Emotional and Psychological Impacts on Bullying Perpetrators

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the emotional and psychological impacts experienced by bullying perpetrators and to analyze the influence of parenting styles on the development of such behavior within the context of Madrasah Aliyah (Islamic Senior High Schools). Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation involving perpetrators, guidance and counseling (BK) teachers, and school staff. The findings indicate that bullying perpetrators often experience emotional distress, including feelings of guilt, remorse, and behavioral changes such as social withdrawal following disciplinary actions. Contributing factors to these behaviors include unsupportive parenting styles, poor family communication, and social environmental pressures. Notably, several perpetrators demonstrated a willingness to change after undergoing counseling and engaging in personal reflection. This study underscores the importance of a comprehensive rehabilitative approach that goes beyond punitive measures, emphasizing the need for ongoing emotional and psychological support to effectively address bullying behavior.

Keywords: Bullying, Emotional Impact, Parenting Style, Perpetrator Psychology, School-Based Rehabilitation

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is an escalating phenomenon that has become a serious concern in education, both nationally and globally. According to data from the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (KPPPA), approximately 41% of children in Indonesia have experienced bullying (KPPPA, 2024), in forms ranging from physical and verbal abuse to cyberbullying. Similarly, a 2022 survey by the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) reported that over 60% of violence against children in schools is related to bullying. This phenomenon affects not only the victims but also the perpetrators, who may suffer long-term emotional and psychological consequences. Research has shown that perpetrators of bullying are at risk of developing persistent mental health problems such as depression and anxiety (Yang et al., 2018).

A growing body of literature indicates that individuals who engage in bullying behaviors tend to exhibit emotional disturbances (Coleman, 2011), including insecurity, difficulty in emotional regulation, and a heightened risk of developing mental health disorders in the future. According to UNESCO (2021), approximately 32% of individuals who engage in bullying experience social and emotional difficulties in

adulthood. Permissive, authoritarian, or neglectful parenting styles are widely regarded as key contributing factors to the emergence of aggressive behavior (Fitri, 2024). Among adolescents, bullying may manifest in physical, verbal, and online forms, all of which have significant implications for the mental health of both perpetrators and victims. Psychological studies consistently demonstrate that permissive or authoritarian parenting contributes to the development of aggressive tendencies in adolescents (Syahputra et al., 2023; Masud et al., 2019). These findings are supported by local research indicating that adolescent perpetrators of bullying often show impairments in empathy and self-regulation (Hein et al., 2015; Jelita et al., 2021).

From a psychological perspective, bullying is not merely an act of aggression but also reflects failures in emotional management and an underlying need for attention (Safitri, 2024). Perpetrators frequently exhibit dominance and a lack of empathy toward others. Longitudinal studies further suggest that individuals who engage in bullying during adolescence are likely to carry these behavioral patterns into adulthood, with an increased risk of engaging in criminal or violent acts (Andris et al., 2024).

This study focuses on students from MA Walisongo and highlights the role of psychological pressure, family conflict, and social influence as key triggers for bullying behaviors (Blester & Du Plessis, 2010; Hase et al., 2015). It is expected that the findings will enrich the literature on educational psychology and serve as a reference for both prevention and rehabilitation efforts targeting bullying behavior (Amadori et al., 2023; Yusuf & Kartika, 2023).

Despite the growing interest in bullying research, most existing studies have focused primarily on the experiences of victims or the external behaviors of perpetrators. There remains a significant gap in the literature regarding the internal emotional and psychological states of the perpetrators themselves, particularly in relation to parenting styles and rehabilitative potential within religious-based school contexts like Madrasah Aliyah. This study seeks to address that gap by providing a nuanced understanding of the emotional struggles faced by perpetrators and the influence of family upbringing in shaping these behaviors, thus offering deeper insight into holistic interventions that emphasize healing and transformation rather than punishment alone.

METHODS

Design

This study employed a qualitative case study approach, focusing on the exploration of the emotional and psychological impacts experienced by bullying perpetrators within the context of Madrasah Aliyah (Jelita et al., 2021). In-depth interviews and direct observations were conducted with key informants, including the perpetrators, school counselors, and the principal at Madrasah Aliyah (Islamic Senior High Schoo) Walisongo (Nur et al., 2022). This methodological choice was intended to provide a comprehensive understanding of bullying behaviors and the emotional background of the perpetrators.

