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Understanding Young Adults' Perception of Their Childhood Bullying and Victimization: A  
Phenomenological Research

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Childhood bullying, and victimization is a worldwide issue in the field of education. We now through research that bullying has longitudinal negative influences upon former victims' psychological, physical, and economic circumstances decades after the incidence of childhood bullying. However, not enough studies have been conducted to address these longitudinal unfair experiences, including the study of the underlying reasons of its longitudinal continuity upon victims and trans-generational potential through social cognitive theory. Neither has there been enough research focusing on the victims' perspective, to explore their current cognition of childhood bullying experiences and to find proper guidance and treatment for their PTSD symptoms. Different from previous quantitative studies which reveal the longitudinal psychological consequences correlating their childhood bullying suffering through specific variables, this qualitative research is aimed at giving victims a voice regarding their individual experiences and present a holistic picture of how individuals experienced bullying in childhood and furthermore exploring how can victims empower and heal themselves through cognitive restructuring.

Phenomenology is employed to explore and present the subjective reality of their lived experiences. This study examined 7 young adults, aged between 26-30 years, who presently study in the University of Oulu and shared the experience of bullying in childhood. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with snow-ball sampling method was utilized to search for participants accurately and reliably. Despite the different cultural backgrounds, all research participants demonstrated similar types of experiences with comparable symptoms.

In my research, bullying victimization is found as a dynamic and reciprocal process during which the victims internalize and reinforce the distorted cognition and automatic thoughts and become emotionally consumed, psychologically tormented, and physically paralyzed to fight back. The mechanism of re-victimization may lie in the continuity of the internalized incorrect cognitions. In this research moral dilemma, Stockholm syndrome, and societal convention that bullying equals "competitive selection" were discussed for future research. Social cognitive theory is applied to analyze the data, while cognitive behavior therapy is recommended to restructure the former victims' automatic thoughts and distorted cognitions. This research may contribute to academic discussion on the cross-contextual and trans-generational continuity of bullying re-victimization and bullying intervention program.

Keywords: bullying, longitudinal, phenomenology, social cognitive theory, cognitive behavior therapy, perception

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## **1 Introduction**

Childhood is supposed to be a blissful period where children explore and understand the world with peers through play and study while guided by adults with love and support. However, a large number of children grow-up with wounds, both physically and psychologically given by peers and adults around them. This negative type of peer relations of bullying and victimization has captivated my attention due to the world-wide scale of childhood bullying cases and its longitudinal influences toward adulthood. Research probing the connection between childhood victimization and its longitudinal influence toward adulthood has been well documented with quantitative research through psychological diagnosis as well as statistical data of economic and even criminal records.

Meanwhile, it is hard to find research which focuses on effective measures that is aimed at mitigating the longitudinal psychological influence of bullying for victims. Many quantitative research studies have not provided a platform for victims' voices and contextual presentation of victims' experiences. Childhood bullying experiences still leave a psychological or physical "scar" yet to be addressed in adulthood. This research is aimed at probing how young adults perceive their childhood mistreatment experiences, and whether the former victims have psychologically recovered from their abuse. Through qualitative research and specifically adapting phenomenology as the research methodology, I would like to give a contextual and detailed presentation on how individuals experience and reflect upon their childhood torment and analyze their adulthood perception so as to obtain an insight toward the longitudinal continuity and re-victimization problem. Furthermore, where ever possible, to seek a precise solution or set of solutions after exposing the core issues.

Bullying is a worldwide issue among children's as they reach maturity. From the cross-sectional research on bullying issues among 79 countries, the researchers found that approximately 30% of adolescents reported being suffered from bullying worldwide and "10.7% of males and 2.7% of females were involved in frequent physical fighting" (Elgar, F. J., McKinnon, B., Walsh, S. D., Freeman, J., Donnelly, P. D., de Matos, M. G., ... & Currie,

C, 2015). My research is launched at the University of Oulu and focuses on how university students perceive their childhood maltreatment experiences without the restriction of nationality. In this way, I can obtain a relatively comprehensive perspective in the era of globalization.

The severity of bullying experiences has been studied and proved by a number of researchers, including Ryu Takizawa (Takizawa, Maughan, & Arseneault, 2014) and John A. Rønning (Rønning et al., 2009) to analyze the influence of victim who suffered frequent ill-treatment. Firstly, there are the **immediate effects** of bullying, such as social anxiety, lower self-worth, and depressive symptoms as well as “low level of social acceptance and social competence” (as cited in Roth, Coles, & Heimberg, 2002). Victims become less accepted, less liked, and more rejected by peers. (Swearer & Hymel, 2015; Cullerton-Sen & Crick, 2005; Graham et al., 2007; Veenstra et al., 2007)

Secondly, childhood bullying experience has **a longitudinal influence** upon people in adulthood and cause psychological, physical, financial, and social relational impacts. Ryu Takizawa and John A. Rønning’s research revealed that childhood bullying resulted in a wide range of adversity in adulthood such as “poor social, health, and economic outcomes” (Takizawa, Maughan, & Arseneault, 2014) four decades later and “criminality and psychiatric disorders” (Rønning et al., 2009). Many studies found that there is a high possibility of **re-victimization** as “bullying victimization generates further abuse from peers or adults, forming the first stage in a cycle of victimization that perpetuates itself over time and across situations” (Rønning et al., 2009). These findings echo Olweus’s opinion, who in 1993 stated that “students who are bullied at a certain period of time also tend to be bullied several years later” (p. 28). Many studies show that longitudinal influences include low self-esteem, depression, academic failure, conduct problems, psychosis and an increased risk of suicide (Arseneault, Bowes, & Shakoor, 2009; Barker, Arseneault, Brendgen, Fontaine, & Maughan, 2008; Brunstein-Klomek, Sourander, & Gould, 2010; Schreier et al., 2009), anxiety,

loneliness, withdrawal, social avoidance, hyperactivity, and aggression (Swearer & Hymel, 2015; Kumpulainen et al., 2001).

Thirdly, the severity of the influence of bullying also lies to the suboptimal health status that related to their childhood bully victimization. Researches has found bullying victimization are more inclined to leave internalizing problem toward adulthood and psychological problems include obvious symptom of depression, anxiety, social phobia, and agoraphobia, and oblivious symptoms such as loneliness (Hemphill, Tollit, Herrenkohl, 2014; Gladstone, Parker, Malhi, 2006; Segrin, Nevarez, Arroyo, & Harwood, 2012). In addition, Bowers, Smith and Binney (1994) found that bullying has a detrimental influence upon victims' self-esteem and confidence in social interaction. The developmental psychopathologist Michael Rutter (1996), believes that "turning point effects represent a heterogeneous range of lasting changes in psychological functioning". Our cognition of self and others has largely formed through individual experience. If we want to understand why some social events trigger specific reaction of us such as anxiety and depression, we need to trace back to the reason, and sometimes the cognitive pattern hid in the past experience. Bullying as a severe defeating experience has a profound influence upon individual's value system of self, others, and the world. Without proper understanding and reflection upon the bully victimization experience and correlated elements, we can't furthermore to restructure the more reasonable and sophisticated cognitive pattern for similar occasions in the future life (Rutter, 1996).

Thirdly, the severity of childhood bullying is also linked to the psychological suboptimal health among former victims. "Research has found bullying victims are more inclined to get internalizing problems instead of externalizing issues as the longitudinal consequences in adulthood since the bullies were found to have more externalizing problems such as violence, substance abuse, and even crime commitment (Hemphill, Tollit, & Herrenkohl, 2014). Meanwhile, the psychological problems include obvious symptoms of depression, anxiety, social phobia, and agoraphobia, as well as oblivious symptoms such as loneliness (Hemphill, Tollit, & Herrenkohl, 2014; Gladstone, Parker, & Malhi, 2006; Segrin, Nevarez,



Arroyo, & Harwood, 2012). In addition, Bowers, Smith and Binney (1994) found that bullying has a detrimental influence upon victims' self-esteem and confidence in social interaction. The developmental psychopathologist Michael Rutter, (1996) believes that "turning point effects represent a heterogeneous range of lasting changes in psychological functioning". Our cognition of self and others has largely formed through individual experience. If we want to understand why some social events trigger specific reactions in us such as anxiety and depression, we need to trace back to the reason, and sometimes the cognitive pattern hidden in past experiences. Bullying as a severe defeating experience, has a profound influence upon an individual's value system of self, others, and the world. According to Gökkaya (2017), the fundamental assumption of CBT is changing emotions and actions by finding the negative automatic thoughts and reframing them (p. 175). In practice, the techniques of cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) includes psycho-education, self-awareness training, cognitive restructuring, coping techniques, self-instruction, role-playing, and the building of the reward system (p. 176). In short conclusion, I believe the suboptimal psychological status may functions as the bridge between immediate and longitudinal impacts, and served as the key to issues of re-victimization cross occasions. Underlying the suboptimal psychological condition are the cognitions that victims have internalized during previous bullying experiences. Without proper understanding of their childhood bullying experience which is part of the psycho-education and self-awareness training procedure, the former victims cannot subsequently restructure more reasonable cognitive alternatives to end the longitudinal impacts of re-victimization.

Fourthly, the profound influence of bullying also dues to the possibility of trans-generational continuity and the test of intimate relationship in a family. When I investigated the spectrum of relevant factors, probing the causality of bullying, I realized that **family factors** in the microsystem of the bullying social-ecological framework, exerted a strong and intimate influence upon how the individual coped with the bullying event (Hemphill, Tollit, & Herrenkohl, 2014; Bronfenbrennet, 1979). Psychological research found that **the origin of family** has a longitudinal and defining influence of an individual's growing-up, maturity (Segrin, Nevarez, Arroyo, & Harwood, 2012). Rutter (1999) has explained that negative relationships with peers and family in childhood result in poor social relationships in

adulthood according to the development theory. Some other researchers found genetic transmission also contributes to the inclination of bullying (Distel et al., 2010). The social skill of parents and the loneliness of parents has indirectly impacted the social skill and solitary situation of children according to social learning theory (Segrin, Nevarez, Arroyo, & Harwood, 2012). Cooper and Nickerson (2013) found that parents' previous involvement in bullying exerts significant impact upon their current views, intensity of concern, and strategies they implemented in dealing with their children's bullying situation. They discussed that their quantitative research results demonstrate that over 90 % of parents in their study can recall consistently and validly of their personal involvement as a bully, victim, or bystander over considerable long time (Cooper & Nickerson, 2013). Therefore, I believe the longitudinal influence of bullying also lies to the **transgenerational impact** which may contribute to the continuity of psychological pain from bullying experience and the possibility of re-victimization. Meanwhile, this transgenerational impact is represented by the attitude as well as methods that the victims will take to tackle their children's bullying cases. In addition, within the research sphere of family factors, Soli, McHale, and Feinberg (2009) have found that sibling relationships exert great influence on a child's self-esteem, peer social competence, and bully protection (as cited in Sapouna, & Wolke, 2013, p. 999). Whereas the only-child is more likely to have emotional problems such as egocentrism, identity and socializing problems according to Eleanor Patrick (2006). Since most of the research participants are either Finnish or Chinese, and due to the national only-child policy in China and low birth rate in Finland, sibling's influence and the identity of only-child will be discussed to explore the influence of bullying toward intimate relationship.

In addition, the grave longitudinal influence of school bully also lies to its cross-contextual continuity from school bully to workplace bully. The correlation between school and workplace bullying is demonstrated through recent studies (Smith, 1997; Tehrani, 2003; Smith, Singer, & Cooper, 2003). Smith (1997) said that "the traditions of research on school bullying, and more recently on workplace bullying have sufficient similarities and continuities that they can learn from each other" (p. 253). Smith, Singer, and Cooper (2003) found that former victims of school bullying are more likely to be victimized in the workplace. Tehrani

(2003) pointed that “the interest in the role of personality traits in explaining workplace bullying has largely been informed by research into school bullying” (p. 6). Since the psychological heal of victimization and the prevention of re-victimization are crucial for breaking the connection between school and workplace bullying, this research demonstrate its value by the descriptive and contextual emphasis of victims’ perceptions.

Considering the context of my research, I carried out this qualitative study in Finland and tried to collect data from culture that was as diverse as possible with regard to the participants. The methodology is phenomenological research, which allows me to understand the individual experience and perception of childhood bullying issues. In addition, even though there are many differences regarding bullying matters in different cultures, the similarity among bullying cases is significant and worldwide. With the specific study of bullying in Southeast Asia, Sittichai and Smith (2015) illustrate that there is significant similarity in the process of victimization across China and Western countries. Furthermore, there are massive quantitative studies launched among participants from a variety of nationalities (Elgar et al., 2015).

To conclude, my research questions are as follows: 1) How young adults perceive their childhood bullying experience? 2) What might be the contributive reasons for longitudinal continuity of childhood victimization experiences?

The significance of this study lies in 1) understanding the individual experience and reflection about their childhood bullying victimization, and furthermore obtain a deep understanding of the cognitive similarity and differences among bullying victims; 2) Qualitative research can provide more variables than that of the quantitative research and give voices to individuals; 3) Longitude research has significance in preventing re-victimization as well as trans-generational continuity.

## **2 Theoretical Frameworks**

### **2.1 Definition of Bullying**

From Deborach, Meredith, and Richard (2002), the early research of bullying was initiated by Olweus (1993) after three Norwegian boys committed suicide due to a severe case of bullying. After this tragic incident, intensive research was carried out on the issue of school bullying. However, the definition of bullying has been changed and enriched with time. According to Olweus (1993), he explained bullying as “a person is bullied when he or she is exposed, regularly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more persons” (p. 9). Sourander et al. (2016) emphasize that bully is a repetitive aggressive act with varied forms of physical, verbal or indirect such as sending nasty notes or relational ostracizing. In addition, there is an imbalance of power and the victim is usually unable to defend him/herself (Sourander et al., 2007, p. 398). Hemphill, Tollit, and Herrenkohl (2014) believes that bullying can be exerted by one or more individuals and the power difference between perpetrator(s) or victim(s) differentiate bullying from other kinds of aggression.

What deserves special attention is the dynamic elements of bullying that arise with new technology and cultural differences. Firstly, Cyberbullying draws attention with its novelty in transmission and gravity in impact. Bauman, Cross, and Walker (2013) argues whether the previous defining criteria apply. Secondly, while comparing the difference of bully behavior between Southeast countries and western findings, Sittichai and Smith illustrate that there is a prevalence of extortion as unique bullying behavior in Hong Kong primary school and there are cultural implications such as “legitimate or illegitimate power” and ‘individualism-collectivism’ underlying it. (Sittichai & Smith, 2015)

Kathleen Stassen Berger (2006) explained further that the aforementioned definition of bullying distinguished itself from ‘playful fighting, a one-time attack, or good-natured teasing

between friends', whereas includes indirect or covert attacks and relational bullying. With his explanation, hostility, intentionality, repetitiveness and power imbalance in bullying differ it from other forms of aggression. Among the confusion to distinguish bullying among aggression, teasing, and other mischief behavior, the relationship of teasing and bullying deserves special attention. In the following part, I would like to give a detailed comparison.

With regard to aggression and bullying, aggression is a broad term to categorize aggressive and harmful behaviors of different extent as illustrated by Ramirez and Andreu (2006) that "the *delivery of any form of definite and observable harm-giving behavior towards any target*" (P. 278). Whereas bullying, as explained above, includes repetitive and intentional harmful behaviors between the two parts with the power imbalance. Harmful behaviors include verbal, physical, relational, financial, and cyber conducts. According to Anderson and Bushman (2002), "*Human aggression is any behavior directed toward another individual that is carried out with the proximate (immediate) intent to cause harm.*" (p. 28). As an umbrella term, aggression defined by Baron as an overt behavior that has the intention to cause harm to other individual (as cited in Sexton-Radek, 2005). In addition, Gendreau and Archer (2005) conclude that 'not all aggression is bullying, but bullying is always aggression, defined as hurtful and hostile behavior' (as cited in Berger, 2006). Therefore, we can distinguish aggression and bully by the extent of application and the intention as well as the frequency of the behavior.

## **2.2 Teasing vs Bullying**

Among researches to explore the relationship between childhood bully experience and adult outcome, some of the research taking teasing as a way of bullying without fully recognizing the positive and negative function of teasing in social communication which would influence the credibility of the research result. For example, in Roth, Coles, and Heimberg's research of the connection between childhood teasing memories and adulthood depression and anxiety, the authors take teasing as a specific form of bullying and define teasing as become verbally taunted about their appearance, personality and behavior (Roth, Coles, & Heimberg, 2002).

However, we can't simply understand teasing as a verbal version of bullying since teasing innately has the elements of challenge, play and ambiguity and can be observed possessing both prosocial and negative communicative effect. According to Mills and Carwile (2009), teasing can be defined as a multifaceted communicative act; it can be lighthearted and fun or mean spirited and degrading, or a combination of lighthearted yet degrading, or fun and simultaneously mean spirited. For them the core elements in teasing are **challenging, play,** and **ambiguity**, and aggression is not a compulsory part of teasing. The balance of these elements makes the differences between prosocial teasing and cruel teasing. As discussed before, bully, however, is an **intentional** and **repetitive harmful act** that entails obvious **power imbalance**. With this understanding, the core elements of bullying are aggression and challenge without the involvement of play and ambiguity.

Without comprehensive understanding of teasing and recognition of the prosocial teasing, research result and correspondent measures to counter the bully issue would be defective. Mills and Carwile discussed this issue when they observed how the cognitive development level correlate children's understanding of teasing, and they state that "it is possible that children do understand prosocial teasing, but are not able to replicate the knowledge in surveys or experiments because they are responding to the words 'teasing' itself as inherently negative, particularly when asked to think about times they have been teased, rather than when they have teased others" (Mills & Carwile, 2009, p. 293). In addition, agreeing with Mills and Carwile, we need to recognize the positive applications of prosocial teasing which express affiliation, affection and enhance social bonds, entertainment, etc (Kruger, Gordon, Kuban, 2006). Furthermore, with clarification of prosocial teasing and cruel teasing, educator can draw the boundary between bully/cruel teasing and prosocial teasing. While cruel teasing is aimed at causing more challenge instead of play and therefore it belongs to bullying, and the positive social communication function and ambiguity in the interpretation of prosocial teasing should be recognized by educators so as to enhance tease targets' social skills (Mills and Carwile, 2009).

What's worth mentioning is when we perform longitudinal research of bullying influences to victims, we need to be aware of the developmental changes of individuals. For example, Mills and Carwile (2009) found that young children around 7 years old tend to understand teasing as a pure negative act while teenagers around 14 years old have a better cognitive ability to distinguish positive and negative teasing even though many of them show "inability to negotiate the conflicting elements of both challenge and play" (p. 293). The level of psychological development and the mastery of social skill should be taking into account when we are trying to find the individual reasons for bullying victimization.

Likewise, young adults obtain more sophisticated and mature understanding of interpersonal communication, their cognition and perception of their childhood bully victimization would accordingly be modified when they reflect back. Based on this thinking, my longitudinal research aims to obtain a dynamic and contextual understanding of how former victims perceive their childhood bully experience during their individual development.

