (c) yes, now and then (monthly); (d) yes, several times per week; and (e) yes, almost daily. Looking first at the combined “yes” responses (i.e., items b through e), we found that 20.1% ($n = 88$) of the Norwegian participants indicated that they were bullied compared to 39.2% ($n =$

294) of the Ghanaian students. Considering the distribution of the responses across all five response categories, the chi-square results showed a significant relationship between the country of the respondents and the frequency of the reported bullying ($\chi^2 = 47.81$, $df = 4$, $p < .001$).

As predicted, students who reported being bullied also reported experiencing more negative behaviors. Among the Norwegian students, the average number of negative behaviors was significantly higher in this group ($M = 6.49$, $SD = 0.52$) when compared to students who did not report bullying ($M = 1.22$, $SD = 2.25$), $t(436) = -14.56$, $p < .001$. A similar significant result was found when comparing “bullied” ($M = 12.52$, $SD = 8.06$) versus “non-bullied” ($M = 5.71$, $SD = 6.28$) groups within the Ghanaian sample, $t(749) = -12.95$, $p < .001$.

Bullying in Relation to Student Characteristics

No significant differences were found with respect to the proportion of reported bullying among different age groups in Ghana. However, a significant difference was found in Norway regarding this variable ($\chi^2 = 14.44$, $df = 6$, $p = .025$). Students who were 33 years of age or older were proportionally overrepresented among “rarely” bullied students, with 28.2% of this age group providing this response, compared to less than 15% of younger students. The proportion of participants indicating more frequent exposure to bullying (i.e., \geq monthly) did not vary significantly across the age groups (range = 3.2%–7.0%).

Whereas no significant association was found between bullying and the number of years the students had attended university in the Norwegian sample, the chi-square tests showed a significant relationship between these variables among the Ghanaian students ($\chi^2 = 29.75$, $df = 8$, $p < .001$). In general, the longer students had attended their universities in Ghana, the more likely they were to report having been involved in bullying. For example, 42.9% of fourth-year students and 62.6% of fifth-year students reported being bullied, compared to less than 30% of first- and second-year students.

In addition, we found that the proportions of students exposed to bullying did not differ based on gender in either country. Having a minority background was not associated with reported bullying in Ghana, yet this relationship was significant in the Norwegian sample ($\chi^2 = 9.16$, $df = 2$, $p = .010$). Students with a minority background were underrepresented among those who did not report bullying (68.8% vs. 82.9%) and overrepresented among students who responded that they were “rarely” bullied (23.7% vs. 12.5%). Differences concerning more frequent levels of bullying pointed in the same direction but were not significant (range = 4.6%–7.5%).

Perpetrators

The respondents were provided with a list of seven alternative categories of possible perpetrators from which to choose. Multiple responses per participant

were allowed. The numbers and percentages of the responses for each country are presented in Table 6. The percentages are based on the sub-groups within each country who reported being bullied ($n = 88$ in Norway; $n = 294$ in Ghana). As can be seen in Table 6, perpetrators most often fell into the category of fellow students: 61.4% and 41.4% for Norway and Ghana, respectively. The second most common group was academic staff and supervisors in Norway (38.6%) and higher-level students in Ghana (23.5%). The category of faculty and supervisors was also frequently indicated in Ghana (17.3%). The remainder of the responses were observed considerably less frequently, comprising approximately 10%–12% of the total responses or less.

Table 6

Reports of Perpetrators among Participants Who Experienced Bullying

Perpetrators	Norway (n=88)		Ghana (n=294)	
	%	(n)	%	(n)
Fellow student(s) or colleagues	61.4	54	51.4	151
Academic faculty fellow or supervisor	38.6	34	17.3	51
Students at higher levels	8.0	7	23.5	69
Other superiors or administrators	5.7	5	12.6	37
Other university employee	10.2	9	3.7	11
Subordinate staff(s) or student	4.5	4	4.4	13
Other	6.8	6	5.1	15

Discussion

Across both countries, the most frequently reported negative behaviors were in the person-related category, and these were followed by behaviors in the work-related category that were quite similar in nature. By and large, these behaviors reflect direct, non-physical forms of bullying, such as name-calling, insults, ignoring, and repeated criticism. Between-country comparisons revealed that students in Ghana more often reported being bullied and being exposed to a broader range of negative behaviors than students in Norway.