Procedure and Data Collection

Data were collected through three primary techniques: (1) direct observation of student behavior, which refers to a non-intrusive method used by the researcher to observe how the bullying perpetrators interacted with peers, teachers, and the school environment during regular school activities. (2) in-depth interviews with key stakeholders such as the school principal, teachers, Guidance and Counseling, and the bullying perpetrators themselves, and (3) documentation analysis involving relevant school records and disciplinary reports (Including disciplinary records, student reports, and other relevant school documents). This empirical data collection was complemented by an extensive literature review of scholarly articles and books to establish a theoretical framework that supports the analysis (Tech & Theophilos, 2022).

Data collection relied on an interview guide developed to explore themes such as emotional responses, behavioral changes, family dynamics, and social influences. To support and contextualize the empirical findings, the study was also grounded in a literature review of scholarly sources on adolescent psychology and bullying behavior (Tech & Theophilos, 2022).

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study followed the qualitative descriptive approach proposed by Jonathan Sarwono (2022), consisting of three systematic stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. During the data reduction stage, the researcher carefully selected, simplified, and organized raw data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation. This process involved categorizing statements, identifying recurring themes such as emotional expressions (e.g., guilt, regret, social withdrawal), and eliminating irrelevant or repetitive information while maintaining the integrity of participants' responses. Coding techniques were applied to group similar data segments, particularly those related to parenting patterns, psychological distress, and behavioral changes in the perpetrators.

In the data display stage, the reduced data were organized and presented in both narrative descriptions and visual matrices to allow easier interpretation and pattern recognition. These displays facilitated the comparison of data across different sources (e.g., interviews vs. observations), allowing for triangulation. Finally, the conclusion-drawing and verification stage involved interpreting the meaning of the data, identifying causal relationships, and drawing insights into how psychological and social factors contributed to bullying behavior. Conclusions were continuously refined and verified through repeated reference to the raw data and theoretical frameworks. The field site for this case study was MA Walisongo, which provided the contextual grounding for the behavioral patterns and psychological conditions observed in the student perpetrators (Soejono & Abdurrahman, 1999).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Results
Emotional and Psychological Impacts Experienced by Bullying Perpetrators

Bullying perpetrators at MA Walisongo demonstrated a range of emotional reactions after their actions were discovered and sanctioned by the school. One of the initial observed effects was a change in behavior, becoming more withdrawn as a sign of deterrence from the consequences faced. These individuals appeared more reserved and expressed regret, although in some cases, perpetrators exhibited continued aggression, such as issuing further threats to their victims. Several perpetrators showed genuine signs of remorse, such as discomfort upon re-encountering their victims, avoiding direct contact, and expressing guilt for having caused distress to their peers. However, school counselors noted that not all perpetrators displayed empathy; some pretended to show remorse while actually denying any wrongdoing and even indicated a tendency to repeat their aggressive behavior if unchecked.

Psychologically, bullying perpetrators often exhibited deep emotional symptoms prior to committing the act. Counselors observed that many were impulsive, quick to anger, and lacked empathy (Reknes et al., 2019):

> "Yes, bullying perpetrators often exhibit emotional or psychological problems before engaging in such actions. Some show impulsive behavior, are easily angered, and lack empathy toward others."

These psychological conditions were frequently unnoticed by those around them until after the bullying occurred. Family dynamics appeared to be one of the primary triggers of bullying behavior. Based on interviews with perpetrators, it was revealed that unpleasant home environments such as being the target of emotional outbursts by siblings or experiencing poor communication with parents created emotional pressures that were displaced onto peers. Unresolved frustration led perpetrators to seek control over others as a form of self-protection.

In addition to family issues, peer pressure played a significant role. Some perpetrators admitted to engaging in bullying because they followed more dominant peers in their social circles. A lack of self-confidence also emerged as a factor, with perpetrators bullying others to feel superior. In this context, bullying served as a mechanism to mask feelings of inferiority. Involvement in bullying further resulted in substantial social stress. Some perpetrators reported being ostracized by peers after their actions came to light (Williams & Guerra, 2011):

"My friends started to avoid me after they found out I was involved in bullying."