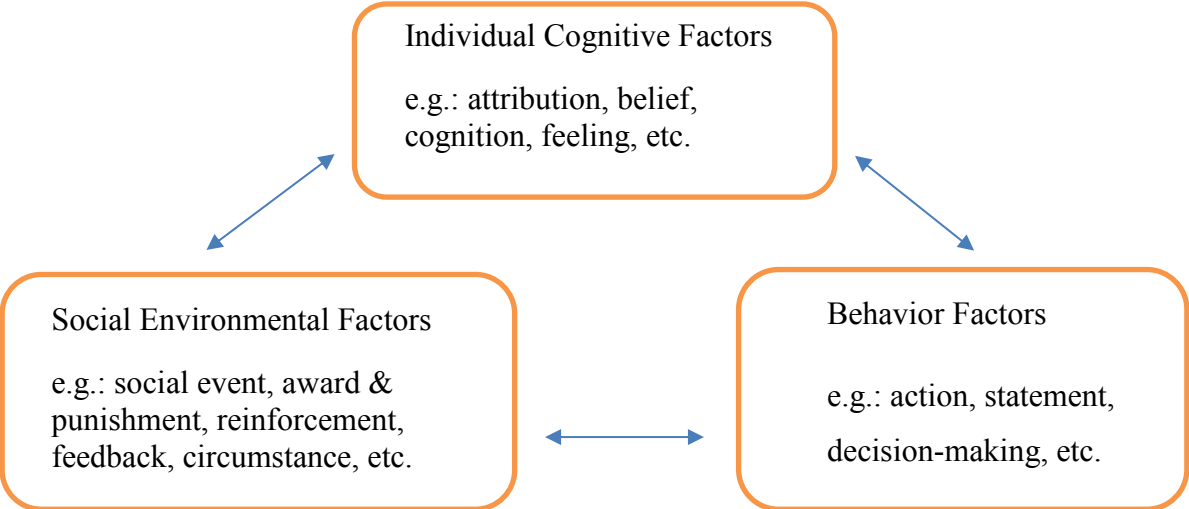
### **2.3 Theoretical Orientation for the Study**

I will adapt social cognitive theory to analyze the research findings and recommend cognitive behavior therapy as a practical and efficient method to address former victims' longitudinal psychological issues. According to Swearer, Wang, Berry, and Myers (2014), "social cognitive theory (SCT) is an important heuristic for understanding the complexity of bullying behaviors and the social nature of involvement in bullying. Bullying has been heralded as a social relationship problem, and the interplay between the individual and his or her social environment supports this conceptualization" (p.271). This research focuses on the former victims' cognition back in their childhood and their adulthood toward their bullying experience which requires a theory to provide a paradigm to examine how individuals perceive, interpret a social event, and respond accordingly. Therefore, social cognitive theory comes to me as the suitable theory to approach this research.

Cognitive behavior therapy is a renowned clinical psychological treatment for depression, anxiety, and PTSD in teens (Hofmann, Asnaani, Vonk, Sawyer, & Fang, 2012). From previous studies, the major longitudinal internalizing problems that victims have suffered are depression and anxiety. With this qualitative research, I would like to know how former victim perceive their childhood victimization experience which established their early social interaction cognition and may be detrimental to the reason of the continuity for re-victimization and transgenerational influences, and provide meaningful coping suggestions such as cognitive behavior therapy for them to become aware, identify, and finally restructure their cognitions toward this drastic issue in childhood.

### 2.3.1 Social Cognitive Theory

Social cognitive theory is developed from social learning theory (Bandura, 1986). Different from social learning theory, social cognitive theory emphasizes the role of cognition in determining individuals' behaviors (Bandura, 1986). Specifically, social cognitive theory proposes that there is a dynamic interaction between the social environmental factors (e.g., social event), individual cognitive factors (e.g., cognition and feelings), and behaviors. This triadic interaction demonstrates the reciprocal and dynamic mechanism or “reciprocal determinism” (Bandura 1986, 1997, 2001) of how individuals learn and respond to external events. Swearer, Wang, Berry, and Myers (2014) refer the triadic interaction in social cognitive theory as “social environment, internal stimuli, and behaviors” (P. 272). This mechanism can be demonstrated as follows;





In the study of bullying, social cognitive theory is accepted to explain the aggressive behavior of bullying perpetrators (Swearer, Wang, Berry, & Myers, 2014) and bystander behavior (Kim, 2014), however, I believe social cognitive theory can be applied in analyzing victims' response toward bullying as well. This idea can find confirmation from Simon's (2001) explanation of the self-regulatory mechanism of social cognitive theory. This mechanism may explain the measure of avoidance which contributes to depression and social anxiety but most victims have applied in bullying cases.

“social cognitive theory asserts that individuals have self-regulatory mechanisms that provide for the potential for self-directed change and for the ability to influence one's own behavior...The manner and degree to which people affect their own behavior involve the accuracy and consistency of their self-observation and self-monitoring, the judgments they make regarding their actions, choices, and attributions, and, finally, the evaluative and tangible reactions to their own behavior that they develop through the self-regulatory process. (Simon, 2001, p. 35)

In addition, from Bandura (2008), the core concepts in social cognitive theory are human can learn from the social cognitive model, anticipate consequences of behavior, and establish the belief in self-efficacy. The process of bullying victimization may also lie to how individuals internalize and establish a belief of their self-efficacy in the fight against a bully. Under the stress of repetitive and intentional aggression, victims may learn from other victims' as well as their own previous experience to establish a model, and anticipate physical or verbal hurt from bullying, which consolidate their belief of their self-efficacy for a counter attack. From this research, we can testify its applicability.

### 2.3.2 Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT)

Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) is firstly initiated by Beck (2011) in the 1960s based on the cognitive model that thoughts, feelings and behavior are all connected in response to external stimuli or events. According to Banks (2011) is that “thinking precedes feelings and feelings precede behavior” (as cited by Tucker, 2016, p. 18). Based on the cognitive model, Gökkaya (2017) interpret the cognitive behavior therapy as that “our cognitions (thoughts) determine

our emotions and actions” and “our acts show some strong effects on our thoughts and feelings” (p. 175). Gökkaya (2017) believes “every single psychological disorders and problematic behaviors have an underlying mechanism as distortional and dysfunctional thoughts that affect people’s psychological mental health and their actions” (p. 175). Therefore, individuals such as bullying victims can adjust their mental state by identifying their automatic thought and distorted cognition, arguing and replacing the unreasonable cognition with a more rational and objective cognition. This step would be helpful for the psychological recovery of victims. What worth mentioning is that CBT does not equal to positive thinking, rather it is a psycho-education to help the individual obtain a reflective control of their cognition, and subsequently adjust their emotion and behavior (Gökkaya, 2017; Hofmann, & Reinecke, 2010).

Since CBT emphasizes the role of adjust automatic thoughts, it is necessary to illustrate the definition of automatic thoughts. Automatic thoughts were first defined by Beck (1976) as spontaneous cognition that often occur in a fleeting manner and are mostly conscious and easily accessible (Dattilio, 2005). Beck (2011) refers to automatic thinking as a stream of thought that is unrealistic and maladaptive thinking that usually comes automatically and originated over their experience. These internal private expectations subconsciously influence our emotions and sometimes indicate our response to external events. Beck (1976) and Haritonov (2009) listed the common automatic thoughts are filtering, polarized thinking, overgeneralization, mind reading, fortune telling, catastrophizing, personalization, emotional reasoning, shoulds, global labeling, and the like (as cited by Zasiékina, 2015, p. 152). According to Hope, Burns, Hayes, Herbert, and Warner (2010), automatic thoughts are considered to play the central role in the maintenance of the disorder (p. 2). Therefore, I believe identifying the automatic thoughts that originated at the first experience of severe psychological incidence can be the solution to approach the longitudinal continuity of psychological problems in bullying cases.

In practice, CBT has been applied in addressing bully aggression (Swearer, Wang, Berry, & Myers, 2014), bystander attitude (Kim, 2014), and victims' syndromes (Tucker, 2016). As a proved effective therapy to address a number of psychological issues among different populations, CBT can help both the children as well as adult to grasp cognitive restructuring skills which consist of four steps: "(1) identification of problematic cognitions known as "automatic thoughts" (ATs—dysfunctional or negative view of the self, world, or future), (2) identification of the cognitive distortions in the ATs, (3) rational disputation of ATs with Socratic dialogue, and (4) development of a rational rebuttal to the ATs" (Hope et al., 2010, p 2). Hope et al. (2010) also confirmed the application of cognitive restructuring before, during, and after the exposure of extreme psychological incidents. With solid theoretical foundation and comprehensive implementation procedures, CBT is found to be an appropriate method for psychological treatment in the area of depression and anxiety which bullying victims were suffering most (Dobson, Hopkins, Fata, Scherrer, & Allan, 2010; Tucker, 2016).

## **2.4 Literature Review and Critique of Previous Research Theories and Methods**

### **2.4.1 Social Ecological Theory**

Cognition is formed by the coercive influence of social ecological environment. According to Bronfenbrenner's **ecological systems framework**, there are micro- (parent–youth relationships, inter-parental violence, relations with peers, school connectedness, and school environment), meso- (teacher involvement), exo- (exposure to media violence, neighborhood environment), macro- (cultural norms and beliefs, religious affiliation), and chronosystem (changes in family structure) levels (Hong, & Espelage, 2012). A large number of research applied social ecological theory in accessing the reason and influence of bullying cases based on the theoretical comprehensiveness.

### **2.4.2 Theories to Analyze Family Factors**

Lereya, Samara and Wolke (2013) adapted social learning theories (Bandura, 1978), family-relational schema (Perry, Hodges, Egan, 2001), and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973) to

analyze how both positive and negative parenting behaviors correlated to bullying. Through a systematic review of published relevant literature from 1970 to 2012, they concluded that maladaptive parenting predicts increased risk of victim or bully/victim status at school, while authoritative parenting and affectionate parent-child relationships protect or mitigate children against bully victimization. They discussed that bullied children usually experience multiple victimizations in their lives. The reason for this is suggested that “some maltreated and abused children adopt a submissive and ingratiating posture with their parents in an effort to maintain their safety in violent and chaotic homes” (as cited by Lereya, Samara, & Wolke, 2013, p. 31). Children in maladaptive families may feel powerless, have low self-confidence, less able to assert their need, and potentially transfer these cognitions and submissive or catering behavior into other situations (Lereya, Samara, & Wolke, 2013).

Besides the research on parenting methods, Bowers, Smith, and Binney (1994) also take attachment pattern, family structure, and developmental pathways into account to approach the issue. Firstly, they propose that children with “ambivalent-insecure” attachment to parents are more easily bullied by peers. From the attachment theory, there are four categories of attachment patterns: secure attachment, avoidant-insecure attachment, ambivalent-insecure attachment, and disorganized-insecure attachment (Bowers et al., 1994). The ambivalent-insecure attachment of children means they receive unpredictable care and possess lower self-esteem and confidence as well as self-value doubt due to their parents. Secondly, family system theorists have pointed out when there are ‘distortions in family structure’, children are likely to adapt roles such as scapegoat (victim) or ‘bully’ in order to maintain the family functioning (Bowers, Smith, and Binney, 1994). Thirdly, the developmental pathway theorists suggest that a child who is shy and in the insecure-ambivalent attachment patterns are likely to develop anxiety, withdrawal, and prior to being targeted by bullies. Meanwhile, poor discipline in the family, poor identification with father, and mother’s over-protectiveness lead to the inclination of the boys been bullied (Bowers, Smith, and Binney, 1994). Even though their researches analyze these theories via quantitative research without giving the individual voice to victims, neither do they present the victim’s cognition during the term of bully

victimization experience, their research enlarged the psychological theoretical understanding of family influence in bullying issue.

A siblings' role regarding bullying has yet to receive extensive discussion. However, the only child policy in China and low birthrate in Finland makes this factor distinctive since my research is majorly conducted among Finnish and Chinese participants. Soli, McHale, and Feinberg (2009) have found that sibling relationships exert great influence on a child's **self-esteem, peer social competence, and bully protection** (as cited in Sapouna, & Wolke, 2013, p. 999). Sapouna and Wolke (2013) suggest that peer support, and specifically emotional adjustment and console, mitigate the post trauma symptoms of bullying victims. This idea is also shared by Diane Hofkins (2006) that "siblings were an integral part of their emotional sense of who they were" (p. 23) and siblings provide emotional security for preventing bullying victimization for many children. In addition, the situation that siblings fight and argue at home always help each other at school which actually establishes the opportunity of self-realization, peer social skill development, and the establishment of a secure emotional zone (Hofkins, 2006).

Whereas Eleanor Patrick (2006) focuses on the psychological issues related exclusively to **the only-child**. She found that the only-children are inclined to have psychological issues such as **egocentrism, undue secrecy, socializing, and identity** problems. Specifically, egocentrism is caused by no sibling to bargain or to mirror their status in the family; undue secrecy comes from the protective mechanism with which they "guard feelings or thoughts and furthermore arose peer's suspicion of their unfriendliness" so that they can relieve the sense of suffocation and intrusion that comes from constant attention (Patrick, 2006). Socializing problems originated from their singular upbringing environment. Identity problems of the only-child is ignited by the obligation to "defer or comply to avoid conflict as well as high sense of responsibility" while they are surrounded by adults as their significant relational ties (Patrick, 2006). She pointed out that being constantly imbued with adults' attention and company leads to a "**lack of emotional space**" and the "**diminished sense of separate identity**" (Patrick,

2006). From Jill Pitkeathley and David Emerson (2011), the only child might be bullied or ostracized because of their socializing problems, their high responsibility for others which sometimes is not appropriate or reasonable leads their attitude to be strongly against bullying, yet they are often not good at dealing with attacks or confrontation. Therefore, they are conceived to be the vulnerable group in bullying circumstances and they tend to set up defense mechanisms to protect themselves beforehand in social interactions (Pitkeathley, & Emerson, 2011). Cameron, Erkal, Gangadharan, and Meng (2013) also agreed that only children are underprivileged in bullying due to “sibling deprivation”, which may lead to their being self-centered, less cooperative, and less likely to get along with peers. Pitkeathley and Emerson (2011) further explained that the only child may feel strong guilty, be easily exploited and become the scapegoat by bullies who are smarter to shift the responsibility. These studies on the psychological traits of only-child and non-only child as well as their correlation to bullying are valuable and referable when we understand the cognition of different group of participants.

#### 2.4.3 Previous Studies on Cognitive Analysis Regarding to Longitudinal Influence

Former victim’s perception in adulthood is an indispensable and essential part to analyze the longitudinal outcome of their childhood bullying experience. From Boulton and Underwood (1992) and Olweus (1978, 1992) “The experience of being bullied is associated with a variety of emotional difficulties such as depression, anxiety, poor self-concept, loneliness, and social withdrawal” (as cited in Gladstone, Parker, & Malhi, 2006, p. 201). From the previous theoretical exploration on social cognitive theory and cognitive behavior therapy, personal cognition of an incidence has a vital influence on how they perceive themselves and people around him. Subsequently, the conclusion they draw from personal experience has largely defined their interpersonal communication, personality development, and social connection. Amongst the abundance of research on the longitudinal and short-term influences of their childhood bully experience, I believe there is one part missed between their bullying experience and their internalizing outcomes, that is, the research on how different individuals perceive their victim experience when they were bullied, and how they reflected after the occurrence of bullying. As we discussed above, bullying is a repetitive and intentionally

harmful act, and very likely lead to the longitudinal, cross-contextual, and trans-generational continuity of re-victimization. How former victims internalize distorted cognition as well as negative automatic thoughts would be the key for empowering victims from re-victimization. Here with this literature review, I aimed at firstly pointing out the hypothesis of victims' mental cognition that appeared but not yet systematically and specifically explored in previous literature; secondly, the significance of introspective qualitative research in the phenomenal study of bullying victimization experience.

### *Cognition & Anxiety and Depression*

Roth, Coles, and Heimberg (2002), have studied the relationship between memories for childhood teasing, the anxiety and depression in adulthood. They pointed out "being teased during childhood may lead people to develop **thinking patterns** common to both general anxiety and depression" (Roth, Coles, & Heimberg, 2002, p. 161). Furthermore, he analyzed that the cognitive change includes the point of view of themselves and their view of the world. Inwardly they develop learned helplessness through the constant inability to cope with bullying, and "a gradual but pervasive erosion of self-esteem take place" (Roth, Coles, & Heimberg, 2002, p. 53) when they believed that they deserved being teased because there are inferior. Outwardly, the victims view the world as dangerous and should keep constantly alert. This belief contributes to social sensitivity and social anxiety. The victims may take extreme thinking to completely avoid social situations so as to avoid anxiety, and subsequently can't experience the alternative possibility of positive social interaction and furthermore being precluded from learning and practicing social skills. This is in return perpetuates their bully victimization.

### *Cognition & Loneliness*

Besides anxiety and depression, adulthood loneliness has been found has a strong correlation to childhood bullying. In Segrin, Nevarez, Arroyo and Harwood's (2012) research, they focused on how family of origin environment, parental loneliness, and a history of being bullied can influence young adults' social skills and young adults' loneliness. Segrin et al.'s (2012) research is unique for longitudinal research in bullying for three reasons. Firstly, Segrin et al. (2012) focuses on loneliness instead of anxiety and depression with the believe

that “loneliness tends to be strongly associated with psychological problems such as depression” (Cacioppo, Hawkley, & Thisted, 2010; Segrin, 1998) and social anxiety (Stednitz & Epkins, 2006). In this way, Segrin et al.’s (2012) research builds a bridge of longitudinal outcome of bullying between the resilience of bullying and internalizing influence of bullying (such as social anxiety and depression). Secondly, to analyze how the **family of origin contributes to young adult loneliness**, Segrin et al. (2012) pointed out three family factors exert influence upon the loneliness of the children. They are social learning from lonely parents, genetic transmission, and dysfunctional family environment created. To describe the relationship between cognition and loneliness in dysfunctional family environment, Segrin et al.’s (2012) said, “when people do not feel supported and free to express their thoughts and feelings in the family of origin, they may consequently feel alienated, disconnected, and misunderstood—the very components of loneliness” (120). Segrin et al.’s (2012) study demonstrated the trans-generational continuity of loneliness as the result of the dysfunctional family environment that lonely parents have created. Therefore, the transgenerational propensity of suboptimal psychological state is exemplified. Thirdly, Segrin et al. (2012) argued against one-way attribution that loneliness and social skill deficiency cause bullying, but instead they believe a dynamics reciprocal relationship between loneliness, social skills, and bullying. In addition, this study referred that bullying experience may cause victims’ loneliness by stating “a history of aversive social experiences is assumed to impact people’s readiness to relate to others and to get close to them (Rokach, 1989)” (as cited by Segrin et al., 2012, p. 121). In conclusion, Segrin et al.’s (2012) study built a bridge between internalizing problems and bullying resilience by plausible presenting the transgenerational continuity of loneliness as the reciprocal consequence of bullying. Individuals’ cognitions which are related loneliness is also described in the dysfunctional family environment and the bullying circumstances.

### *Cognition & Moral Disengagement*

Beside adulthood cognitive correlation between childhood bullying and adulthood loneliness, anxiety, and depression, self-blame is an important part of victims’ cognition that relates to the continuity of bullying infliction. Shortly, questions such as what was the bully’s motivation and did the victims really deserve to be bullied are central to victims’ recovery.



Besides reasons such as predisposing trait, ‘rewarded’ mechanism of bullying, conduct disorder, callous-unemotional traits, narcissism, susceptibility to peer pressure, and impulsivity (Swearer & Hymel, 2015), moral disengagement plays an important role in bully behavior.

According to Swearer and Hymel (2015), morally disengagement is a cognitive mechanism that allows individuals to justify and rationalize cruel behavior in ways that make it seem less harmful. Swearer and Hymel found that the more often children “experienced victimization themselves, the less likely they were to morally disengage regarding bullying” (Swearer & Hymel, 2015, p. 349). In Gini’s (2006) study, “Victims showed some difficulties in the social cognition task, whereas bullies did not. Aggressive children, instead, were found to be more ready to show moral disengagement mechanisms, whereas defenders showed higher levels of moral sensibility” (p. 528).” From their studies, victims are less likely to resort to moral disengagement meanwhile incline to have social cognitive deficiency. Giving the importance of proper attribution of bullying causality for the psychological recovery of victims, moral disengagement is mentioned here in my research. These previous findings on moral disengagement would be valuable to analyze the cognitive traits of perpetrators and victims in bullying cases.

#### *Cognitive Vulnerability & Inhibited Temperament*

Gladstone, Parker and Malhi (2006) explore the connection between Childhood bully experience with adulthood anxiety and depression. They argued that even though Gibb et al. (2004) identified the childhood peer victimization contributes to cognitive vulnerabilities in young adulthood, the causality of bullying victimization is difficult to ascertain since early inhibited temperament is one of the reasons for some victims being targeted. He explained that submissive behaviors and negative self-image are found the predictor of peer victimization. Even though their research hasn’t discussed the individuals’ cognitive change of bullying, their research pointed out the reasons for bully victimization is varied. Personal reasons such as inhibited temperament, illness or disability, and physical appearance are covered by their research. Family factors such as parental over control were pointed out for

the reason of being targeted. In addition, the difficulty to identify the causality of bullying actually illustrate that bullying victimization and cognitive vulnerabilities are intertwined in individual's bullying experience.