Frequency of Bullying and Related Behaviors

With respect to the first research question, many of the behaviors that

ranked highly in the current study (e.g., gossiping, withholding information, and insults) have also been found to be prevalent in research on workplace bullying (e.g., Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001; Notelaers et al., 2019). The finding that participants in this study rarely encountered physical aggression is also consistent with previous research. For instance, Gómez-Galán et al. (2021) identified verbal and relational bullying at Spanish universities but found little evidence of physical bullying. Rayner and Hoel (1997) observed how physical bullying gives way to indirect, relational, and more subtle forms of bullying as young people become adults. Thus, it is perhaps to be expected that adult university students less often experience physical aggression.

Einarsen and Skogstad (1996) argue that victims themselves should determine when repeated negative behaviors should be labeled bullying. This method is considered superior to using only behavioral indicators because it has convincing face validity and high construct validity (Nielsen et al., 2011). However, this approach also has weaknesses related to bias, as emotional and cognitive factors may affect (usually reduce) the disclosure of bullying (Nielsen et al., 2011). Thus, the fact that 20.1% and 39.2% of students in Norway and Ghana, respectively, report that the negative behaviors they experienced constitute bullying is upsetting, given that some studies have reported much lower percentages (Hoel et al., 2001; Nielsen et al., 2009; Zabrodska & Kveton, 2013). On the other hand, Keashly and Neuman (2010) and McKay et al. (2008) similarly found a range between 18% and 32% in higher education settings.

Most respondents experienced bullying “only rarely,” and progressively fewer participants indicated that they were bullied as the time intervals became less prolonged. These patterns are consistent with previous studies using the NAQ, indicating relatively low levels of negative behaviors despite high percentages of self-reported bullying (see Hoel et al., 2001). Thus, even “rare” instances may still be enough for many participants to say that bullying has occurred.

Not surprisingly, we found that students who reported being bullied were exposed to a wider range of negative behaviors. For example, Norwegian students who did not feel that they were bullied reported experiencing, on average, less than two of the thirty behaviors listed in the survey—in contrast to more than six behaviors among those who had been bullied. Interestingly, the average number of negative behaviors experienced by students who did not report being bullied was considerably higher in Ghana ($M = 5.71$), indicating that the threshold for labeling behaviors as bullying is substantially higher among students in Ghana.

Country Comparisons

Regarding the second research question, the findings indicate that bullying is significantly more prevalent in Ghana than in Norway. This difference may be related to several factors, including differences in the countries’ cultural

predispositions to acts that constitute bullying, the national commitment to bullying prevention (as reflected in laws and regulations), and economic conditions.

First, it is possible that Norway's prominent national policies regarding bullying influence institutional commitment to anti-bullying structures in higher education, resulting in a lower prevalence. Second, the population's emphasis on egalitarianism (see Ministry of Education and Research, 1998; Rayner et al., 2002) may also serve to mute power imbalances associated with bullying. It is likely that economic conditions also play a role with respect to the prevalence of bullying behavior. Research considering the relationship between socioeconomic status and bullying suggests that unfavorable economic conditions and resource scarcity are precursors to bullying (Sinkkonen et al., 2014).

Perhaps also related to economic conditions is the finding that being excluded from digital communication or social networks was among the most common forms of bullying in Norway, yet was proportionally much less common in Ghana (albeit higher than in Norway). On the one hand, it could be argued that the more stable infrastructure and internet availability in Norway contributed to this issue. However, it must be noted that "being ignored or excluded" was by far the most common form of bullying in Norway, indicating that it is most likely the "exclusion" component of this behavior that led to its prominence and not the fact that the behavior occurs in a digital environment.