Moreover, some parents forbade their children from associating with the perpetrators. This social rejection deepened the perpetrators' sense of guilt and emotional awareness, making them realize the broader consequences of their actions not only for the victims but also for themselves. In several cases, perpetrators began to change their perspectives and acknowledge the impact of their behavior. They reported feeling empathy for what the victims had experienced and expressed a desire to change, particularly following guidance from teachers and school-imposed sanctions. While not all perpetrators underwent significant transformation, most expressed a willingness to become better individuals.

Individual counseling based on behavioral approaches, implemented by school counselors, was found to be relatively effective (Gaffney et al., 2021):

"The approach we used proved to be quite effective. Bullying cases did not recur after the perpetrators received sanctions and counseling."

Through counseling, perpetrators were guided to understand the consequences of their actions and were encouraged to develop self-control. However, this approach remains short-term in nature, as the school does not yet have a sustainable rehabilitation or emotional support program in place (Finne et al., 2018). When asked what they would like to change about their experience, most perpetrators indicated a desire to improve themselves and refrain from harming others in the future. This experience opened their understanding of the importance of healthy social relationships and the need for emotional support from both family and school.

Overall, the findings suggest that bullying perpetrators are not inherently "bad" or indifferent, but are often individuals experiencing psychological distress, lack of familial attention, and emotional instability. Therefore, schools must go beyond disciplinary measures and implement long-term rehabilitative and psychological support strategies to assist perpetrators in recovery and behavioral transformation.

Social and Psychological Consequences for Perpetrators

Following the exposure of their bullying behavior, perpetrators received school sanctions, including suspension, as well as social repercussions such as peer rejection. Many parents also prohibited their children from associating with the perpetrators. These consequences intensified the psychological pressure already experienced by the perpetrators, prompting greater awareness of the harmful impact of their actions. A deep internal reflection process occurred, which some perpetrators described as a turning point in their lives:

"My friends started to avoid me after they found out I was involved in bullying."

This process indicates a form of cognitive restructuring a reorganization of thought patterns that reflects moral and social development. According to Kohlberg and Clark (1981), moral development progresses when individuals are capable of reflecting on the consequences of their actions for others.

The interviews concluded with perpetrators expressing a desire to become better individuals and avoid repeating the same mistakes. This statement reflects the emergence of self-regulation and positive social learning.

The Influence of Parenting Styles on Bullying Behavior

Parenting styles within the family significantly influence the formation of bullying behavior. Perpetrators reveal that the home environment tends to be unpleasant, primarily due to pressure from other family members, such as older siblings who frequently vent their emotions. Family situations characterized by minimal communication and lack of parental attention, especially due to their busy schedules, are significant triggering factors. Such conditions lead children to feel misunderstood and seek emotional outlets outside the home, including through aggressive behavior towards peers.

Perpetrators also acknowledge that their bullying behavior stems from insecurity. They feel better by putting others down, indicating that a family environment lacking in fostering self-confidence and self-esteem can contribute to the emergence of negative behaviors. In this regard, permissive parenting and lack of parental support are primary triggers (Manda & Darmayanti, 2025). Parents who are emotionally uninvolved in their children's lives indirectly create space for them to seek control and recognition elsewhere, including through bullying.

The influence of peers and social environment also reinforces these tendencies. Perpetrators state that they engage in bullying due to peer influence, following friends who have done so before them. When families fail to instill values of empathy and self-control, children are more susceptible to absorbing negative values from their social environment (Hendricks & Tanga, 2019). This underscores that parenting styles cannot be separated from the daily social dynamics faced by children.

Moreover, after receiving school sanctions such as suspension, perpetrators begin to experience emotional and cognitive changes. They express empathy towards victims and recognize their mistakes. However, pressures from the surrounding environment, such as being shunned by peers and having other students' parents forbid their children from associating with them, make perpetrators feel protected. This indicates that without rehabilitation support and psychological counseling, bullying perpetrators may transition from being aggressors to becoming emotional victims within their own environment.

The importance of parental roles in shaping children's characters and creating a supportive home environment is evident from this case. Attentive parenting, good communication, and emotional interaction with parents help children develop empathy, manage emotions, and build healthy self-confidence. Ignoring these parenting patterns increases the likelihood that children will seek negative compensation, including through bullying as a form of self-assertion.