### *Cognition & Resilience*

Different from analyzing the negative outcome and potential reason of bullying victimization, Sapouna and Wolke (2013) studied the resilience of former victims after the bullying experience based on previous research finding that 12-22% of former victims manifest resilience to bullying. For them resilience is a capacity instead of a personality trait that develops in a positive social context (Egeland, Carison, & Sroufe, 1993; Luthar, 2003; Rutter, 1999). Sapouna and Wolke's (2013) study found that supports within and outside of the family which enhance self-esteem and nurture positive feelings about social relationships increase the former victims' belief of their capability to cope with negative bullying experiences. Their research joins the belief that proper cognition of a negative experience can exert a crucial part in their longitudinal development with even positive outcomes. This idea is also echoed by Catterson and Hunter (2010) that the cognitive interpretation of events (e.g., the appraisals of blame, threat, and perceived control) partially mediates the extent to which bullied children will report feeling lonely (p. 403). What is worth mentioning is that they suggest future intervention programs should include the efforts on developing victims' psychosocial competence in supplement to improve their family relationships.

Hemphill, Tollit, and Herrenkohl (2014) conducted a research that provided supplementary protective factors such as high academic performance, problem-solving coping strategies, and opportunities for prosocial involvement in the family to solve victims' internalizing problems which include withdrawn, reporting somatic complaints, depression and anxiety. They also pointed out emotional control and belief in moral order are protective factors for bullying perpetrators to buffer longitudinal externalizing problems such as increased aggression, violent behavior, later delinquency, criminality and repeated offending (Hemphill, Tollit, & Herrenkohl, 2014). Even though Hemphill et al. (2014) haven't discussed how the victims' cognitive modification was established under the influence of protective factors which

mitigate the longitudinal internalizing problem of bully victimization, Hemphill et al.'s (2014) research presents that high academic performance, problem-solving coping strategies, and prosocial involvement in family can reduce the possibility of future mental problems of victims.

### *Cognition & Adulthood Response*

Personal cognition is formed by a variety of influences which include individual biological and genetically traits, social context such as family and school education, as well as influential incidence such as bullying. Personal cognition is also dynamic and flexible over the term of psychological development. Nevertheless, drastic experience such as bullying engraved a strong, subconscious, and longitudinal mark upon individual's personal perception of the self, others, interpersonal relationship, and the world. Swearer and Hymel (2015) point that "if negative events are attributed to global, stable, and internal cognitive schemas, and negative beliefs about self, world, and future, individuals are at increased risk for internalizing and externalizing problems" (Swearer and Hymel, 2015, p. 349). Therefore, after discussion with how previous literatures analyze individual cognition being influenced by bully experience, and how individual factors and family factors influence former victim's perception of bully, here below are the discussion how former victims react when they grow up in the confrontation of social stressful events and their children's bully involvement.

From Araki Tsuyoshi (2003), adults who have been bullied in childhood majorly applied non-engagement coping strategies in adulthood interpersonal stressful events. Through 81 self-reports from young adults, he discussed that a former victim was likely to possess the inferiority complex and the hurt of self-image which deprives the victim's courage and confidence to cope with interpersonal stressful events, so they adopted non-engagement strategy which further causes their depression. His quantitative research pointed out that the mental damage that was caused by childhood bully victimization may sustain and transfer to other social stressful events rather than exclusive bully situation in the adult world. The cognition of self and relationship with others plays a vital role for their depression.

Cooper and Nickerson (2013) have conducted an online survey among two-hundred-sixty parents from a public-school district in the Northeast America. They found that parents' previous involvement in bullying exerts significant impact upon their current views, intensity of concern, and strategies they implemented in dealing with their children' bullying situation. Specifically, they found about half of parents apply measures such as "obtaining anti-bullying resources, attending an anti-bullying presentation, or spreading information about bullying to others" (p. 536) and male parents tend to advise fighting back while female parents who were formerly bullied incline to suggest avoiding confrontation (Cooper & Nickerson, 2013; Turkel, 2007). Cooper and Nickerson's (2013) study showed that over 90 % of parents in their study can recall consistently and validly of their personal involvement as a bully, victim, or bystander over considerable long time. Meanwhile, they recall and reflection upon their parents' reactions toward the bully are worked as a reference to learn and compare from. Therefore, I think the longitudinal influence of childhood bully toward individuals also lies in trans-generational cognitive heritage of bullying involvement and anti-bullying experience. As mentioned before, family of origin exerts influence such as loneliness through social skill learning, genetically transmit as well as parenting style from bullied parent toward their children. These two literatures echo in the discussion, and illustrated that children may be influenced by family of origin, engaged and self-inflicted in bullied and its aftermath; whereas parents who are formerly bullied may apply their cognition and reflection into their children's involvement of bully.

These previous studies provide a deeper understanding of the longitudinal impact of childhood bullying and the cognitive implications that have been explained among these researches; however, the issue of how victims in adulthood reflect upon their childhood bullying experience and their current cognitive attribution of childhood victimization requires further exploration. Through literature review, the exploration of these questions is lacking in previous studies.

#### 2.4.4 Methodology of Literature Review and Conclusion for This Part

With literature review of previous research, I searched journals and books through ProQuest, Eric, and Ebsco Databases with keywords such as bully, longitudinal, perception, and adulthood. I performed an initial screening among 57 articles and 5 books and excluded researches in neighborhood, community, and school circumstances. Then I conducted a full-text in-depth review among 20 journals and one book. Additionally, all of these sources are listed in References of this thesis.

Among a large number of longitudinal research on the adulthood outcome of childhood victimization, most of them adapted psychological questionnaire (quantitative research methods) to measure and diagnose the longitudinal psychological outcome of former victims. Specifically, among 57 journals, there are 52 applied quantitative research methods; three out of five books applied quantitative research exclusively, and the other two books adapted both quantitative and qualitative methods to approach the longitudinal effect of childhood bullying issues. This idea is also supported by Patton, Hong, Patel, and Kral that “most empirical studies on bullying and peer victimization are quantitative and examines the prevalence of bullying, associated risk and protective factors, and negative outcomes. Conversely, there is limited qualitative research on the experience of children and adolescents related to school bullying and victimization” (Patton, Hong, Patel, & Kral, 2017, p. 3). Consequently, former victims’ voices have been represented via numbers, and implication from bullying resilience research are hard to find.

In addition, none of current literature addresses the victims’ current perception or cognition of their childhood experience, and this leaves the academic potential for my thesis. For example, Sourander et al. explore the early adulthood psychiatric disorder of Finnish males who bully or are bullied in childhood. They applied International Classification of Disease, Tenth Revision (ICD-10) psychiatric diagnose to determine the magnitude of participants’ psychiatric disorder (Sourander et al., 2007). The quantitative research showed that

“information about frequent bullying and victimization as primary screening for children at risk identified around 28% of those with a psychiatric disorder 10 to 15 years later” (Sourander et al., 2007, p. 397). The problem of similar quantitative researches lies that we hardly can't obtain the **first-person perspective** regarding the causality of being the bully target, and the complex elements throughout individual **psychological development**. In other words, we can hardly obtain a holistic picture of young adults' perception of bullying victimization during and after the bullying through similar quantitative researches.

Through the extensive presentation of previous literature in this topic, we can conclude that: Firstly, bullying experiences trigger cognitive changes by influencing victims' view of themselves, others, social relations, and the world. The subsequent learned helplessness, inferior complex, adulthood anxiety that derived from longitudinal social avoidance and social sensitivity caused loneliness, depression, and other internalizing and externalizing problems (Gladstone, Parker, & Malhi 2006; Davidson, & Demaray, 2007). These psychological symptoms in return perpetuate bullying re-victimization. Whereas loneliness worked as a transitional psychological state between bullying resilience and internalizing problems such as depression and anxiety. The transgenerational continuity of loneliness echoes studies of attitude and strategies that demonstrate consistency among generations. In addition, to obtain a correct causal attribution from childhood victimization, understanding bully's moral disengagement mentality is vital for victims' cognitive rectification.

Secondly, focus on micro-ecological system in Bronfenbrenner's (1992) ecological systems framework, individual factors such as inhibited temperament correlated their cognition in a bullying situation; while family factors such as parenting style, attachment pattern, family structure, and developmental pathways exert great influence upon victimization. However, a supportive family atmosphere, sibling relationship, high academic performance, problem-solving coping strategies are working as the protective factors to nurture resilience with bullying. What is worth mentioning is that the unique identity of the only-child giving that most of my participants share this background. The psychological traits of the only-child

deserve special attention. Thirdly, besides cognitive reasons among different theories in micro-ecological systems, the significance of this longitudinal cognitive research lies in the adulthood social interaction, the re-victimization causality and transgenerational continuity.

As it is known to many, cognition provide a lens for individuals to interpret the life event. Sometimes the lens may be distorted by a range of factors when we firstly experienced it, however, the holistic and intimate understanding of adults' reflection of childhood bully victimization phenomenon can provide a start point for young adults to review their cognition that originated in childhood when they deal with severe social conflict for the first time, which is the highlight of CBT for empowering the victims.

### **3 Phenomenology**

Now that the theoretical foundation has been framed, the methodology applied in this research will be developed. First, the history of phenomenology will be introduced to explain the development of the ontological and epistemological of phenomenology. Thereafter, phenomenology as an applicable method for my longitudinal bully research will be explained. Finally, the specifics of the methodological practice of phenomenology in my research will be laid out. This includes how participants were selected, how the interview questions were prepared, and the collection and analyzation of the data.

#### **3.1 The History, Ontology, and Epistemology of Phenomenology**

By way of introduction, consider the following scenario: On a normal day, you would get up and prepare yourself for university or the work place. However, suddenly, there is news about a bombing and that troops are approaching the city in which you live. Your study and work schedule are disturbed. The topic of conversation between friends shifts from scientific rules to racial holocaust. You doubt what will happen to the world. How can we approach reality in turbulent years? The rule, number, and principle that we once believed in have been toppled down. A massive number of people marched between towns to trample the civilization and flourishing economy that the hard work of previous generations have built. Philosophers and scholars are trying to understand and explore the possibilities beyond quantitative or imperial research. Psychologists are trying to argue their academic place in social and scientific research. How do they argue against the voice which doubts the reliability and credibility of psychology because psychological research focuses on the subjectivity of human experience? How do we analyze a human's perception of reality? What is meaningful to individuals? Why people possess distinctive understandings of the meaning toward the same event? Phenomenology sprang from just such a collision of turbulent times and the paradigm-shifting questions that always follow such times.



According to Groenewald (2004), the origin of phenomenological research can be traced back to Kant (who wrote *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781) and Hegel (who wrote *The Phenomenology of Spirit* in 1807). However, it was until the devastation of the European social order during World War One when the dominant ideologies were subsequently shaken, philosophers and scholars began to rethink the very nature of the world and the way they viewed the world. Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), who has been recognized as ‘the fountainhead of phenomenology in the twentieth century’ ‘sought to develop a new philosophical method which would lend absolute certainty to a disintegrating civilization’ (Eagleton, 1983, p. 54) after World War One. He raised arguments against the positivism belief that ‘the objects in the external world exist independently and that the information about objects is reliable’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), and made a break away from Cartesian dualism of reality being something “out there” waiting to be understood and independent from individual (Lavery, 2003; Jone, 1975; Koch, 1995). Historically, Husserl absorbed his teacher, German philosopher and psychologist, Franz Brentano’s (1838-1917) concept of the “intentional nature of consciousness”. (Brentano was also the teacher of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939).) Husserl’s research built an important epistemological foundation with the development of Brentano’s concept. Later, under Husserl’s training as the successor of Husserl’s professorship (Lavery, 2003), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) introduced the concept of “Dasein” which Groenewald (2014) explained as “Being there” and Lavery (2003) translated into “the mode of being human” or “the situated meaning of a human in the world”, which is used to explore the ontological issues of phenomenology. This idea is also supported by Lavery (2003): “while Husserl focused more on the epistemological question of the relationship between the knower and the object of study, Heidegger moved to the ontological question of the nature of reality and “Being” in the world” (p. 26-27).

In discussions of epistemology, Edmund Husserl argues that ‘reality is *intentional* and humans direct their consciousness toward an object’ (Davis, 1991), the reality of the world is inaccessible, but the *subjective experience* of the world is knowable. Furthermore, each individual is an *integral part* of the reality by personal participation, conceptualization, and interpretation. **First**, regard to “intentional nature of consciousness”, phenomenologists

believe objects do not arouse individual's concept of reality until we exert intentional consciousness to particular things. Things that our consciousness doesn't direct to usually eliminated or neglected from individuals' construction of reality. They believe researchers should understand the "facts within the scheme of human motives, means and ends, planning, and actions" (Davis, 1991, p. 9), which constitute the view of the world beyond stimuli, empirical formula. Even though there are innate physical, chemical, or biological property of things, phenomenologists believes the meaning of things locates in the individual's consciousness and conveyed through active construction of language, rules, roles and status (Swingewood, 1984). **Second**, to emphasize the *subjective experience* of interpreting reality, they believe that the reality of the world is inaccessible, but the subjective experience of the world is knowable. As Davis (1991) explained, 'all our knowledge of the world, even scientific knowledge, is obtained from one particular point of view, or from some experience of the world' (Davis, 1991, p. 4). Edmund Husserl argued that people can only obtain reality through careful research on the structure of personal consciousness and subjective-interpretation of reality. In addition, the reality and the meaning of things are fluid and dynamic with the flow of individual's consciousness. **Third**, individuals are actively engaged in building the reality through personal influences as well as intersubjectivity. Schutz initiated the concept of intersubjectivity to describe the mechanism when individual's perceptions mingle and transform, and subsequently create "a world of intersubjective culture". Furthermore, each individual is an integral part of the reality by personal participation, conceptualization, and interpretation. They believe reality is actively and consciously constructed by subjects, and the truth or reality is multiple. Through the 'internal experience of being conscious of something' (Holloway, 1997, p. 117), every individual creates meaning by their experiences and the shared group experience contributes to a dynamic and fluid reality. Edmund Husserl and his followers hereby laid the epistemological foundation of phenomenology. The integral consideration of subject/knower and object/the known in the epistemological question of reality and meaning in the world provides a credible research foundation of phenomenology especially in the field of psychology.

Besides the contribution to the establishment of the epistemology of phenomenology, Husserl also brought up “*bracketing*” as the research method and suggested phenomenology as a reliable research method to approach subjective research questions such as perception and cognition in the field of *psychology*. On one hand, Husserl developed the process of phenomenological bracketing to present “the purely immanent character of conscious experience by means of careful description”, and to ‘bracket out the outer world as well as individual biases in order to successfully achieve contact with essences of ‘back to things’” (Lavery, 2003, p. 23). Van Manen and Adams (2010) referred that the process of bracketing is “aims to reflect on prereflective human experience” instead of a pure subjective interpretation. From Davis (1991), Lavery (2003), and Groenewald (2004), they described bracketing as identifying one’s presuppositions, “individual biases”, “judgement or particular beliefs” about the nature of the phenomena, and put them aside to obtain the essential properties and structures of their experience. Lavery (2003) further explain that “the ultimate structures of consciousness were described as essences that made the object identifiable as a particular type of object or experience, unique from others (Edie, 1987)”. In this way, phenomenology attempts to reach subjective experience such as perception, emotion and judgement in an objective way. On the other hand, Husserl also criticized the attempt to approach psychological issues via purely natural science-based methods. According to Lavery (2003), “psychology deals with living subjects who are not simply reacting automatically to external stimuli, but rather are responding to their own perception of what these stimuli mean” (p. 24). Similar ideas are also shared by Menon, Sinha, and Sreekantan (2014) that “phenomenology attempts to create conditions for the objective study of topics usually regarded as subjective: consciousness and the content of conscious experiences such as judgments, perceptions, and emotions. Although phenomenology seeks to be scientific, it does not attempt to study consciousness from the perspective of clinical psychology or neurology. Instead, it seeks through systematic reflection to determine the essential properties and structures of experience” (p. 172). For Husserl, psychological research that only explore the isolate and quantified correlation between psychological response and external and physical stimuli may lead to **inadequacy of variable, context ignorance, and the artificial situation** (Lavery, 2003). To conclude, with the introducing of bracketing as the phenomenological method to grasp the structure or “prereflective human experience” (Van

Manen & Adams, 2010) rather than pure subjective interpretation, Husserl tried to attain objectivity in analyzing subjective psychological issues such as individuals' cognitive construction of reality.

As defined by Webster dictionary, ontology is the philosophical study of the nature of being, becoming, existence or reality as well as the basic categories of being and their relations. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) introduced the concept of "Dasein" which Groenewald (2014) explained as "Being there" and highlighted the concept of historicity, as being explained by Lavery (2003), which indicates an individual's history or background presents this person's epistemology of the world. Based on this concept, Heidegger believes that "all understanding is connected to a given set of fore-structures, including one's historicity, that cannot be eliminated" (Lavery, 2003, p. 24). Even though Husserl and Heidegger both deny the duality between the object and inquiry as well as the split of body and mind, Husserl believes "individuals were capable of a direct grasping of consciousness" through bracketing while Heidegger argue that the bracketing is impossible because personal pre-understanding and historicity are inseparable from their personal experience (Lavery, 2003). Instead of bracketing the biases and assumptions of the researcher, Heidegger suggested to present and give consideration of the individual's pre-understanding which was taken as inevitable and essential to interpretive process (Lavery, 2003). Nowadays, Martin Heidegger has been recognized as the major representor and frontier of "Hermeneutic Phenomenology", and Hans-Georg Gadamer has extended Heidegger's work "into practical application" through introducing the idea of "horizon" and arguing the impossibility of bracketing in the process of interpretation (Lavery, 2003). For Gadamer (1900-2002), horizon is a range of vision that includes wide individual perception and enable the researcher to understand reality beyond what is close at hand. In a word, Heidegger and Gadamer enriched the ontological question of the nature of being or "Dasein" in phenomenological research with the introduction of "historicity" and "horizon".

Subsequently phenomenology has been developed in a variety of branches such as Existential phenomenology, generative historicist phenomenology, realistic phenomenology, and the like (David Woodruff, 2016). However, the ideological devastation of old value and rule during the historical rise of phenomenology in World War One might be taken as a metaphor of the

cognitive transformation that took place upon victims in childhood bullying. The epistemology of phenomenology gives the voice of participants to express their perceptions, emotions, and experience. These voices may not only function as emancipation for victims, but also expand the horizon of interpreting reality for researchers. In addition, the ontology of phenomenology gives the researchers the implications of finding the suitable way to explore the nature of being, and the ideas of “historicality” and “horizon” are useful to present the nature of being as prudent and holistic as possible. With my research focuses on the adulthood perception of former victims’ childhood bullying, phenomenology which focus on the intersubjective experience of phenomena serves as a reliable, contextual method to approach psychological questions.

### **3.2 The Specific Application of Phenomenology in This Research**

Now that the ontology and epistemology of phenomenology have been laid, and the applicability of phenomenology has been explained, in this section, I will explain the definition of phenomenology, the phenomenological research procedures, the selection of research participants, and the process of data analysis.

#### **3.2.1 Definition of Phenomenology and Applicability**

Phenomenology is never easy to define. As a matter of fact, Gabriella Farina explained that:

“A unique and final definition of phenomenology is dangerous and perhaps even paradoxical as it lacks a thematic focus. In fact, it is not a doctrine, nor a philosophical school, but rather a style of thought, a method, an open and ever-renewed experience having different results, and this may disorient anyone wishing to define the meaning of phenomenology”.