Indeed, the finding speaks to the individualistic cultural predisposition of Norwegian society compared to the collectivist predisposition in Ghana. Samnani and Singh (2012) and Ahmad et al. (2021) argue that individualism can lead to bullying, but we advise caution when interpreting this with regard to Norwegian society. Individualism in Norwegian society can be described as a private life predisposition. People do not share their private spaces to the same extent as individuals in many other countries do. As a result, people living in Norway who come from more collectivist societies, who might also constitute a minority group, could experience cultural shock when they are left out. Nonetheless, universities are supposed to provide avenues for collaborative learning and the exchange of ideas. Private life predispositions can be a source of exclusion for different people. This is in line with Bronfenbrenner (1979)'s theory that people's behavior is an expression of their culture, and to change such a culture, awareness must be created about its effects.

In the case of Ghana, we would argue that cultural predispositions, particularly regarding power distance and masculinity (see Adom et al., 2018), account for the higher prevalence rates of negative behaviors and bullying. More so, in his broader work, Bronfenbrenner (1979) argued that when people know about an environment before entering it, they observe certain social expectations. In this case, had there been a cultural and national consciousness regarding

bullying, we would expect it to be reflected in the institutional commitment to preventing bullying. Our results indicate that quite a few confrontational behaviors occurred in the Ghanaian sample. This suggests that people are less deterred from bullying others, which again points to the need for increased consciousness about bullying among students in higher education.

At first glance, the findings relate to the number of years the students had attended university, and their academic levels appear to be in conflict. Norwegian students at the master's degree level were significantly more likely to report being bullied, whereas no differences were found among the academic levels in Ghana. At the same time, in Ghana, students who had attended university for longer were more likely to report being bullied. We suspect that the different findings in the two countries reflect differences in the two samples, in which students at the master's degree level were largely overrepresented in Norway (ca. 48%) and underrepresented in Ghana (ca. 3%).

We found no association between gender and reported bullying in either country, and minority status did not appear to influence self-reported bullying in Ghana. Although these reports most often fell into the "rarely" category, students from minority backgrounds in Norway were significantly more likely to report being bullied than other students. The concept of "minority" was defined broadly in the survey, in which participants were asked to answer the following question: "Do you belong to a minority group, for example, because of language, origin, or any other reason?" Thus, it is impossible to know more about the specific backgrounds of these participants. This also makes it difficult to speculate as to the potential reasons for the different findings in the two countries. Nonetheless, school-based research in Norway has shown that students from minority groups experience bullying at higher rates than other students (Bjereld et al., 2015; Hansen et al., 2010; Hansen & Sørli, 2012). Thus, our findings suggest that this trend may carry over into higher education.

Perpetrators of bullying

In both countries, fellow students were most often reported as bullying perpetrators. University students typically have closer interpersonal relationships with their fellow students than with other people in these settings, and such relationships are generally seen as a prerequisite for bullying to exist (Ledlow, 2008). Beyond fellow students, the Norwegian participants reported faculty and other employees as being the most frequent perpetrators of bullying. In Ghana, senior students were the second most frequently reported group, followed by faculty and other higher administrative employees. These results underline the notion that a central component of bullying is an imbalance in the distribution of power among those involved (Olweus, 1993). In many cultures, superiors are treated with some reverence. However, those in positions of authority may become

less mindful of their actions with regard to their subordinates, which explains why academic faculty and advisors are seen as perpetrators of bullying—even in Norway, where the abuse of power should be less likely, given the cultural emphasis on equality (Hofstede, 1983).