Perpetrator's Perspective: Regret and Self-Awareness

Interview results with one bullying perpetrator provide deeper insight into the emotional dynamics they experience. The perpetrator expresses feelings of guilt and regret following the incident. They admit that an unharmonious family environment, particularly pressure from siblings and lack of parental attention, were primary triggers for the aggressive behavior displayed at school.

> "My parents don't communicate with me very often because they are busy working, so I feel neglected."

This narrative illustrates the psychological mechanism of projection, where negative emotions are transferred from one context to another. In this case, the perpetrator shifts emotional pressures from home to the school environment, aligning with Freud's explanation of ego defense mechanisms, wherein individuals attempt to stabilize themselves by symbolically attacking others.

Discussion

Bullying behavior exhibited by students cannot be separated from the emotional and psychological backgrounds they experience. At MA Walisongo, data obtained from interviews with school counselors and the perpetrators themselves revealed that students who engaged in bullying generally showed signs of emotional distress both before and after committing the act. These symptoms included impulsivity, uncontrolled anger, and a low level of empathy. After their actions were discovered, many perpetrators exhibited behavioral changes, reflecting feelings of guilt and regret, with some expressing a desire for self-improvement. However, a number of perpetrators continued to display aggressive tendencies, indicating that significant changes in their cognitive patterns had not yet occurred.

These findings are consistent with developmental psychology theories which suggest that emotional experiences that are not healthily expressed during adolescence (Coleman, 2011) can influence an individual's social behavior. In this context, bullying is not merely a form of violence against others but also serves as a self-protection mechanism in response to experienced pressure (Susilawati et al., 2024). This is further supported by interview results showing that bullying perpetrators often face stress at home, whether due to conflicts with family members or a lack of parental attention. When children feel neglected, unforgiven, or become the emotional scapegoat in the household, they tend to seek control and recognition elsewhere, including through bullying behavior.

Parenting styles within the family evidently play a crucial role in shaping a child's behavioral tendencies. Authoritarian, permissive, or neglectful parenting that fails to address children's emotional needs fosters character traits that are more vulnerable to deviant behavior. A lack of healthy communication between parents and children, along with insufficient emotional regulation and supervision, makes it difficult for children to manage their negative emotions. Children raised in such environments often seek external validation and feel the need to assert power in inappropriate ways. Conversely, democratic and supportive parenting has been shown to cultivate empathy, self-confidence, and healthy social competence in children (Darling & Steinberg, 2017).

In addition to family influence, peer and social environments significantly affect bullying behavior. Children who grow up without adequate emotional guidance at home are more susceptible to peer pressure. Interviews with perpetrators revealed that some were driven to bully others because they followed more dominant peers. This suggests that the absence of positive values within the home environment makes children more likely to adopt negative influences from their social surroundings. Therefore, intervention from schools and the wider community is essential to compensate for ineffective parenting functions (Sanders, 2008).

Overall, the findings of this study affirm that bullying behavior should not be viewed in simplistic, black-and-white terms. Bullies are not merely "bad children," but individuals who require psychological and emotional support. School-imposed sanctions are important as a form of disciplinary education, but they are insufficient to bring about behavioral change if not accompanied by ongoing counseling and environmental support. Schools should consider implementing long-term rehabilitation programs involving teachers, counselors, and families to ensure that changes in perpetrators are meaningful and sustainable. Thus, approaches to bullying cases must be comprehensive, focusing not only on the victims but also on the recovery and development of the perpetrators, in order to prevent recurrence (Finne et al., 2018).

This finding is critical, as it highlights that perpetrators of bullying should not be seen solely as individuals deserving punishment, but as individuals facing difficulties in social and emotional domains. Therefore, effective responses to bullying must be holistic, balancing disciplinary measures, counseling, and constructive social support.

CONCLUSION

Bullying behavior is not always the result of deliberate intent to cause harm; rather, it often emerges as an expression of unresolved emotional and psychological distress, frequently rooted in inadequate parenting practices and adverse social influences. Addressing this issue effectively requires more than punitive measures it demands a comprehensive and collaborative approach involving families, schools, and the broader community. Through sustained rehabilitative efforts that prioritize emotional healing and behavioral guidance, perpetrators can be supported in developing empathy, self-regulation, and social responsibility, ultimately fostering their transformation toward healthier interpersonal relationships and overall psychological well-being.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

All authors, WW, SS, KH, AL, MAS, were involved in the development and writing of this article.

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