(Farina 2014)

In my review of the definition of phenomenology through an extensive range of academic papers, phenomenology has been discussed as an empirical qualitative research methodology, a philosophical attitude, and a psychological research concept. According to Van Manen and Adams (2010), ‘phenomenology is an approach to qualitative inquiry that is grounded in

certain traditions of philosophy and the humanities, and that aims to reflect on prereflective human experience'. This idea is also shared by Maron (1986), phenomenology is a research method aimed at 'description, analysis, and understanding of experience' (p. 180) through which to describe the individual construction of reality. F Lindsley et al (2015), 'phenomenology itself is the philosophical study of the structures of experience and consciousness'. Wertz (2011) explained that Edmund Husserl established phenomenology as a kind of "descriptive psychology" and "many seminal phenomenological philosophers have addressed disciplinary issues in psychology and have performed psychological analysis, including, Heidegger (1927/1962), Sartre (1948/1939, 1948/1940, 1956/1943), Merleau-Ponty (1943/1962; 1942/1963), Marcel (1965), Schutz (1932/1967) ...and Gadamer (1960/1989)" (p. 4).

Despite the multiple standpoints from which to define phenomenology and the complexity of its development realms in research methodology, philosophy, and psychology, I would like to adopt Valle and Halling's (1989) definition in this thesis to illustrate my understanding of phenomenology: phenomenology is "the rigorous and unbiased study of things as they appear so that one might come to an essential(fundamental) understanding of human consciousness and experience" in the "life world" (p. 6). For this definition, there are three concepts that deserve special attention. They are the understanding of the '*life world*' (Lavery, 2003; Willis, 2001) and "*objectivizing subjectivity*" (Heidegger, 1962; Willis, 2001), as well as the connotation of "*essential structure of consciousness*" (Willis, 2001; Edie, 1987).

#### *what is life world*

Phenomenologists believe that the world is the 'experienced life world' in phenomenological discourse. In addition, this world is fluid and ever-changing. The individuals' experience is understood as "as a part of all the familiar and recurrent experience of body, time, space and social relations which make up a person's felt world" (Willis, 2001, p. 8). According to Willis (2001), Husserl (1964) and other phenomenologists emphasized the role that humans play in the construction of the world as it is experienced (p. 2). With this explanation, the

phenomenologists reject the positivist idea that the world and the “essential structure” of the world are out there to be discovered (Davis, 1991; Laverty, 2003).

### *objectivizing subjectivity*

When we explore the definition of phenomenology, we need to pay special attention to the issue of subjectivity and objectivity since the phenomenological research subjects are human consciousness, experience, emotion, and memory. As mentioned before, Husserl was trying to “develop a new philosophical method which would lend absolute certainty to a disintegrating civilization” which is actually a pursuit of objectively presenting of humans’ subjective experience, feeling, perceptions, and emotions. Phenomenology adapted **bracketing** to differentiate itself from the ‘objectifying view’ and purely subjective ideas so as to attain the objectivizing subjectivity (Willis, 2001). Willis (2001) explained that “there is a tension between objectifying views that posit that the world, as we know it, exists ‘out there’ independently of human consciousness; and mentalist views, that think the world is purely a construction of the mind” (Willis, 2001, p. 2). **Phenomenology is a middle ground focusing on human experienced truth.** Hereby, phenomenologists hold the belief that phenomenological research neither works as a camera to capture “the things out there”, nor a compilation of subjective ideas. Furthermore, analysis and data presentation of phenomenology is neither “scientific report” nor “narcissistic” accounts (Willis, 2001, p. 3). Instead, phenomenological researchers believe the interaction between subject and object, that is “to experience, to know”, is the true epistemological way toward reality.

Regarding the difficulty of objectivizing subjectivity in phenomenological research, Gadamer (1984) suggested that the “Hermeneutics of suspicion”, or suspicion of our ability to represent subjective experience truthfully and reliably lies in our willingness to accept “the mystery of individuality”. He explains that the mystery of individuality puts aside our suspicion of whether we can correctly understand the expression of the other individual since there is no available measurement of how truthful we are presenting other individual’s inner world. However, he also argues that “behind a person’s individuality something common and intelligible could be reenacted” (p. 57). Therefore, the researcher should accept the mystery of

individuality and try to obtain the essence or structure of experience and then gain a horizon from multiple perspectives or perceptions.

### *structure of consciousness or experience*

For Edmund Husserl, Phenomenology, is primarily concerned with the study of the structures of consciousness and the phenomena which attain and exhibit the objectivity of subjective experience of the same phenomena. In this way, he believes the lived experience of humans, especially the bracketing experience, is intimate and reliable to reveal the reality of the life world which can offer alternative approach for empirical research. As Laverty (2003) put it, Husserl “sought to show the purely immanent character of conscious experience” through phenomenological bracketing (p. 23). Specifically, Edie (1987) explained that the structure of consciousness “were described as essences that made the object identifiable as a particular type of object or experience, unique from others” (as cited by Laverty, 2003, p. 23). This understanding of the structure of consciousness is also supported by Polkinghorne (1989) that “the investigation of conscious (or "lived") structures” means to identify the “invariant and essential” part of the experience of a phenomenon (P. 42).

### 3.2.2 Research Procedures

These abovementioned ideas are essential for my understanding of phenomenology as applied in this research. With regard to implementing phenomenological research procedures for this research, I referred Perter Willis’s (2001) procedures. From Willis, there are three steps to perform a phenomenological research: 1) description; 2) bracketing, and 3) naming essential themes (Willis, 2001, p.7). He explained that description is the process of presenting multiple perspectives of a lived experience of a given phenomenon which provides the premise to secure the structure of experience or phenomenon. During the description process, the researchers try to eliminate the pre-reflexive bias, expectation, cultural influence, and try to adapt intuitive words and describe the immediate experience as well as avoid further ‘analysis or generalization or contemplation of the thing itself’ (Willis, 2001, p. 7). The bracketing procedure, as explained by Van Manen (1990) is “suspending one’s various beliefs in the reality of the natural world in order to study the essential structures of the world” (p. 175).



The last step is naming essential themes. According to Willis (2001), the researcher must adapt thematic analysis to draw out the essential and constant elements of a particular phenomenon among multiple individualized life experiences. Therefore, following Willis's (2001) procedure, the very start to implement my research is to find participants who had experienced the phenomenon of childhood bullying, and I will present the process as below.

### 3.2.3 Selection of Research Participants

When I select the participants for the research, there were four aspects showed to the process. First, all of the participants are chosen for their possession of a childhood bully victimization experience. According to Hycner (1999, p. 156) "the phenomenon dictates the method (not vice-versa) including even the type of participants." Since the research purpose is understanding the young adults' perception of their childhood bully victimization experience, I eliminated people who were the bully, the bystander, and the bully victim. Second, the participants in this research are those who are familiar with me, or whom being recommended by my friends. This was because the establishment of trust, rapport, and common interest of the research is vital to obtain deep, reliable, and abundant data in the research of personal and sensitive topic (Lester, 1999). As mentioned in the theoretical framework part, studies showed that bully victimization may cause longitudinal impact upon a person's interpersonal communication pattern and mentality. Many former victims of severe hurts may suffer depression, loneliness, anxiety, and low self-image in their adulthood. Some former victims show resilience in the course of personal growth. Despite of the diversity of my participants, the mutual trust and closeness are essential for this research. To balance the way this connection limited my participant pool, I adapted a snowball sampling method to find participants. This method searches participants by collecting data from one informant or participant who matches to their research objectives, and then ask the participant to provide the information needed to locate other candidates who may also be suitable and interested to participate the research, and so on (Babbie, 1995; Crabtree & Miller, 1992). Using this sampling method, I can ensure the rapport relationship and trust with participants, connect with unexpected participants, and obtain a diversity of participants. Compared to other sampling methods, this method does not require complex design and personnel assistance

(Voicu & Babonea, 2007). After determining the data collecting method, I oriented my research in the sphere of global education which enable my research does not culturally bound.

Third, the nationality of participants is not a criterion because of the data triangulation consideration. In different countries, the bully issue has been viewed differently based on ethnographic reason. Leung and Cohen (2011) have pointed out that culture creates meaningful clusters of behavior according to particular logic. However, in this research, I focus on individual differences so as to obtain a phenomenological answer to the perceptions of previous bully victimization. As argued by Davis 1991, the major impact of phenomenology is “to make individuals--both subjects and researcher-- and their perceptions of the world around them central to the research process” (p. 4). How people construct meaning out of their reality is center to phenomenological research. In addition, the process of bracketing requires phenomenological researchers put aside cultural connotation, bias, and presuppositions so as to “get back to things” (Laverty, 2003). Furthermore, the diversity of participants from different cultural background enables the researcher ‘to contrast the data and “validate” the data if it yields similar findings’ (Groenewald, 2004, p. 46).

The number of participants is seven, young adults with an average age of 26.75, all students at the University of Oulu. From Boyd (2001), as quoted by Groenewald (2004, p. 46), two to ten participants are sufficient to reach saturation in phenomenological research. Among them, two are female and five are male. The nationalities of the participants are four Chinese, one Finnish, one Austrian Finnish, and one British.

#### 3.2.4 Data Analysis

At the beginning of the semi-structured interview, I gathered demographic information about each participant (e.g., gender, age, occupation). I then interviewed participants about their general bully experiences (e.g., what kind of bully they have suffered, what might be the

reason for their being targeted, what they thought and how they felt during the occurrence of the bullying in childhood, and what is their perception of their childhood bully experience today). My particular focus was on their perception of bullying victimization in childhood and in adulthood. Interviews ranged from approximately 35 minutes to 2 hours. All interviews were audio-recorded, annotated and transcribed for further data analysis. Below is a simplified table of the seven participants' experiences, which will be further developed in the Finding section to follow.

#	Sex	Age	Interview	Citizenship	Time of Bullying Occurrence	Ways of Bullying	Frequency of Bullying
P1	M	29	Email	UK	final year of primary school	teasing, calling names	almost every school day
P2	M	27	F2F	Chinese	senior high school, 16-17 years old	rumors, mocking, teasing, call nicknames	regular and intense at school
P3	F	29	F2F	Chinese	primary school, 7-8, 13 years old	extorting, teasing, social ostracizing, unfair requests	intense at certain period
P4	M	26	F2F	Austria, Finnish	high school, 13-14 years old	teasing	often
P5	M	29	F2F	Finnish	junior high school, 14-16 years old	teasing, calling names, social ostracization	almost every school day,
P6	F	24	F2F	Chinese	primary school, 7-8 years old	social ostracization, steal things from the victim	regular and long term
P7	M	27	F2F	Chinese	junior high school, 14-16 years old	mocking, teasing in public	often

Table 1. Demographics of Participants and Bullying Situations.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Reasons for Being Bullied

Following phenomenological research methods, I identified five categories of reasons for being bullied: physical appearance, socio-economic background, victims' temperament, group conflict in the classroom, and differences from other classmates. Although the following discussion treats each of these themes separately, it is quite possible that a student might suffer from bullying for multiple reasons at different stages of life, perhaps even multiple reasons at the same time.

#### 4.1.1 Physical Appearance

A common reason for childhood bully victimization is the physical appearance. The primary rationale underlying this reason is that the differentiation of physical appearance has been taken advantage of by the bully who is supported by societal conventions. This concept is mingled with the prevalent aesthetical and health concepts in the social and cultural environment. Sometimes the victims cannot change their physical appearance due to personal identity or health reasons. As an example, P1 suffered from severe asthma and had to take steroid medicines which resulted in his overweight and so larger physical build. So, at school, other kids teased him and called him names in the playground:

*"I think that the bully-bullee relationship normally involves a power imbalance. For some reasons, people utilize these elevated power or status, whether it be materially, ideologically, or physically, in a way that discriminates against (normally through the medium of physical and psychological violence, even sexual harassment) ... Sometimes they will just target people who are different and deviate away from social norms and conventions. I was targeted because of my weight and this made me noticeable to those predators in many ways. In my case, the bully was older than I was, and therefore had more status and thus greater physical strength." (P1)*

For P4, physical appearance is a confirmation of personal identity. In this case, physical appearance as well as the low possibility of retaliation in the bully's eyes has been taken advantage of to target victims.

*“People might think I am strange, because I have dreadlocks. I was also kind of Gothic style, I only dress in black. I use black nail polish for my nails. Because of my appearance as well as shyness, I didn't fit in. In Austria, it is weird if you don't immediately be outgoing and then talk about everything.” (P4)*

Here physical appearance has been taken advantage of by the bully as a source to assert power from social conventions. The victims may go through confusion and self-doubt because of the judgements and mock that bullies cause. We are not sure shyness and other typical characteristics of bullying victims relate to their victimization or not. However, these elements put the victim into disadvantage in the struggle of social power in bullying situations.

#### 4.1.2 Social-economic Background

Social-economic background has been found to be a major reason of bullying victimization for P3. From the narration of the childhood environment she grew up in, I got to know that her parents left her and her siblings in a little town so as to support the family financially. Her grandma and uncle took care of her for a short period of time during primary school. Then her two elder sisters shouldered the responsibility of taking care of her and her brother when she attended junior high school. The financial situation of her family was quite grave. She seldom had new clothes, and she rarely ate snacks.

*“I believe the financial situation in my family and my parents' long term of absence cause me being targeted in childhood. I remember when my sisters were taking care of me and my brother, sometimes the family was short of money to buy rice and had to borrow money from a nice neighbor. In junior high school, my mother convinced me to wear my eldest sister's big green winter coat which made me looks strange and I didn't dare talk to boys. A group of rich girls in the class used to laugh at me, and ridicule my outfits and personal belongings. They forced me to take off my school uniform to let them sit on it on the ground in physical*

*education classes. They also excluded me from group discussions in the class, and sent rumors that I was deserted by my parents.” (P3)*

#### 4.1.3 Social-economic Background

Many participants describe their own temperament as shy and introverted during their experiences of bullying victimization. Many participants claimed that before the intense occurrence of bullying, they are energetic, happy, and friendly (P3, P4, P5 P7, P8). With this phenomenological research, P6 has experienced a particular subtle kind of relational bullying. She explained that these incidents of intimidation caused her to act in a cowardly way as well as reducing her level of confidence.

*“When I was a child, I was self-inflicted to magnify the influence of a thing which made me quiet and self-inflicted. In kindergarten and primary school, there is a girl whom I took as a good friend of mine always bully me. For example, when kids get together, she will never let me join in the game of playing house. She just said there is no business of you and the like. While in primary school, she sat beside me. She stole my pen very often and she usually used the stolen pen in front of me and I dared not to complain about it or claim them back. There was a time I tentatively asked her to return my pen, and she said that was her father’s and that ‘which eye does you see that I had stolen the pen from you?’ I feared to offend her and ruin the relationship, and I never dared to report to teachers or parents. Nevertheless, she always tried to convince the public that she was a good friend of mine.” (P6)*

In her further narrations, she overcame this bullying situation by rebuilding her self-confidence. Even though, P6 didn’t show shyness, introversion, or inhibited temperament in her daily life, she suffered regular relational bullying due to her low confidence, and anxiety of social relationship as became clear through her descriptions.

#### 4.1.4 Group Conflict in Classroom

Among all interviewees, P5 and P7 described a different facet of bullying, that is, group bullying. For P5, he was bullied due to the classroom had a culture of bullying. His differences with hobbies and interests, along with his excellent academic performance singled him out from the other students and therefore made him a prime candidate for bullying.

*“There are so many of these bullies. If you just have one or two good friends, your interference will just make the situation more complex. In our class, we have maybe 7 boys overall as the bully. You can consider that 5 of them sometimes did it. There is a power imbalance. You don’t have your power. They are randomly targeted on someone. There were more dominant figures in the group. They were kind of holding the power.” (P5)*

Regard to P7, his class had a group conflict, and he was bullied because he belonged to the minority group.

*“In the classroom, there are different groups of people. They seem to be against with each other, so you have to join one of the groups, otherwise you would get hurt from both of the groups. I belonged to the minority group since most of my friends are in that group. Subsequently I had been teased very often by the big groups. They laughed at me and embarrassed me when I hadn’t answered the teacher’s question perfectly.” (P7)*

For P5, the presence of multiple bullies in the class encouraged the bullying culture. In this situation, the bullies obtained a sense of power by randomly choosing victims who were easy targets and different from other peers. However, the situation for P6 was different. A group of people intentionally pursued people from another group and the power imbalance was easy to observe. This kind of bullying differentiates itself from the discussion of individual power to the discussion of group power in bullying victimization situations. There are cases where the victim won the firm support from his group, and the victim who had been struggling with his belongings to the minority group. His perception of interpersonal relationships would be

highly dependent on his own response, emotion, and cognition. We will discuss more in the following part.

#### 4.1.5 Differences and Low Probability of Retaliation

Among the interviews, there is one reason that was mentioned by all of the victims: they believe they had been chosen because they were different from the rest of the students and their temperament and reaction toward the initial bullying made the bully believe that these students were easy targets. This point is also shared by Georgiou and Stavrinides (2008) that “It is possible that these students look and act differently from typical students, rendering it difficult for them to find acceptance or support from peers”. Sometimes the differences result from the predator’s subjective sense of threatening, jealous, or hatred.

*“In our class, we have maybe 7 boys overall. You can consider that 5 of them sometimes did it. There is a power imbalance. You don’t have your power. They randomly target on someone. If you are different, you are vulnerable to become the target. For example, one boy joins in our class in grade 8. He came from a different town. He was taken as different from the group. I had different interest than others. For example, I finished the task properly in school and wanted to perform well in the school, but there were kids who did not really care about the grades. I was also quite competitive in sport, so I might irritate some bullies in things like that. I had goals in attending school and was quite striving to attain these goals.”*  
(P5)

*“Maybe because I was too well-behaved, so there were some bullies in my class so they would like to look for this kind of person. Also, maybe because I was the head of the class (as a monitor) in the first year of my high school, and there were some bad students who don’t behave well, and I always give them some kinds of punishment. I was in charge of the class. And my head teacher he wasn’t very responsible so I did quite a lot of work. Some students they think that I may mean to them. Maybe because of that, they wanted to get back to me. That might be the case for some students, but for some other students they may have nothing good to do but to bully students who are well behaved, who are not brave enough. And I didn’t have many friends at that time. I guess I am not the same type of student as the students*



*in my class, so I would be rather hang out with students in other classes. Most students in my class were not very good students. I just wasn't the same person as they were.” (P2)*

During the interview, I put aside personal bias. Instead of doubting the victim's exclamation or judging the reasons of victimization, I chose to stand on the listener's side. On one hand, this is the proper research attitude of bracketing and empathic neutrality. On the other hand, according to ethical principle, I can't deepen their self-blame during their reflection.

## **4.2 Childhood Perception of Bully Victimization**

After enquiring to the potential reasons for their victimization, I asked the participants what were their views and feelings toward their victimization experience when they were young. Through theme coding, I found they shared a similar perception toward their bullying experience. These are self-blame, learnt helplessness, suspiciousness of interpersonal relationships, sensitivity and defensiveness with other people's opinions, and doubt of self-worth.

### **4.2.1 Self-blame**

There is a prevailing cognition of blaming themselves for the bullying experience. They blamed themselves for their differences, their incapability to defend themselves, their involvement toward the bullying situations, and the surrender to social discrimination.

*“when I thought about things later I felt hurt. I wanted to be similar to my friends and I wanted to just blend in with the crowd in a way that avoided those hurtful comments.” (P1)*

*“I felt quite irritated, my anger, but I didn't do much about that, I was just trying to... by to wait...I just didn't maybe just because I thought that was shameful? I don't know.” (P2)*

*“I felt unfair that even though they can use their own clothes, they still asked me to submit my outfit for them maybe because I look poor and my clothes are deserving to be used as a blanket on the ground? However, my family was quite poor at that time, and I can't do anything to change it. Maybe poor people have to endure these hardships.” (P3)*

The participants showed anger, shame, and remorse during the interviews. To differentiate perception from emotional reaction, I focused on how they reason internally, and how they think of these experiences. They were trying so hard to understand why they were targeted, this inner talk is particularly strong when they witness their peers were happy and intact, but he or she was looked upon with suspicion by their teachers or family members from whom the victim sought help.