Limitations

There are a few limitations to the current study that are noteworthy. Although the use of purposive sampling makes the need for statistical representation less of an issue (Mason, 2002, p. 134), we cannot be certain that low response rates and selection bias did not contribute to the relatively high percentage of participants who reported being bullied in each country. In addition, the different data collection strategies used in Norway and Ghana may also raise questions about comparability. However, given that paper-based surveys, which were used in Ghana, tend to have higher response rates (Converse et al., 2008), it can be assumed that this approach likely resulted in a more representative sample in Ghana. In theory, using a more selective procedure (i.e., an email survey) would result in a greater number of participants who had previous experience of bullying being included in Ghana, thereby increasing the already considerable and significant differences between the two countries. Imbalance with respect to the demographic characteristics of the two samples, including a larger proportion of female and master's degree-level students in Norway, also means that caution should be used when interpreting these findings. Finally, due to concerns raised by the instrument's ethical review, it was impossible to collect more detailed demographic information about the participants (e.g., their field of study, ethnicity, and race). Factors such as these are also likely to play a role in how bullying is experienced and merit consideration in future research.

Implications for Research and Practice

The evidence derived from this study contributes to research on bullying in higher education by providing a first step toward a more objective means of measuring bullying within this context. This is because the questionnaire for this research contains behavioral items that reflect acts of bullying that are typical of the study environment (e.g., sexual harassment) but are not part of a typical NAQ used in most university and workplace bullying research.

In addition, the comparative approach adds insight into how to conduct and interpret bullying data across different cultural and national conditions. Indeed, the findings underline how results on bullying prevalence are less meaningful when they are only considered in relation to one population within institutional, cultural, or national contexts. More so, as much as a culture might determine people's attitudes towards bullying, culture itself is dynamic, as our needs and

goals vary in time and are discarded, re-structured, or developed further (Freiherr Von Fircks, 2022). There might be a need to educate people about attitudes that breach fundamental rights. For example, family dynamics that defined the position of women as subordinate to men in older patriarchal traditions are no longer present. Such power dynamics, which still influence women's bullying in contemporary times, must change.

Concerning practice, we posit that education directed toward the most prevalent negative behaviors identified in research of this kind can lead to increased student awareness of offensive and dangerous bullying behaviors. The findings suggest that efforts to prevent bullying at universities must start with national commitments, which are comparatively absent in Ghana. In addition, educators must be careful when organizing groups to facilitate diversity and the inclusion of "at-risk" individuals. Moreover, our findings indicate that risks of exclusion should be considered early in educational programs and highlighted through teaching and policy to make students and staff more conscious of and receptive to the needs and vulnerabilities of others.

Researchers have primarily used the NAQ for workplace bullying (Einarsen et al., 2009). Our results indicate that some negative behaviors frequently appeared in Norway and Ghana, yet they were not part of the NAQ. Future research should consider incorporating these results when seeking to develop more universal questionnaires to study bullying in higher education.

Conclusion

This study provided insight into university students' exposure to negative behaviors and reported bullying, thereby contributing to the knowledge base. We found that bullying at universities takes on subtler forms than in schools, which could make its prevention difficult. We identified behaviors such as spreading gossip and rumors, practical jokes by people with whom the victims do not get along, name-calling, and making fun of or taunting the victims. In other cases, the participants mentioned staring at victims to make them feel intimidated and making insults or offensive remarks about the victims' beliefs or private lives. People reported being ignored or facing hostile reactions when approaching the perpetrator. Some of these behaviors can be considered confrontational, but they still do not meet the specific description of physical and aggressive behaviors.

We also found a higher incidence of bullying in Ghana than in Norway, including more confrontational behaviors in Ghana. This points to cultural variations that may reflect national consciousness, which determines how people in different cultures perceive and react to bullying. Inferring from the ecology of human development theory, we can say that the cultural differences we identified between Ghana and Norway could account for variations in national consciousness

and institutional commitments to bullying prevention since the broader cultural blueprint influences the universities in the mesosystem. When the culture favors aggressive behavior, it is difficult to challenge such behaviors when they occur. As such, this study confirms previous research that demonstrates that bullying behavior is culturally specific and that creating more preventative conditions requires ambitious efforts to change cultural assumptions.

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