#### 4.2.2 Learnt Helplessness

As mentioned before, learnt helplessness is found from victims in the previous researches as a perception possessed by many victims and contributes to the victim's anxiety and depression in their later life. During the interviews with the participants, I found victims possess this perception of learnt helplessness when he/she met bullying situations in their childhood. At that time, they believed that they could neither empower themselves and change the situation, nor obtain meaningful help from others.

*“Mainly fear of the long term. I could deal with the issue in the present because it was somewhat manageable, but I could not deal with the idea that this treatment could be a constant feature of my school life. This fear stayed with me permanently, so I guess the bully managed to put me in a permanent state of fear. This was his goal. I felt that my self-confidence would drop and I would become more introverted and shy as a result, and as a result of the fact.” (P1)*

*“I felt frighten to go back home from school, because they will extort money in the ally not far away from campus, and there were no adults at my home and my older siblings have different time schedule with their studies. They asked me to steal snack food from the vendors' stand for them or they would tear up my exercise books and textbooks. As a poor student, I tried so hard to pretend my daily life was normal both at home and in class so I won't take more troubles to my parents who were constantly fighting and arguing, but I knew the way back home was the hell I needed to endure every day.” (P3)*

*“I remember it still quite well. On one hand, I could still cope with the situation. I think the most difficult aspect of it was the regularity. It kind of you knew that when you go to school,*

*there are peers who will not be nice to you. On the other hand, you want to make well in the school, and would like to go to school, but you are in such a situation, meet some guys. It was tense.” (P5)*

*“I dared not to argue with her, neither did I talk this with the teacher. I was very cautious for making her unhappy. Even though the friendship she pretended in public was fake, I still believed the pretentious peacefulness is better than direct confrontation.” (P6)*

As G. Namie and R. Namie (2009) pointed out, *“to thrive, bullies require secrecy, shame, silent witnesses.”* The helpless feeling, the intense self-blame hindered them from taking effective defense both mentally and physically. The helpless perception allows the bully to sense the low-probability of retaliation from these targets, and their confidence and desire to enjoy the domination has been boosted which increased the gravity and frequency of further bullying.

#### 4.2.3 Hypersensitivity of Interpersonal Interaction and Relationship

Not only the perception of themselves has changed, their view towards bystanders changed as well, especially for female participants who suffered mostly relational or verbal bullying. After the bullying, they demonstrated obvious suspicion towards interpersonal relationships, and were sensitive and defensive to other people’s opinions. What deserves special attention is their cognitive changes that took place after the destruction of their naïve belief towards people and the world. These monologues present what dwells in the core of the psychological hurt. Even today, when they reflect their attitude back to the childhood bullies, these thoughts are ingrained in the mind and might guide their interactions in later life. If we want to empower them, we need, however, to let them be aware how the former kid thinks and faces the situation. Some of these cognitions might be erroneous and clouded by emotions.

*“As a person, I do not like people controlling me, and I suppose that can make me quite defensive. Sometimes I suppose I can be overly-defensive and lacking in an element of trust in people in general which are something I need to work on.” (P1)*

*“I also have the mentality that many people are not trustworthy and are indifferent for the sake of their own interests. Good friends I ever believed didn’t trust me, help me, or console me. They just stood by with the bully. I know there might be some friends who would like to help but helping me may cause trouble for them. I gradually understood the reality of the world is cruel and nobody is obligated to help you. This is my battle, only mine, no one can help me and no one is trustworthy. So, I became sensitive towards others’ words, laugh, and progressive behavior for fearing they were trying to mock and ridicule me. I stopped making friends because I thought it will take trouble to them, and I doubt whether there is sincere friendship. There was an occasion when I trusted and made a friend with a girl who was nice to me. However, she said no wonder you were the strange girl in other classmates’ eyes when we had disagreements.” (P3)*

*“I was very serious and keen about how other people think of me. At that time, even a trivial occurrence of misunderstanding towards me would vexed and tormented me for a whole day. I blamed myself for my weakness of enduring such a small unpleasant thing. I think I was clumsy at socialization. On one hand, I craved for friendship, but on the other hand, I don’t like big scale socialization, I enjoyed close friends having a party at home. I was quite quick tempered. Sometimes I was enraged with small things and would think in a really extreme way. For example, when a friend had a quarrel for misunderstanding me, I was very hysterical.” (P6)*

#### 4.2.4 Doubtful of Self-worth

Underneath the anger, nervousness, and fear that they felt in childhood bully, participants shared a common doubt of their own value. The bullying experience deprived their dignity and declined their internal sense of self-worth.

*“I tried hard to find out suitable ways to deal with conflicts and competitions between me and peers. I felt self-loathing because I wasn’t able to fight back. I hated coward self yet I couldn’t do anything to change it. After so many mocking and humiliation, I even doubted whether I am a poor worthless cowardly girl. Everyone trod on my dignity and what could I do is to please them to avoid further hurts. Even years past, I still shiver when people act*

*aggressively to me. When people scold and criticized me unfairly, I subconsciously don't get angry and alert to defend myself, maybe because I got used to it for such a long time.” (P3)*

*“So, I felt embarrassed and scared by them. I felt I was quite embarrassing and somehow was threatened by the (big group) ... You cannot tell your parents, because your parents will blame you and asking did you do something wrong or why you are so scared and you don't behave like a man.” (P7)*

#### 4.2.5 Blame Their Families

Family provides the source for the sense of security as well as belonging. However, when the victim experienced bullying this sense of security was invaded. Among the participants, I could observe the children's reluctance and frustration to tell their experience to their parents. For participant 3, she said that her parents were always absent in her childhood. When she needed help and support from home, she had no one to turn to and she had an extra burden of shouldering the responsibility of protecting her siblings. For participant 1 and 2, they lived in single-parent households, and they were the only-child. Due to the family structure, these participants did not want to take these issues home to their parents. Participant 4 experienced bullying while the parents were going through divorce, and participant 5 believes his parents intervention toward bullying in his childhood made the situation even more difficult. Among these participants, participants 2 and 3 expressed their disappointment of their parents' absence which caused the helpless situation of bullying victimization. Participant 3 and 7 shared the same idea that their parent's doubt and excessive irritation of the victim's faults made their parents psychologically far from being supportive. Participant 3 said that “since almost 14 years have passed, I can forgive these bullies, but I still cannot forgive my parents' trustless and impatience while I made a phone call and cried for help from the bully. I understand they were busy making money and not available when I need them, but their suspicious and ignoring attitude were the last straw that broke the camel's back.” In addition, “You cannot tell your parents. Your parents will blame you. They said did you do something wrong, or why are you so scared, and you don't behave like a man.” (P7)

### 4.3 Measures to Confront Bullying in Childhood

Since the measures victims applied during the bullying are vital for the further victimization, I examined the participants' counterattack during their childhood bullying. After categorization of the code, I found avoidance and relocation are related to re-victimization, while measures to enhance the self-confidence building are related to bullying resilience. Here below I would like to present the interviewees' inner voice of the reasons contributing to their decision-making since my research is more concerned about their experience rather than the result.

#### 4.3.1 Avoidance of Conflicts

The first finding of the participants' counter measures they took was conflict avoidance. However, the strategies they took differ. Some of them obtained academic achievement to leave the environment of bullying. Some of them physically shun away from the bullies, kept silent, disguised the fear with a sullen face, or tried to please the bully to avoid conflicts and potential further harm.

*“Nothing directly confrontational. It was more about a passive and indirect attempt at stopping the bullying. Some days I would walk a different route to avoid him that was much longer. I never told anybody about this, just I kept it to myself. My main objective was to pass the test. I knew that if I passed the test I would not have to see this boy again! Luckily, I studied hard and passed the test (I only just passed the test and almost failed).” (P1)*

*“There was a time that I isolated myself from talking and interacting with other classmates, and just concentrating on my study. I was taken as a weird poor diligent student with sensitive and enclosed heart. I know at that time I want to become cool and unapproachable and mysterious so that nobody can hurt me. The coward, sensitive, and fearful self is nevertheless easy to look through behind the aloof facade.” (P3)*

*“If there is some argument, I couldn't stand up for myself. If you say something, I may not have the word to push back like that. It wasn't physical often, sometimes I tried to push back and it works a little bit, but not always. When they are calling you with names, I came up with giving something back, but it didn't solve the problem, it just deepened the conflict.” (P5)*

*“I never dared to argue with her. Neither did I dare to talk to my teachers about this. We feel bringing what happens between peers to the teachers are what traitors do. So, I tried my best to please her.” (P6)*

*“I didn’t defend I think. I just remained silent. Because If I did react, I may get threatened and physically abused with a punch or kick, so it is better to be silent in that sense. I think I didn’t know how to protect myself at that time? if I did retaliate, if I tried to defend myself I may get hurt from them. I think I was threatened by them somehow. So, I was silent as a way of self-defenses. It doesn’t work but it doesn’t go worse. That is the point. I don’t want to be physically hit by them. That’s the way I am trying to protect myself. If I say something bad, that is it. If they physically hit you, you will feel more embarrassed. You don’t want your parents to know that.” (P7)*

#### 4.3.2 Relocation

Some of the interviewees luckily dislocated from the environment of bullying and avoided further bullying confrontations. Participant 2 transferred to another school while Participant 4 moved to Finland from Austria where shyness wasn’t considered weird.

*“I just tried to ignore them and didn’t do much, I was just trying to (deal with the situation) by waiting. I thought one day that they may be bored so they would stop that. But I hadn’t really done much. Well, I just tried to ignore them. I just didn’t maybe just because I thought that was shameful? I don’t know. I went to Shanghai in my third year. I changed my high school.” (P2)*

*“Finland is really great that is why I moved here. It is quite normal to be a little shy and you get to know people in Finland. It is not weird if you don’t talk to them in the beginning. But in Austria, it is weird if you don’t immediately be outgoing and then talk about everything. When I took exchange study in Finland, I was 15-year-old, I spend a year as a high school exchange student in Finland. It was much better than in Austria, developed XX, so that is the reason I moved here.” (P4)*

What is worth mentioning is that Participant 2 met his bully again in the senior high school and he chose physically to fight back which made the bully stop harming him. For participant 4, he didn't meet a bully after he moved to Finland.

#### 4.3.3 Self-confidence Rebuilding

One participant, however, learnt to deal with bullying by rebuilding her self-confidence. This procedure however was attained by the coercive efforts of peers, teachers, and parents.

*“Luckily, there was a little boy who said I would like to protect you when I was bullied...Then the bullying situation finally ended when I was in Grade 3. There was a head teacher who pays attention to every kid. When she observed the progress of a student, she would like to buy gifts with her own money and pay a visit to the student's house. At that time, every child was very proud if she visited his/her home. I was somehow making good progress with my study. Then she took a box of chocolate to our home and praised me in front of my parents. Suddenly I became confident and happier. When I was confident, I was no longer the fearful and pleasing kid anymore.” (P6)*

I also found that participant 3 built her confidence from academic achievement. The reason behind it is that academic achievement was taken as an important element of power in the class culture.

*“I felt I needed to study hard and preserve the self-dignity and show the bully group that I was smarter than them and I acquired favor among teacher while they couldn't get this. I learnt the survival rule of the population. Even though we were just kids, but we still needed to aware that we should learn and follow the survival rule which distinguished the weak and the strong by judging your family financial background, your physical appearance, your relationship with the strong persons, your academic achievement, etc.” (P3)*

#### **4.4 Adulthood Perceptions of Bullying Victimization**

After retrospection of their childhood bully victimization experience, all of the young adults found that their perception changed as they matured. Their reflections toward previous



experiences are verified since different people experienced bullying in different gradations in a different context. I identified four categories of their adulthood perception toward childhood bullying experience: *understanding the influences of childhood victimization, finding solutions to cure themselves, empowering others, and referring to positive elements of bullying resilience.*

#### 4.4.1 Understanding the Influences of Bullying victimization

##### *A. Psychological Pain to the Victims*

When participants narrate their childhood bullying experiences, they are still tormented by the previous memories. Many participants realized how childhood bullying influenced them particularly psychologically. Nevertheless, being aware and accept that they had been hurt in a powerless situation is the first step in making peace with the Self. They all tried to ignore, deny, and hide the feeling to themselves as a child because it was shameful to share it with others. Yes, we were powerless to change the situation, but that is ok. Forgive the one who was weak and lonely, it was not your fault. Now, we need to accept the fact that we had been hurt psychologically, exhibit the suppressed feeling of helplessness, and finally let it go and empower ourselves against future bullies.

During the interview, they were aware of the psychological pain they have been carrying for so long. They realized that their confidence has been exploited, they were submerged in constant fear and anxieties, they suffered self-inflicted excessive self-blame and self-doubt, their view toward others and the world had been shattered. However, many of them cannot pinpoint their emotions with accurate words. They described the details of the mental struggle they went through, and applied the language “not open-minded, mentally attacked, focus on trivial interpersonal relation thing all day long, eager for friends yet fear to make friends” to express their monologues. In addition, because of the severity of its influence, one of the participants became introverted and shy as an adult.

*“This fear stayed with me permanently, so I guess the bully managed to put me in a permanent state of fear. This was his goal. I felt that my self-confidence would drop and I would become more introverted and shy as a result, and as a result of the fact. It taught me to treat the world with an air of caution, and to not necessarily take people and things at face value. Protecting one’s health, both physically and psychologically is so important in this sense.” (P1)*

Participant 3, however, demonstrated her inner battle with multifold meanings. Firstly, she was helpless to change her situation and hoping someone stronger would achieve this for her. She didn’t realize that she needed to empower herself and regain her courage via conscious action and knowledge. This unrealistic illusion just provides temporary and false psychological comfort. However, her mentality may demonstrate the wishful thinking. From Demarest, R. A. (2009), “the Wishful Thinking form of coping may, in fact, be related to Stockholm Syndrome because Stockholm Syndrome includes a significant amount of self-delusion on the part of abused individuals” (p. 12). Nevertheless, if she indulges the idea of future punishment of the bully from someone else and doesn’t undertake any practical action, the positive effect of anger would be wasted and she will always be under the control of different bullies at a different stage.

Secondly, she worships those who are strong and capable of dealing with bullying and indifferent to those who are powerless which might reflect her projection of the cowardly self toward others and the self-loathing that she obtained subconsciously. Her cognition demonstrates another trait of Stockholm Syndrome. From Demarest (2009), “Stockholm Syndrome was caused by the dynamic interplay of domination (the aggressors’ control of their hostages) and affiliation (the victims’ identification with the aggressors)” (p. 11) in kidnapping or abusive relationship. It can also be taken as an abidance of social hierarchy, and the crucial quality of compassion in her has been altered.

Thirdly, she stays in permanent fear of encountering aggressive people, and she applied the self-consoling lie of “bad behavior may have good intentions and at least they care for me” to agree with the bullies’ behavior and desperately wishing a conformity with the bully. There is a potential reason that her childhood lacks parental attention and love. She took the powerful bully as the substitute of her parents’ role subconsciously. This emotional favor of the perpetrator resembles the emotional display of Stockholm syndrome which is part of PTSD (Cantor, & Price, 2007).

Lastly, she realized that she can’t draw an interpersonal boundary line, having reduced self-esteem, and acquired emotional flatness from the bullying experiences. For example, “I wasn’t aware of my right, I didn’t get angry when other people treated me badly, and I was too ready to forgive. I became indifferent with others no matter they are kind or not.” She believed that she should be nice and forgiving even to bullies”. This confusion between anger of bullying and adherence toward high moral principles paralyzed her from acting out.

According to Namie and Namie (2009), emotional flatness is one class of PTSD symptoms. He stated that emotional flatness is “a need to avoid feelings, thoughts, and situations reminiscent of the trauma, a loss of normal emotional responses, feelings that seem unreal” (Namie & Namie, 2009, p. 143). He also described the details: “feeling cut off from the concerns of other, and inability to trust others; anger at those responsible for the traumatic experience while feeling ashamed of their own helplessness. Sufferers feel demoralized and isolated; suppressing anger that might lead to an explosion of violence. They are no longer able to use their feelings as cues to pay attention to their needs. Trauma victims habitually respond either too intensely or not at all” (Namie & Namie, 2009, p. 143).

*“I felt the major influences of bullying come to my mentality of social interaction and myself. I believe I still have the fear of social conflict with people who act rude, aggressively, and good at using disrespectful words to me. I fear for these manipulative and aggressive people and don’t want to be caught or approached by them. I also don’t want to be close with people*

*who were ostracized by the group because they usually eager for protection and friendship but I don't feel obliged and capable for that and I don't want to get involved. I became indifferent with others no matter they are kind or not. I don't know how to rebut and protect myself when I was in an unfair situation and conflict. I felt bad with myself being coward and trying to console myself that I should just ignore or forgive them and wishing one day they will get retaliated and felt regretted by other people who are stronger than them. In another way, I admire the kind of strong people that nobody dares to threat and trying to make friends with them. I also felt I wasn't aware of my right, I didn't get angry when other people treat me badly, and I was too ready to forgive, and I coax myself that I should be kind even to people who treat me bad. Sometimes I tried to tell myself that their bad behavior may have good intention and at least they cared about me. I was verbally and relationally bullied at work place, and this caused severe distress and anxiety psychologically.” (P3)*

From the monologue of the victim, we can find the psychological torment may be multifold. For example, in participant 3's case, Stockholm Syndrome and emotional flatness may coexist as parts of her PTSD. Demarest (2009) explained that Stockholm Syndrome was a combination of defensive self-delusion and an effort to “get along” with their captors which is similar to some forms of coping such as wishful thinking or avoidance coping. Specifically, avoidant coping is exemplified by “being unable to look at the relationship and determine its value” (Demarest, 2009, p. 12). Her data demonstrated both the wishful thinking as well as avoidance coping. Hughes and Jones (2000) indicate that Stockholm syndrome may be one of the coping strategies that victims use to moderate PTSD symptoms by denying a realistic fact of victimization. The psychological suffering of bullying is hereby found to be complicate and detrimental for psychological health of victims.

### *B. Relational Cost*

Victims also realized that bullies not only cause psychological pain to themselves, but also affect their view of others which include peers, siblings, parents. This result in an ambivalent state that the eagerness for friendship is mingled with suspicion of “true friend”. Some of them unconsciously project their fear toward people who possess strong personality traits. P1, P2, P3 and P7 became suspicious of people, and defensive towards powerful people. P7

believes this suspicion of people contributes to his self-defense strategy since if “you don’t trust people easily, and you keep yourself in control that you won’t be set up by somebody”. He also stated it is important to join in the right team since he experienced group bullying. To observe closer, below is P3’s narration as an example;

*“I also have the mentality that many people are not trustworthy and are indifferent for the sake of their own interests...I stopped making friends because I think it will bring trouble to them, and I doubt whether there is sincere friendship. There was an occasion when I trusted and made a friend with a girl who was nice to me. However, she said no wonder you were the strange girl in other classmates’ eyes when we had disagreements. I stopped to make a friend, and I am the weird lonely student in their minds. I didn’t want sympathy which might turn into despising when your friends stand at the bully’s side one day. Some of them did as a matter of fact. I also don’t believe in true friendship because when I was hurt nobody stand up or support me, not even a word. Even though I wish someone helped me on the site, I think I should be relieved that they are not harmed because of me. This contradiction makes me didn’t seek out help from friends, and makes myself in isolation and the adversary. There is a voice inside me that ‘nobody can help you and they all have their things to deal with, you need to solve the problem all by yourself’.” (P3)*

While P3 and P4 are suspicious of interpersonal relations, P4 exhibited the anxiety of participating in social events. P5, however, believed that he might take the anger caused by bullying home which influenced the relationship between his brother and him. P5 also became hypervigilant for potential victimization.

*“Maybe during that period of time when I was bullied, I was kind of related to our relationship. We also had been a bit more argument. Maybe I was releasing the anger in our relationship which was not fair for my brother...Someone laughing, you have some attention, why they are laughing, and things like that, it must be upsetting, it seems that it’s me in the laugh. I don’t know whether this is normal.” (P5)*

For P6, the long-term bullying makes her think obsessively about it which makes her very sensitive toward how other people think about her. She tried to please others to maintain friendship and over-reacted when someone misunderstood her. Meanwhile, both the friendship as well as the family relationship had been influenced by bullying victimization.

*“I was very keen on how other people looked at me. I was quick-tempered and became volatile with little things. For example, when my friend misunderstood me and quarreled with me in front of everyone in the class, I attempted to jump off the building because of unbearable anger and panic. At that time, I was quite anxious and I frequently quarreled with my parents, smashed a cell phone and never talked patiently.” (P6)*

### *C. Personal Growth Opportunities*

Besides psychological pain and relational cost, participants also believed the personal development opportunities would be deprived if the bullying had been worse and they were not resilient enough for bullying bust.

*“For years after the event, I imagined what my life could have been like if I had failed that test. It is amazing how one moment can change your life so dramatically. I think the negatives of bullying are obvious in many ways. It makes you feel sick, tired, and constantly in fear of the unknown.” (P1)*

P2 and P7 said that their academic performance had been affected by the bullying and intimidations.

*“So that give me the idea that I don’t want to go to school because it is not really a fun and happy place. I tried to do something to escape. I played lots of games at that time, and once I told my mother that I felt better in those games than in real world.” (P2)*

*“My academic performance has been influenced by bullying in junior high school. When I was suffering that. I wasn’t that confident to answer the questions of the teacher. I wasn’t speaking anything loudly in public.” (P7)*

#### *D. Longitudinal Influences Leading to Workplace Bullying*

Childhood bullying experience also left longitudinal influences such as personality changes, distress toward bullying related context, and workplace bullying. Participant 3 said his introverted and shy personality is formed as the result of the bullying, and Participant 5 said:

*“I guess I am carrying something from that time with me. Especially when I am dealing with social occasions. When there are some kinds of imbalance in power in social situations. If the social occasion is tense, and there is a really dominant figure there, it arouses with in me a feeling of apprehension, putting me on edge. As a result of this I would not be as open as I usually would be without this kind of history.” (P5)*

For participant 3, she believed she still feels helpless after suffering both from the school bully in childhood and workplace bully in adulthood.

*“In the workplace, my supervisor has more power and possesses exquisite tricks to control us. Two colleagues had been threatened and discharged by her. I didn’t know how to let her respect me. Neither did I know how to defend myself in unfair accusations, deliberate exclusion of information and meetings, and humiliations. Till now, I still don’t know whether I can act against a bully calmly and logically. Stupid enough, I thought she expressed her concern and good intention in a special way. I also lack knowledge with what strategies I should take to defend myself without too strong confrontation. I believe I need to be observant and sophisticated to learn from social practices so as to overcome the fear of social interaction in the future.” (P3)*

#### 4.4.2 Find Solutions to Heal Themselves

After realizing how much impact that the previous bully exerted on them, the victims share the similar thinking of finding practical solutions to restore their confidence and reclaim the power of their lives. Here I categorized their fluid consciousness of finding solutions for self-healing into three categories: *changing the wrongful inner voice or cognition*, *learning practical social skills* for preventing future re-victimization, *adjusting their coping strategy* by seeking support instead of facing issues alone.

### *A. Change the Incorrect Inner Voice or Cognitions*

Upon reflection, participants found a significant amount of self-criticism and perceptions of social relations need adjustment. However, they narrate ideas which belong to different categories at the same time; for example, Participant 2 expressed the change should be taken not only on perspective of others, but having one's own coping strategy which should be adopted in the future.

*“What I have learnt, well I should try to talk to other people about that and about this kind of thing. I should also have tried to talk to my parents or some people with more experience than me, or some friends. If someone bullied me, I should not just ignore but try to fight back... stop them at the very beginning.” (P2)*

To avoid repetitive quotations, I would concisely present their thoughts into categories in the following way. Specifically, their shared opinions on the needed cognitive changes are:

- Stop self-blame
- Being realistic toward social relationships and avoid being too extreme
- Rebuild social trust and boundaries toward others
- Rebuild a more positive yet realistic view toward the world
- Understand their emotions and accept them
- Restore family relations and forgive the imperfect parents in childhood
- Stop pleasing others and find the lost self

### *B. Learn Practical Social Skills for Preventing Re-victimization*

The participants also think that they need to acquire practical skills to equip themselves from potential bullying situations. This is essential for the victims to establish confidence in dealing with adverse situations. After stopping their inner critics and identifying the emotion-clouded incorrect inner judgement, they begin rationally re-evaluating their demeanor and thoughts about bullying victimizations. Their thoughts are majorly:

- Enhance social skills
- Be conscious to learn social rules in different context



- Be aware of the political rule in a community

### *C. Adjust Their Coping Strategies*

Besides preventing the anguish and suffering of the situation, some of the participants believe that some bullies are randomly choosing the victims in different places, and they need to equip themselves with coping strategies when they are unfortunately involved in the bullying situations. Their ideas are generally:

- Distinguish the bully, friendly teasing, and others' emotional eruptions
- Fight back at the beginning
- Reflect upon reasons from which the confrontation arose, and adjust your behavior accordingly
- Stay calm and defend myself with verbal reasoning
- Rely on yourself to claim your dignity but also unite others for strength, tactic, and support
- Draw a social interaction boundary and let them know your principles
- Learn legal articles and familiarize with procedures you should take to defend yourself when necessary

#### 4.4.3 Help Others with Bullying Issues

One important aspect for bullying incidents is that even the bystanders have been intimidated and influenced by it. For the former victims, they possess the empathy and feel a responsibility to help others. Some of the former victims felt guilty for having no power to interfere with the bully on site and being paralyzed on the scene. However, participant 1 suggested the supportive anti-bully programs, peer support groups, and teacher education for school bully prevention. Generally, his and other participants' viewpoints are:

- School bully intervention programs which include Anti-Bully Days
- Teacher education training which includes anti-bully strategies and conflict handling
- Peer protection or student council system
- Psychological consulting for bullying issues in school

- Pay attention to their kids, and give support
- Family hotline for school bullying
- Empower bystanders
- Shield my child from bullying when I was the parent
- Higher motivation to learn about bullying

#### 4.4.4 Identify Protective Factors

The participants also demonstrated a similar experience of how supportive elements helped them to recover the childhood psychological pain those years. Among all of the participants, some of them are still suffering from the psychological burden and feel helpless toward future bullying while some of them demonstrate resilience toward the bullying situations. Their personal experience is extremely valuable for victims' self-healing and empowerment research. From their narration, the supportive element for their overcoming of bullying are as follows;

- Emotional intelligence which includes emotional awareness and examination
- Confidence reconstruction is vital for fighting against bullying
- Estimate the gravity of bullying, escape when necessary which is not shameful
- Notice that ethical doctrines might be hijacked and twisted by bullies
- Don't torment yourself with the bully's points repetitively in your mind. It was partial and incorrect at the very beginning.
- Be brave to assert your rights even though it would be difficult for the first time
- Be kind, but also prepare an armor for fighting against the bullying
- Supportive social network and culture are important for the resilience and confidence reconstruction
- Seek help from your family and trusted friends, do not face it all alone.

Participants show their concern about ethical education and school anti-bully programs. P3 said that "the books I read in childhood for conflict resolution only teaches people to forgive and stay tolerant, but there are no instructions about appropriate ways to fight back and defend myself properly in an unfair situation. All I learnt is that swearing is wrong, to hate is

wrong, and to seek revenge is wrong.” She thinks these books didn’t give her a clear answer about strategies to cope with bullying. This drew my special attention. Do adults suppose the childhood world is a dreamland with trivial friction? Furthermore, is bullying insignificant for the children’s development so they don’t provide practical advice? Are there any helpful guidance books for children to empower themselves in bullying nowadays? Here, I do not provide direct answers to these questions, however, they questions are urgent and should be pondered for bullying researchers, parents, and educators alike.

## **5 Discussions of the Findings**

Since the research question is “what are the adults’ perceptions of their childhood bullying victimization experience”, I adapted social cognitive theory to examine the importance of cognition in encoding and performing social behaviors. Encompassed by the theory, the triadic reciprocal relationship between personal, behavioral and environmental influences is taken into account to understand the complexity of bullying issues. With the employment of phenomenology methodology, I was able to gather, code, analyze, and interpret the data focusing on the participants’ experiences of external incidences so as to gain access to the reality.

In this study, I have identified five reasons of bully victimization, summarized childhood perceptions of bullying experience, described multiple measures that former victims undertook to deal with the bullying, and classified the adults’ perceptions toward their childhood bullying experiences. Echoing my research interest in the longitudinal impact of childhood bullying victimization, the findings show that the longitudinal impacts are exhibited and verified. For example, some of the former victims do not understand bullying clearly which makes them feel shame and guilt of victimization. Meanwhile, some participants are still not capable of dealing with the potential bullying situations now and in the future. Some have been suffering from mistreatment and harassment in the workplace in their adulthood which demonstrates the longitudinal effects of bullying vulnerability that hampers and freezes the victim and may lead to re-victimization. In the following part, I would like to discuss the findings one by one with the analysis of the previous literature review and the social cognitive theory.

### **5.1 Reasons for Bullying**

To generalize the findings in this part, the reasons of bullying in childhood that have been coded from data are: a. physical appearance; b. social economic background; c. inadequacy of personality; d. group conflicts; e. differences & low retaliation probability.

During the interview, there is a question that constantly lingers in the heart of all participants: “why was it me who got bullied?” When victims started to ask this question, they began with self-blame and self-criticism, and posit suspicious attitude toward self, others, and the world.

Previous literature demonstrates a wide range of reasons for bullying and victimization in empirical researches. From Gladstone, Parker, and Malhi (2006), factors that relate to victimizations are parental over control, physical illness or disability, and inhibited temperament. Whereas Rigby (2003), the reasons of bullying are: gender, race, disability, social class. From Wong, Cheng, and Chen (2013), they classified three types of students that are vulnerable to being victimized: provocative students, vulnerable students, atypical students. They pointed out bullying as an intentional aggression entailing the selections of specific targets and referring to “physical or mental impairments (Frisén, Holmqvist, & Oscarsson, 2008; Estell et al., 2009), speech and language problems (Savage, 2005), oddities (Terasahjo & Salmivalli, 2003), social isolation (Veenstra et al., 2007), and excessive obedience (Olweus, 1993)” as the reasons of bully victimizations.

Applying social cognitive theory to examine the findings in this phenomenological qualitative research, however, we can grasp different implications that go beyond the empirical researches. Firstly, the reasons for bullying are a web of personal, social-environmental factors, as well as the individual digesting of these elements into behavior adjustment. Correspondently, perhaps the social cognitive theory should be employed instead of social-ecological theory. For instance, Participant 3 and 7 explained how their individual beliefs toward self, other, and the world have been shattered which further perpetuates their re-victimization. While Participant 6 has restructured her confidence, which enabled her to change her belief and her behavior and demonstrate bully resilience. Many previous researchers applied social-ecological framework to understand the influence of shareholders with bullying issues. However, social cognitive theory provides me the method to approach

the issue through a personal, behavioral, and environmental paradigm, which integrates individual's cognition and social environmental factors together.

Secondly, the relationship between personal reasons and victimization is **not** simply **stimuli and reaction model** that demonstrated in previous quantitative researches, **but a dynamic and reciprocal mechanism** for victims to internalize distorted cognition under the power of bullying. Specifically, the bully controls and inflicts victims by causing social bias, moral dilemmas, infusing and reinforcing harmful personal concepts, and might even intimidate bystanders, leads to the deprivation of the victims' confidence, dignity, the trust in others, and crushing the faith in the fairness of the world.

The ancient Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus said, "men are not disturbed by things, but by the view they take of them". Hence, the deeper understanding of the cognitive distortion from victims' bullying experience enables us to know the victims' inner voice, to build new cognitive and behavior patterns toward stressful events, and finally escape the longitudinal re-victimization loop. It's neither the objective fact such as physical appearance nor subjective reason such as envy or threat (Einarsen, 1999) that triggers the repetitive intentional harm, instead the causality of bullying victimization is rather a **dynamic and reciprocal process**. Individual cognitive processing of the event is a coercive process between thought, emotion, and behavior. From Beck (1976), it is not the event itself that influences one's behavior, but instead it is how we perceive the event which decides our emotions and behavior. This view is shared by Namie and Namie (2009) that "our thoughts, rather than the actual events themselves, create our moods" whilst our thoughts are the interpretation of reality, but not the reality. The cognitive gap between different roles is the core. I will analyze the mechanism of victim's emotion, thought and behavior after bullying in detail in the following part of the discussion.

**Thirdly, the perspective matters.** Previous studies, analyses, and categorizations of the reasons of bullying into the victims' personality, social-economic background, physical appearance, and the like from the third person perspective with which personal thought and emotion are absent from causal attribution and both the victim, bully, as well as the environment are plausible despite the varied latitude of power imbalance among different cases. From Namie and Namie (2009), causal attribution is "the choice of explanations for events depends on a person's vantage point". Furthermore, they refer attribution as "the assignment of responsibility to the person, event, process, or thing that caused the behavior to happen." Namie and Namie (2009) believe from different perspectives of victim, bully, and viewer, respectively the judgement of causality would be different. They argue against the third person causal attribution by presenting the controversial accusation toward the rape victim that the victim's dress is seductive and inviting. I agree with their arguments that perspective of causal attribution is important, and furthermore the victims' responsibility of bullying may be considered inappropriate from the third-person perspective which assemble the victims' situation in rape cases. Since the victims are under-power and under-control and most of the victimization is unprovoked, the psychological healing process of victims should start with approaching the causal attribution of bullying from the first-person perspective so as to understand their mental struggles.

In this research, phenomenology is applied as the research methodology to capture the reality, and social cognitive theory is served as the major research theory to analyze the reality of the participants, who are co-researchers instead of a statistic sample. In this way, we can subsequently gain a horizon from multiple victims' perspectives, and learn from the victims' angle to grasp a structure through all bullying experiences, and understand how external bully incidents and environment cause victims' internal distorted cognitions, and consequently suffer from the repetitive victimization. Furthermore, we can obtain contextual knowledge of differentiated longitudinal impacts of bullying victimization. This research also highlights the role of the specific childhood bully experience in the development of interpersonal belief.

Besides the abovementioned distinctive implications that I drew from this qualitative research, I also found the findings of the reasons for bullying victimization are in accordance with previous researches at many levels. First, the principle of “equifinality and multifinality” (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1996) that has been mentioned in Swearer and Hymel’s research on psychology of bullying (2015) is applicable to study the reasons and results of bullying. Second, they pointed out the psychology of bully might be a “‘chicken or egg’ conundrum” (Swearer & Hymel, 2015) which echoes my research idea that bully victimization is a dynamic reciprocal process between different roles and especially beneath the victims’ minds. Third, previous researches (referred to above) found that longitudinal results of psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, loneliness have cognitive attributions such as pervasive erosion of self-esteem, change of view toward self and the world, change of thinking pattern, social sensitivity and social anxiety, and adulthood cognitive vulnerabilities. In this research, the participants’ experience exhibited these factors in their interviews.

## **5.2 Childhood Cognition of Victimization**

After discussing the victims’ thoughts about their perceived reasons of bullying, we can move to their emotional and cognitive changes that were caused by bullying. From the finding, the childhood cognitions of bullying involvement are: a. self-blame; b. learnt helplessness; c. suspicious of relationship and defensive attitude; d. doubt of self-worth; e. blaming the family.

Among many previous empirical or quantitative research of bullying issues (Roth, Coles, & Heimberg, 2002; Carney, 2008; Davidson, & Demaray, 2007), they mentioned the cognitive changes that relate to depression and anxiety. For example, Roth, Coles, and Heimberg (2002) pointed out “being teased during childhood may lead people to develop thinking patterns common to both general anxiety and depression” (p. 161). However, they haven’t examined how an event caused the cognitive change such as lower self-worth in their research. This gap, however, exemplified in the interview of victims’ experiences in my research. In



analyzing the findings of this part, I found that the social environment as well personal cognitive factors are contributing to the victims' cognitive change.

On one hand, **environmental elements** such as bully and bystander's attitude, teachers' intervention, social and cultural beliefs are all contributing to the victim's cognitive change. In Wong, Cheng and Chen's research (2013), they found that bullies, bystander, educators are tending to blame the victims for either provoking or being involved into bully situation, and keeping silent during victimization. While the victims are more tending to blame themselves instead of the perpetrators (Cheng & Chen, 2013). In many cases, according to Einarsen (1994) and Leymann (1990) "the third party may see the bullying situation as no more than fair treatment of a difficult and neurotic person" (as cited in Einarsen S., 1994, p. 19). From the previous literature review, the bully usually applies moral disengagement to justify their actions. Adding the bystanders' apathy and teachers' inability to handle conflicts, the victims are frequently exposed to a prevalent blaming, belittling, and discounting social environment that consists of bullying, bystanders, family members, and the like.

On the other hand, **individual's cognition** has been changed by bullying and social environment which caused their internalized self-harm. Applying the cognitive model, under repetitive victimization and escalating social pressure of causal attribution, victims "become believe in the accusation from bullying and start to blame themselves" (Namie & Namie, 2009) which heralds the erosion of confidence and leaves victims most vulnerable for hurts. This change of thought causes an emotional attack of themselves. They are angered about others who don't believe them, doubt whether they are the trouble in other people's eyes, and a cynic realization of the unfairness and cruelty of the world in their childhood. At the initial stage of victimization, their behavior has been driven to tolerate the bully with no retaliation under the weakened confidence of their own power in this challenge of social power. Some research referred misconceptions of moral doctrines and misunderstanding of teasing and bullying also lead to tolerance toward the early-stage bully (Mills, C. B., & Carwile, A. M. 2009; Namie & Namie, 2009). Other research also mentioned the denial of victimization at

the early stage is an important reason for chronic bully (Namie & Namie, 2009). However, the bully never stops and the torment is prolonged. The re-victimization consolidates their self-blame and challenges their self-worth. “**guilt** is what you feel when you make a mistake. **Shame** is what you feel when you believe you are the mistake” (Namie & Namie, 2009). Namie and Namie (2009) also introduced an idea of “**reverse empathy**’ with which the target seeing herself as a defective unit in agreement with the bully”. Self-blame, doubt of self-worth, suspicious attitude toward others and the world, contextual blaming of their family, and learnt helplessness were thereby formed, ingrained, and imprinted in their victimization memory.

Furthermore, during the process “automatic thought” was applied consciousness. These inward attacks paralyze them to recollect their confidence and employ the proper way to stop the victimization. From cognitive therapists, the distorted cognition becomes **automatic thought** to perpetuate the helpless situation and paralyze the victims (Beck, 2011). Automatic thoughts were first defined by Beck (1976) as “spontaneous cognition that often occur in a fleeting manner and are mostly conscious and easily accessible” (Namie & Namie, 2009, p. 191). Namie and Namie (2009) explained that automatic thoughts include: “overgeneralization, global labeling, filtering, polarized thinking, catastrophizing, personalization, mind reading, the illusion of control, emotional reasoning”, and the like (p. 192). In this victimization process, a vital automatic thought is that the victims believe they are responsible for a disproportionate amount of the consequence even though the power imbalance outweighs their own capacity and they believe they deserved the outcome of their “cowardice”. This thought consists of personalization, emotional reasoning, and the illusion of control. Namie and Namie remarked that, “people have the ability to distort meanings related to dramatic events...The campaign of destruction is made easier by the target’s paradoxical cooperation” (Namie & Namie, 2009, p. 191).

Another **misconception in society** attracted my special attention. Many adults in society believe bullying is just a social relational obstacle which is inevitable toward social maturity.

The participants' constant self-blame for the bully victimization also implies the **misunderstanding between bullying and competitive selection**. The important traits of bullying are that bullying is unprovoked and it is about power and control. Omizo M., Omizo A., Baxa, and Miyose (2006) identified three key characteristics of a bully in their research: unprovoked, repeated, and power imbalance. Based on my previous explanation of the definition of bullying, the reason why bullying is different from competitive selection lies in the intentional harmful purpose to exhibit or exert power and control. In addition, during this power struggle, the bully's dominance is overwhelming which is beyond the definition of "obstacle". Disguised by the belief of developmental obstacle and supported by the concept of "survival of the fittest", the public can walk away and be indifferent about a victim's suffering and even despise the victims for the lowered confidence and "cowardly" tolerance of abuse in a patronizing attitude. Furthermore, this belief transmits in the professional life where workplace bullying is taken as the test of professional sophistication. Ashforth (1994) and Brodsky (1976) remark that workplace bullying is "institutionalized as a part of the leadership and managerial practice". Namie and Namie (2009) agrees that "in companies that promote cutthroat competition, chronic bullies are overrepresented. They are seen as 'leaders'" (Namie & Namie, 2009, p. 46). As Participant 7 said, even though the bully is abhorrent, the people who have suffered from bullying and pretend that bully is tolerable are even more horrible. The flower of bullying is nourished right from the soil of countless tolerant dead bodies. The prevalent and intentional conceptual confusion between bully and competitive selection left many victims smothered in the unfavorable atmosphere.

Last but not least in this part, understanding how bullying works is vital for anti-bully strategies and victims' recovery. Nowadays, there are bullying intervention school programs launched to deal with school bullying. The former victims may still carry the cognitive pattern in adult life (Roth, Coles, and Heimberg, 2002). Bullying related issues may reflect in the intimate relationship (Rivers, 2001), workplace bully (Smith, 1997; Tehrani, 2003; Smith, Singer, & Cooper, 2003), and parenting methods (Perry, Hodges, Egan, 2001; Bowlby, 1973). Therefore, cognitive therapy demonstrates extraordinary superiority to change victim's cognitions by adjusting the dysfunction and distorted cognitions.

### 5.3 Measures for Confrontation

From the findings, the former victims took three ways to confront the bullying: a. Avoid conflict; b. relocation; c. self-confidence building. This result is in accordance with previous literature. O'Brien (1998) said that the victims who suffered from chronic bullying may use avoidance to repress the intrusive thoughts and feelings about the abuse. Namie and Namie (2009) also mentioned that many victims tried to deny being bullied via finding excuses for the bully and self-doubt the solidity of harm. To deny being bullied can procrastinate to respond to the harm. Ironically, during chronic bullying, "others chip away at our integrity in small doses over long periods of time" and left the victim no grounds to fight back now "when so many earlier compromises went unchallenged" (Namie & Namie, 2009, p. 127). Carney (2008) found that victims may exhibit reluctance to seek support or counseling and sharing traumatic experience to others. In this research, one participant hasn't realized being bullied before the interview and all participants show their reluctance to talk about this with intimate people. Most of them felt shameful to tell teachers or parents because they think it would be cowardly to ask for help, might be taken as the betrayer to report to the teacher, or would face parents' blame, or even make the issue more complicated. However, we need to think over the context and possess an appropriate perspective with anti-bully measures.

Firstly, it was never shameful to take an avoidance method to deal with bullying. It was natural that victims would initially be shocked and frightened by the bully. They may not believe that another person would intentionally target on them. They may doubt whether they have been doing something offensive or showing vulnerability to get involved. As Niemi and Niemi (2009) said "self-defeating labeling forms the prison walls from which you yearn to break out. The bully brought the bricks and mortar. Through mind game, targets are responsible for the prison's upkeep" (p. 192). On the other hand, in this imbalanced fight, avoiding verbal or physical conflict is an effective method to prevent conflict escalation, further harm, and stay safe.

Secondly, victims need to acquire proper cognition with regard to anti-bully measures. From Wong, Cheng, and Chen (2013), victim should know that revealing their victimization is aimed at helping them, rather than with getting bullies into trouble. Applying distorted sympathy to the bully or trying to please the bully by showing submission is neither an appropriate way for their psychological health. Stockholm Syndrome, which describes the phenomena that a victim shows sympathy toward the criminal during the victimization period, has not been studied in bullying cases at present. However, as mentioned in the former part, “reserve empathy”, with which the victims agree with bullies’ accusation and become self-loathing, is related to the victims’ pleasing behavior. Only after correctly understanding their basic rights and emotional boundaries that the victims would be able to take proper measures to fight for their own rights without being trapped in moral orthodox or over-retaliation. Many times, the school taught us how to show kindness, forgiveness, and tolerance for misconduct, yet failed to advise victims to defend themselves with proper methods after logical and situated judgement toward moral doctrines.

Thirdly, effective self-help measures, especially group support programs and cognitive therapy, should be explored for the children, parents, and teachers. From the finding and previous literature review, we found former victims not only inadequate to protect themselves from bullying during childhood but also in their adulthood. Previous research found that children with bullied parents are more likely to lack of the social skills for bullying issues. Measures to tackle bullying should not only focus on temporary bully prevention, the victims’ mental and physical health restoration should be emphasized to decrease re-victimization and potential transformation from victim into bully/victim who demonstrate the most severe psychological program from researches.

#### **5.4 Adulthood Perceptions**

To generalize the findings of adulthood perceptions, the participants’ narration can be classified into four categories: a. understanding the influences of their childhood bully experience upon their psychological health, social relational cognition, personal development,

and re-victimization experiences in work place; b. looking for suitable solutions for self-healing and different counter tactics to help their childhood self in their memory; c. exploring solutions to help other victims; d. identifying the positive elements from their experience for nurturing bullying resilience.

#### 5.4.1 Influence Understanding

As presented in the findings, the Participants become aware of the influences of their childhood bullying experience in facets of their personal development after sharing why they got bullied, how they thought, and what they did in childhood. In accordance with previous literature in chapter 2, the longitudinal impacts of childhood bullying include internal problems such as self-blame and anxiety, external act-out such as P5 directed his anger of school bullying toward his brother and quarreled with him, relational issues such as P3's resentment of her parents' absence and distrust during the crisis, and personality alteration such as P1's confirmation that the bully turned him into an introverted person. Even though physical and financial influences haven't been found during this qualitative research, I believe if the number of participants increases and the research participants are not limited to Finnish university students, the longitudinal influence on physical health and financial situation are likely to be found as well.

In this section of discussion, I would like to follow the structure of findings and analyze findings with comparisons toward previous literature. With better acknowledgement of its influence, the victim steps forward toward their self-healing. According to the cognitive model, the cognitive change can influence emotional engagement and furthermore motivate behavior change. The deeper and more comprehensive understanding the influences of childhood bully experience is, the more motivated the young adult is for undertaking action to empower themselves and others.

### *A. Psychological Influence*

First, **being aware the influence** is a start point to face their experience and cure themselves. In nowadays competitive social environment, power wrestling and cooperation between individuals are inevitable in this complicated adult world. The significance of bullying lies to that our adulthood psychological and behavior pattern of social interactions is formed from our experiences. From this research, participants being aware of their longitudinal emotion-psychological health problems that relate to retrospection of the experiences: low-confidence, fear, anxiety, self-blame, suspicion of self-worth, suspicious toward social relationship and the justice in society, helplessness in interpersonal crisis, ambivalent feeling toward the bully and other bully victims, and emotional flatness. P7 expressed that his childhood bullying experience taught him not to easily trust other people and be observant with the power balance in a social group. This is in consistent with previous literature indicating that social learning from childhood experience would posit longitudinal psychological changes. For example, childhood bullying significantly contributes to cognitive vulnerabilities for depression in adulthood more than family factors such as parental style (Gibb et al., 2004) and children with bullying experiences are more likely not to get engaged in social interaction due to internal and social contextual problems which lose the instructional time of social skill learning (Swearer, & Hymel, 2015). Therefore, realizing its psychological influences instead of avoiding the issue can thereafter put this traumatic experience down.

Second, **understanding how they have been influenced psychologically is part of psycho-education**. Most of the participants confess to have the feeling of “fear, shame, anger and self-blame” even now. However, behind these emotions, there are underlying facts. For example, **fear** comes from the fact that you lose the control of something. From Namie and Namie (2009), **shame** comes from the assumption that “there is something inherently wrong with who you are” which challenges the core value of your identity. Whilst beneath **anger**, there are various unsatisfied desires such as “fear, hurt, disappointment, jealousy, shame, frustration”, and the like (Namie & Namie, 2009, p. 217). In addition, Namie and Namie (2009) believe the victims’ excessive **self-blame** comes from the disproportionate causal

attribution to themselves under the influence of social attributional bias and cognitive distortion, and subsequently lead to the non-defense for self-defeated behavior and other psychological displays. These emotions may lead to a deeper psychological problem. When we understand the emotional reasons behind psychological state such as depression and anxiety, then we can further explore the clues behind these emotions and take back the control of your emotion and ease the psychological pain that bullies can take to you. As Eleanor Roosevelt said, “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.” For handling these emotions, Namie and Namie (2009) suggest that the counter measures of **shame** include obtaining objective evaluation of your identity out of the negative social circle, identifying the shaming messages that you have internalized and the hurtful events you have experienced, separating what is unreasonable and untrue from the core value of who you are. To take **anger** properly, we need to recognize its indicative function which serves to find out the reason behind anger so as to divert anger into rational actions. Anger, instead of being suppressed and turned into emotional flatness, has the primitive drive for the victim to resume courage, take action, and preserve their dignity. Regard to **self-blame**, counter tactics include appropriately evaluate your causal attribution of bullying, take responsibility to reveal the bully’s lies, and hold on your ground despite of social bias. All of their suggestions have cognitive restructure implications. With review our deepest cognitions toward self-value, unsatisfied desire, causal attribution, the victim can take off their inner shackle of shame, anger, self-blame so as to defend themselves (Namie & Namie, 2009).

Third, accepting the imperfect self and **accepting** the fact of having suffered psychological harm by bullying are the startpoints for self-healing. Many former victims didn’t realize the psychological injuries they had suffered. They thought they haven’t been influenced by bullying because they haven’t been physically hurt. However, psychological pains have prolonged effects accompanying the growth of victims. Because of their neglect or denying of their psychological pain, their childhood bullying always subconsciously determines their automatic emotional and cognitive reactions toward similar incidences. So many nights have been inflicted by dreaming of it. On so many social occasions, you are eager to mingle into the group yet fear for showing your imperfect sides. You deny your wishes because you get



used to people's discounting of your opinion. You are eager to make friends yet fear for you can't make friends because deep in your heart, you feel no one would really love you. On the other hand, when other people approach you, you doubt their intention and build a wall for further understanding because in your heart there is always a voice saying you should not trust others. Even though the factors for these cognitions come from many experiences along the path to maturity, we can at least approach these inner voices by re-examining the childhood bullying experience. When the victim finally legitimizes their feelings and suffering, they take the first step toward the journey to reclaim their dignity.

### *B. Relational Influence*

After examining their childhood bullying victimization influences toward their psychological health, I would like to discuss the finding of longitudinal relational influences that related to their childhood bullying experience. Firstly, I would like to discuss the influence of these incidents towards interpersonal relationship between friends comparing to previous literature reviews. Secondly, I would like to analyze the moral trap that victims fell into when handling friendship during a social crisis. Thirdly, I would like to discuss what cognitive restructure should be taken to repair the family relationship. Fourthly, I will focus on the Participant who was the only child and experienced family structural change at the same time having suffered from bullying in childhood.

1, Social Relation. Based on the participants narration of the relational influence, we can find the victims possess hypervigilance for potential victimization, strong suspicion of the genuineness and trustworthiness of friendship, excessive attention of social remarks and over-reaction for being misunderstood, self-hatred and self-image projection toward other victims, and anxiety as well as avoidance of social situations. This finding is in accordance with Deborah, Meredith, and Richard's (2000) research. They stated three explanations for the connection between childhood peer victimization and psychological distress in adulthood: a, the perception that social situations are dangerous and difficult to handle which restrain them to engage and found other possibility; b, twisted cognition that agrees with the bully's name-

calling and has lower self-worth; c. learned helplessness which relates to depression in adulthood.

Gladstone, Parker, and Malhi (2006) also found that bullied children are particularly related to social anxiety, anxiety sensitivity, nonmelancholic depression, and had significantly higher level of state anxiety symptoms and cognitive vulnerabilities for depression in young adulthood. However, even though previous research quantified and demonstrated the correlation between adulthood psychological problems and childhood bullying, qualitative research about how twisted cognition determined the behavior and psychological state in short and long term hasn't been explored. Meanwhile, another question, such as "what are the underlying emotional reasons behind its long-lasting impact toward the victim", hasn't been asked.

With the analysis of the participant's narration of their thought, we can find that they failed to walk out of the psychological trauma and relational dilemma is largely because they didn't realize some of their thoughts are wrong and their emotions should not be hide or discounted. During the victimization, the victims may have experienced distrust, unsupportiveness, betrayal, or indifference from friends which makes he/she sense the loneliness, sadness, and helplessness. At the early stage of life, children have an expectation of loyal and supportive friendship. However, this turned out to be an illusion in the face of the reality. In this social relational crisis, the children were frightened by psychological violence, isolated by mistrustful peers, neglected by discounting remarks of adults, and silenced to seek help from parents. From P3's narrates, she perceives the world is dangerous, and nobody is trustful, so neither good peer or bad peer, she once chose to keep her distance from all her peers which caused social isolation in her junior high school. Beneath this self-imposed isolation, she took distrust as a method of self-protection. Meanwhile, from Namie and Namie's (2009) explanation of cognitive behavior therapy, her reasoning demonstrated the following distorted thoughts: overgeneralization that the world and people are dangerous from one bullying event, Filtering that focus on the negative and disregarded the positive, polarized thinking that

friends either black-or-white, illusion of control that she has totally no control of the situation. Only after the victim is aware of their distorted cognition, then they would be able to possess a more rational view, to take proper measures to defend themselves, and become capable to fight against bullying situations in the future.

2, Moral Traps. From the finding, the Participant showed a moral dilemma that traps the victim to defend themselves. She was afraid to turn to a friend because that might cause trouble for her friends. She should offer forgiveness instead of revenge to people who hurt her. Intentional personal revenge would involve unethical strategy which makes her as evil as the bully and would prick her conscience, etc. This mind game is not a distinctive case of moral orthodoxy. In front of the social crisis that violates social norms, human nature of self and others is tested. Bullying as an antisocial case (Gladstone, Parker, & Malhi, 2006) that should not only require support to reimburse the loss that caused by the bullying, but also require measures to punish this anti-social behavior. In the adult world, work place bullying has initiated corresponding laws to address this issue. However, in the children's world, even though bullying cases could entail severe physical, psychological, and relational problems, appropriate law is relatively scarce. Without a proper channel to turn to, individuals have no legitimate protection. Generally, society neglects to punish the perpetrator which should be a necessary method to restore the power balance. In another words, a more comprehensive legislation in the current Minor Protection Act should be bring in. Therefore, a proper channel to stand for justice is needed since many victims resort to improper retaliation when they found no mechanism to ensure their safety and nobody to turn to. Nevertheless, they deserve justice before they can forgive. Neglect of accountability also makes the bystander freeze to offer help while the bully is emboldened to demonstrate more prevalent and severe terror attacks. Moral doctrine should not be the shelter for avoiding accountability of bad behavior and so force the victim to either be smothered or take extreme measures with a distorted criminal mindset. If it's a reality in society, it is shameful to uphold these hypocritical moral doctrines.

To address the moral trap that victims faced, Namie and Namie (2009) said that “Moralists have a political agenda...Don’t confuse the information they disseminate in a public arena with solid advice that has helped people recover from life damaging events like bullying” (p. 203). Moral doctrine says you need to be generous, forgiveness, tolerant. Revenge, however, is always a sensitive topic. I would suggest victims undertake ethical, legal methods to reveal what bullying has done to you and defend your rights. Even though the bully might be stronger, smarter, more socially intelligent, there should be no guilt to claim dignity and no submission toward social suppression. The silence of suffering is exactly the reason why the bully thrives. In order to prevent re-victimization as well as the victimization of others, the victims have the right and the responsibility to reclaim their dignity for their own sake.

“Since people might get into trouble when a victim seeks help from them, the target may face the bully alone. Is the target taking advantage of others to engage into this personal war?” From previous literature reviews, I haven’t found any research on discussing this moral dilemma yet. To answer the victim’s thought, I think it is reasonable to request help where handling the situation is beyond both the skill and courage of the victim. However, when we are asking for help, we should ensure that their help does not endanger their safety and their rights. In addition, seeking help and taking advantage of others has many differences. The major differences lie on the intention and the appreciation of the assistance. Whether the victim gives a genuine and persuasive reason for this help is the criteria to distinguish the differences from help-seeking or advantage-taking. Also, if one takes the help for granted and show no appreciation with the help, the helper may feel being taken advantage of. These are all my personal opinions, I wish in the future there is more research on the moral dilemma that victims have confronted.

3, Family Relationship. In the finding, participants mentioned the following representative influences of family relationship that related to childhood bully: vent out anger toward siblings, compliant parent’s absence, Family structural change such as divorce or single parents, unsupportive parents’ attitudes, and parents’ intervention escalate the conflict and

worsen the pain and suffering. These findings are in consistency with previous research literature. The association between sibling relationship and peer victimization has been researched by Tippett and Wolke (2015), they found that victimization of siblings has a higher risk to experience bullying, while “perpetrators of sibling aggression were more likely to be both peer bullies as well as bully-victims” (p. 14). P5’s victimization of the school bully is demonstrated by the relationship regarding sibling aggression. On the other hand, previous researchers also emphasized that the sibling relationship exerts a significant influence on a child’s self-esteem, peer social competence, and bully protection (Soll, McHale, & Feinberg, 2009). P3’s sibling provided protection and sense of identity which mitigated her bully suffers in certain ways. Therefore, the positive attitude towards a sibling might benefit them with either emotional or behavior protection from a school bully while the victim that has been overwhelmed by a school bully might direct their negative emotions in their sibling relationship which makes it much more difficult to receive consolation and support from siblings.

Parents’ absence, family structural change, and unsupportive parental attitudes that provided from participants accounting validates the previous research that state victims of bullying are likely to suffer from multiple childhood risks or adversaries. In addition, maladaptive parenting which includes parental support and availability, parental supervision and communication were demonstrated by participants’ narration. The finding confirmed that maladaptive parenting predicts an increased risk of persecution at school. However, the reason behind the result is contextual. In this research, information about participants’ cognition and behavior toward their family structural change is not emphasized. However, from P1’s narration, he didn’t want to tell his mother because he didn’t want to bring worry and distress to his mother. P2 and P3 couldn’t get parental support and counselling because of their parents’ being absent. In addition, P2 stated that he had suffered verbal and physical from his mother. From previous literature, in this maternal relationship, P2 is likely to have ambivalent-insecure attachment with his mother. This may result in the children’s lower self-esteem, confidence, and self-value doubt to their parents. P4 didn’t tell his parents about his bullying suffering at school since his parent was went through a difficult divorce. From these

findings, we can find many victims chose to keep silent with their victimization either because of shame, unproportioned responsibility, neglect, or parental unavailability.

Therefore, the cognitive restructure is vital for the victims to re-evaluate their cognition toward the bullying and family relationship. However, because of the complexity of the family relationship, Dattilio (2005) suggested that family schema instead of individual's cognition should be adopted to access the family relationship problems. Dattilio (2005) explained that family schema is a stable cognitive structure that holds about others and their relationships in the family. It consists of held beliefs among the family members that have formed as a result of years of being an integrated family unit. In addition, he emphasized that cognitive-behavior family therapy is a more comprehensive circular process that considers each family members' cognitions and contextual influences, rather than a linear causal process that focuses on an identical problematic individual in the family. For addressing the correlation between bully victimization and its influences upon victim's family relationship, it's necessary to request the participation of each family member and professional psychological treatment if the influences are grave.

4, The only-child Demographic Identity. What deserves special attention that there are 3 out of 7 participants are the only child in the family unit. As previous literature suggested this special demographic background has drawn special attention from researchers. The only child is more likely to have identity and socializing problems which can be related to "lack of emotional space" and "diminished sense of separate identity" (Patrick, 2006). They are also more inclined to take into account of family structure and comply with their parents' due to the significance of parent's support. In addition, from the abovementioned family system theorists, during divorce the child might take the scapegoat role and pleasing behavior to maintain the integrity of the family. Adding that bully victimization predicts a variety of psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, poor self-concept, loneliness, and social withdrawal from studies of Boulton and Underwood (1992) and Olweus (1978, 1992) (as cited in Gladstone, Parker, & Malhi, 2006), the bully victimization in their childhood may

exert a profound influence toward their well-being. Even though it's hard to find research upon the relationship between only-child and bully victimization, it is obvious that the only child who experienced bully and parent's divorce suffered from high pressure with regard to their identity, emotional boundaries, and social interactions.

### *C. Influence on Personal Development*

The findings are reasonably consistent with previous research based on participants' narrations. P1, P2, and P3 have all stated the influence of bullying to their academic achievement. From Huddleston, Varjas, Meyers, & Cadenhead, (2011), bully victimization has a significant contribution to academic deterioration and loss of instructional time. In addition, they found that the painful experiences of bullying related to a much less favorable view of the school. This unfortunately led to a general disengagement in academic studies. The longitudinal correlation between bully victimization and academic failure has been pointed out among other consequences such as conduct problems, psychosis and increased risk of suicide in Sapouna and Wolke's (2013) research. Besides academic engagement and instructional time, Gladstone, Parker, and Malhi's (2006) research also confirmed that victims have a significant connection to adulthood unemployment or receiving sickness benefits.

On the other hand, consistent with previous research on protective factors against bully victimization, high academic performance was related to bully proofing. Hemphill, Tollit, and Herrenkohl (2014) have stated that high academic performance is a direct protective factor and reduces the depressive symptoms of victims. The longitudinal connection between high academic performance and lower depressive symptoms has been explained that "experiencing success at school is recognized as being an important influence on later outcomes including employment, income earning capacity, and less reliance on welfare (Education Foundation Australia, 2007) and hence, related to lower depressive symptoms (Paul & Moser, 2009)" (Hemphill, Tollit, and Herrenkohl, 2014, p. 138). In this research, P5 and P6 said that the bully perpetrators conducted less targeting on them after they made remarkable academic progress.

#### *D. Influence on Re-victimization*

The association between childhood victimization and adulthood workplace bully with P3 is in line with previous research showing the longitudinal likelihood of re-victimization. Olweus (1993) has pointed out the longitudinal tendency of victims' re-victimization. Roth, Coles and Heimberg (2002) have stated the longitudinal and detrimental effects of bullying on their mental health. Harvey, Heames, Richey, and Leonard (2006) agree that vulnerable individuals in bullying cases are generally both the victims in the playground as well as in business organizations, and they apply negative affectivity which means negative perspective toward self and the situation to explain the continuity between childhood and workplace bullying. On the other hand, even though the research on the indicative function of school bullying on workplace bullying is very few, Tehrani (2003) pointed that "the interest in the role of personality traits in explaining workplace bullying has largely been informed by research into school bullying" (p. 6). Therefore, based on complementary research on school and workplace bullying, and findings from this research on an individual level, I believe the cognitive model as well as the cognitive behavior therapy are the more sophisticated theory to illustrate the distorted cognitions that victims possess from bullying situations which reinforced into automatic thoughts that guiding and reinforcing their behavior in bully situation. The obliviousness of taking a step to examine their perception and cognition during victimization, and the inability to adjust the distorted cognitions and automatic thoughts would be the core of the continuity as well as re-victimization.

Beside the re-victimization in the workplace, bullying can occur in various social situations such as intimate relationships and also with teacher-student relationships. Furthermore, Farrington (1993) suggested that there is intergenerational continuity of bullying patterns. Randall (1997) used "cycle of violence" to emphasize the longitudinal and interrelated influences towards victims' multiple aspects of life. Therefore, my research which focuses on the individual's perception of their cognition can provide an insight into the internalizing process of external harm, the dynamic interplay between the individual and the social environments. In addition, this research can contribute to the contemporary field of



comparative research between school bullying and workplace bullying, and area of rarely delved into.

#### 5.4.2 Solution Exploration & Help Others

From the findings, participants narrate their common consensus that they will take different acts such as warning, emotional control, and boundary declaration to prevent bullying harassment instead of the previous avoidance strategies. This result suggests that most of the participants have adapted cognitive changes such as belief and confidence in capability to deal with bullying issues. However, participants only can only offer one or two ways when answering this question. Therefore, it is very necessary for the former victim to be equipped with higher social emotional intelligence to be observant with their own emotion, cognition adjustments to apply different views and thinking patterns in various social confrontations, and social skills to react effectively and flexibly toward intrusions. Here I would like to suggest that school education should contain contents on **social emotional education and social communication skills particularly for victims** to empower themselves from re-victimization and restructure rational cognitions. In addition, children and their childhood experience deserve equal respect and **societal changes** are needed to empower the victim more comprehensively. P3 suggested that when she tries to find answers from books, she found over simplified and limited description of peer conflicts and felt the moral dilemma to fight back and constant self-blame for ideas of retaliation. Therefore, for children in bullying, the scientific publications on bullying research should be developed for young readers and be accessible for international teenagers without boundaries of cultural, language, and societal differences.

Besides solution exploration, all of the participants show empathy toward other victims and some intend to offer help to other victims. P1 even conducted research on anti-bully programs for schools. This result is also in conformity with previous research that victims are less likely to morally disengage regard bullying (Swearer, Hymel, 2015). According to descriptions of

the bully perpetrators, many of them were described as emotional callous. On the contrary, victim's empathy can work as an advantage for anti-bullying school programs and research.

#### 5.4.3 Identify Positive Elements for Nurturing Bullying Resilience

In the finding, protective factors such as confidence reconstruction, emotional adjustment, cognitive adjustment with regard to causal attribution and moral dilemma, supportive social network and culture can give insight into individual levels bully proof strategies, which complement the school bully intervene programs besides family and community levels. From Sapouna and Wolke (2013), resilience is a capacity that individuals preserve a positive relationship with family members and peers and even confronting adversities. Garmezy (1985) listed three sources of protective factors: "individual characteristics (including high self-esteem and autonomy), family environment... and community..." (as cited in Sapouna and Wolke, 2013, p. 998). Most of the participants narration of protective factors belong to the individual level. This result is reasonable from the perspective of the victim, since cognitive interpretations of events exert great impacts for their response to events according to the cognitive model. In other words, **cognitive behavior therapy** (CBT) would be a practical and important way to nurture **resilience** for bullying victims.

In addition, cognitive behavior therapy should be included for anti-bullying school programs since this therapy can eventually empower the victim and prevent themselves from longitudinal internalizing struggles and re-victimization. Meanwhile, anti-bullying programs which involve family and community collaboration would be beneficial for their cognition restructuration. In this research, due to the limited number of participants, positive factors such as authoritative and adaptive parenting, secure attachment, social skill nurturing, peer support, school policy adjustment have not been explored systematically. However, I would suggest future research on the effect of CBT toward the PTSD of bullying victims in anti-bullying school intervention programs.

## 6 Dependability, Validity, and Ethics

With regard to the suitability to apply validity and reliability in qualitative research, there are a great number of arguments. Golafshani (2003) explained that in quantitative research reliability means the research result is **replicable or transferable** in the particular control of similar contexts. Whilst validity means whether the measurement method is the correct way to **give an accurate answer to the research questions**. Based on the different purposes of qualitative and quantitative research, he agrees with Healy and Perry (2000) that “the quality of a study in each paradigm should be judged by its own paradigm’s terms” based on the situated context of qualitative research. Agreeing with this point, I would like to use “dependability” instead of “reliability” that suggested in Healy and Perry’s (2000) research to state the quality or trustworthiness of my research. After reviewing the dependability, I would explain the validity and ethical issues during my research planning, implementation, and result discussions.

### 6.1 Dependability

Different from reliability which emphasizes the replicability of research results over time in controlled variables, dependability is a favorable way to evaluate the quality of this qualitative research on perceptions. As Healy and Perry (2000) said that researchers such as Lincoln and Guba (1985) use “**dependability**” to replace the criteria of “reliability” as a way to illustrate the differences between naturalistic view of reality in qualitative research and the positivistic view of the reality in quantitative research. As mentioned in the methodology part, the epistemology and ontology of phenomenology are based on the naturalistic view that the world is the “experienced reality” instead of “something there to be discovered”. For phenomenologists, the reality is fluid and contemporary. The phenomenological representation of reality is a horizon of intersubjective and temporary truth out of the structure of the lived experience of the phenomenon. Therefore, I believe dependability which “includes the instability factors” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with the consideration of contextual

and dynamic setting of authentic human experience is the proper measurement for this phenomenological research.

After discussing the suitability of dependability for my research, dependability of this phenomenological research is represented by the method of **bracketing** and the **objectivizing subjectivity**. Even though the research result is dependent on the context instead of repeatable or transferable, phenomenology applies bracketing to analyze, to categorize, and to triangulate essential structure of a phenomena from thick descriptions. Different from quantitative way of measuring reliability via testing the hypothesis, phenomenology allows the research to obtain objectivity with the consideration of the natural setting of the phenomena, the extricable dynamic interrelationship between individual and context, the limited generalization related to the particular context.

Regard to the objectivizing subjectivity, as mentioned in the methodological part, phenomenologists believe the objectivity is an intersubjective experience of the subject toward the object. Through bracketing of the pre-knowledge and bias away, the researcher can bypass the mystery of individuality and obtain the structure of experience in the phenomenon so as to achieve the objectivizing subjectivity. This point of view resonates to Davis's idea (1991) that since the "objective understanding is impossible and meaning is always in the subject rather than in the object", we can achieve the objective via researching on how individuals interpret the phenomena rather than probing what phenomena mean.

Finally, to evaluate the dependable objectivity or dependability in this research, I used **purposive sampling** (snowball sampling) regardless the ethnographic background of participants in participant selection. In the data collecting and analysis process, I applied **triangulation, peer consultation, member checking, and thick description**. Triangulation is achieved through bracketing and coding constant theme among multiple participants so as to grasp the structure. I consulted my critical friend and classmates for data analysis. As to

member checking, I transcribed the participants narrations and requested the participants to review my interpretations while coding and categorizing their ideas so as to achieve accurate interpretation. Thick description was achieved by open questions in the semi-instructed interviews. I also took **empathic neutrality** in interpreting data which enable me to take a neutral and non-judgmental stance in this bullying research.

To obtain the objectivizing perception of their childhood bully experience directly, I avoided the social ecological framework in designing the interview questions, but focused on cognitive modeling of event-emotion-cognition-behavior from participants' bullying experiences. Questions about individual temperament, family environment, school management, community environment, social and culture background have not been asked separately. With the distance from social ecological framework, I bracketed my preconception of bullying research and focus on the intuitive descriptions of participants experiences. This bracketing enables me to obtain genuine and trustworthy data. At last, the themed structures of bullying experiences are emerged from a relatively small scale of participants.

## **6.2 Validity**

Is the research methodology the proper way to answer the research question? Have I get the data accurately and prudently by following the research methodology? These two questions are constantly asked for evaluating the validity of research. From Joppe (2000) "validity determines whether the research truly measures that which it was intended to measure or how truthful the research results are" (p. 1). For the first question, whether phenomenology is the proper method to approach the research question of what are the young adults' perception towards their childhood bully experience, I have explained in the part of methodology that the ontology and epistemology of phenomenology predicts its suitability to access to the experiences which include emotion and perception of a particular phenomenon like bully victimization.

With the second question, I followed the procedures of phenomenology that are suggested by Willis (2001) which include: 1) description; 2) bracketing, and 3) naming essential themes. During the interview, I let the participants to freely talk about their thoughts, feelings, beliefs without purpose to get the answer I want. After collecting data, I transcribed the participants words directly and consulted participants' feedback toward thematic coding which stick to the principle to let the participant presenting their multiple perspective of their experience in the most authentic way. During the data collecting and coding, I keep checking my pre-reflexive bias, expectations, and other pre-knowledge away to ensure the intact presentation of participants representation. While I categorize the essential themes, I focus on the **cognition** instead of emotion that other previous research has done so as to capture the relatively stable thinking and logic throughout the individuals' experience. I also try to **avoid the third person bias** of causal attribution by presenting the victims' understanding of the cause of bullying in a trustful and non-judgmental attitude. Direct quotation of participants' narrations is fully exhibited. With those efforts, I tried to conduct the research in a trustworthy and accurate way by following the prescribed procedure of phenomenological research. In addition, phenomenology is the suitable methodology to approach my research question for its ontological and epistemological niche for studying human experience.

### **6.3 Ethic**

Since my research is focused on the bully victimization experience and their current perceptions, ethical consideration is particularly and consistently reflected on during the whole process of research. Giving that this research is conducted in Finland, I followed the Finnish Research Advisory Board's (2012) standards for ethical procedure in data collection, research planning and presentation, and result reporting. Firstly, I held myself to the principle of responsible conduct of research throughout the research by meticulously and comprehensively referring to previous research in longitudinal bully victimizations and by consulting experts in this field for suggestions. Secondly, in writing the research I adhered to the APA 6 requirements to cite publications and present reference accurately and comprehensively so as to give full credits to previous researchers and their work. Thirdly, I collected data with full consideration of participants' rights and acquire their consent by

making the interview consent form that abides to the Finnish Research Advisory Board's (2012) standards. Please refer to the Appendix 1. Fourthly, I stored, transcribed, presented and analyzed the data with integrity by returning the transcriptions and thematic coding to participants for review. With data collecting, analyzing, I adhered to the ethical way of empathic neutrality which allows the participant to feel safety, acceptance, non-judgement, and full privacy in sharing personal negative experience.

In conclusion, I believe that dependability instead of reliability is a better evaluation criterion for qualitative research. I achieve dependability through bracketing and objectivizing subjectivity and avoid the social ecological framework in designing interview questions. In this way, the intersubjectivity and structure among various participants can be intuitively presented which ensures the dependability of answering my research questions. To achieve the validity, I believe phenomenology is the suitable way for my research which focuses on bullying victims' perceptions. Furthermore, I followed the procedure of phenomenology with prudent accounting of participants' voices and feedback of thematic coding. With regard to ethic consideration, I adhere to the national academic ethical standard into the planning, conducting, and reporting of research. Data collecting, analysis, presentation are in accordance to academic integrity and meticulousness between researcher and participants. The whole research follows the proper citation standard; whilst empathic neutrality is applied to ensure the autonomy and rights of the participants.

## 7 Conclusion

It is widely known that school bullying is a prevalent world-wide occurrence which exerts a profound influence toward the victims both in the short-term and long term. However, there is no extensive qualitative research upon the longitudinal influences toward former victims. Nevertheless, massive research indicates the possibility of re-victimization in adulthood as well as the transgenerational influence of parental bullying victimization. Therefore, it is vital to understand the cognitive reason behind re-victimization as well as parental attitudes toward bullying. As Roth, Coles, and Heimberg (2002) pointed out that childhood bullying experiences may contribute to the thinking patterns common to both general anxiety and depression in adulthood. To probe the cognitive reasons of former victims, it's necessary to conduct this phenomenological research which focuses on the first-person vision to understand the victims' experience. What previous longitudinal quantitative research is short of, is the perspective of victims. Their perspectives are vital for understanding the continuity of their cognitive patterns in social crisis. Meanwhile, there is limited research that employs social cognitive theory in the analysis of victimization and adapts cognitive behavior therapy in coping with the victims' traumatic experience. This is the "niche or gap" within which I have tried to position this research. Hence, at the introductory part, the research question has been highlighted as finding the young adults' perception of their juvenile bullying experiences. This research would also potentially distill the current academic discussion of bully/victim problem, the transition from school bully to workplace bully, and the adaptation of cognitive behavior therapy in bullying intervention programs.

My research question is "what are the perceptions that young adults have towards their bullying experiences?" Every participant gave a descriptive information regarding why they experienced bullying, what they thought, and what they did during their childhood torment, before stating their current perceptions. From these contextual reflections, regarding the reasons for being bullied, firstly, I believe it entails a dynamic and reciprocal cognitive mechanism. In this process, individuals digest and react upon the social environmental event (bullying) and personal factors(cognition) together instead of the quantitative hypothesis of

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individual respond to an external stimulus. Secondly, social cognitive theory or cognitive model is more suitable than a social ecological framework to analyze this cognitive process. Thirdly, I believe perspective matters since there are disproportionate causal attributions in society which improperly blame the victim for bullying involvement and deepens the victims' cognitive distortion of the "coward self", untrustworthy of peers, and unfair judgement from the society. These ideas underlie the results of physical appearance, social-economic background, inadequacy of personality, differences and low probability of retaliation, and group conflict. Even though, these reasons are in conformity with previous research, the cognitive interpretation and response toward social pressure and judgements are the core for their victimization which paralyzes them to reclaim their dignity.

With regard to the childhood perception, the findings show victims experience self-blame, learnt helplessness, suspicion and hypersensitivity of social relations, doubt regarding self-worth, and blame guardians in maladaptive family environments. The findings of this thesis indicate that victims experience cognitive distortion and possess automatic thoughts toward themselves which contribute to self-blame, learnt helplessness, and the like, which eventually depletes their confidence to fight back against repetitive aggression. What deserves special attention is the misconception in the social environment which takes bullying as the 'rule of the jungle' of competitive selection. This misconception legitimates the bystanders' indifference and the bully's anti-social behavior, and even crowns the bully's victory over the victims' torment and misery. Also, this misconception transfers to the adult world, which praises the workplace bully as a measure of professional leadership.

This research also confirmed with previous research, that victims generally take avoidance or relocation measures to confront the bullying in childhood. All participants wished the bully would give up or eventually feel bored. All felt shame for not being capable of fighting back. However, this finding has the implication that the victims should at first accept the powerless self in memory and understand that it was not their fault for not being able to fight back in the unbalanced power situation and the moment of fear and loathing. Secondly, they should

acquire proper cognition for anti-bully strategies. This would help prevent excessive retaliation that may lead to victim/bully, or Stockholm Syndrome and reserve empathy that often complicates their value system. Cognitive behavior therapy helps the victim to realize their psychological boundary, their rights, and automatic thoughts and so this healing remedy should be implemented.

From the finding part of adulthood perception toward their childhood bully victimization experience, participants' narration demonstrates the stable structure: the evaluation of its consequence; the proposal of different coping strategies; the empathy to help other victims; and the identification of protective factors for bully resilience.

Their evaluation of the consequence of childhood bullying includes psychological, relational and personal development influences, and its connection with re-victimization. As to the psychological problem, they still feel anxious, fearful, and apprehensive in social relations, and being ashamed to talk about their victimization experiences, and self-blame toward their weak and cowardly behavior. Furthermore, their anger to the perpetrating bully as well as to the indifferent bystanders. Therefore, I propose them firstly to comprehend the influence and secondly understand how to cope with the anger, shame, and self-blame, thirdly to accept the imperfect self in childhood and the fact that they were unreasonably hurt. After rightful reexamination of their emotion and cognition, they can get emotionally healed and structure a more practical and realistic cognitive pattern to prevent re-victimization. Concerning the relational influence, I am also aware of the victims' moral dilemma in retaliation and suggest more comprehensive legislation which solves the moral predicament of retaliation with proper channels to regain the balance of power. Among the participants, three out of seven partakers are the only child and five participants experience adversary in the family structure. Specific comparative cognitive analysis between the only-child and child with siblings deserves further research to find out the common feature of their mental changes during their bullying victimization.

This research, in conformity with previous studies confirms that these terrorizing experiences exert negative developmental influences toward the victims via academic disengagement or decline, loss of instructional time for nurturing social skills, impaired personality development, and the like. The linkage between school and workplace bullying has been demonstrated through this research which solidified the Tattum and Tattum (1996) and Randall's (1997) "Cycle of violence", that "bullying behavior established and perfected in childhood and adolescence, continues to express and manifest itself in a variety of situations throughout life" (as cited in Tehrani, 2003, p. 7).

Another finding that requires further exploration is the former victims' proposition of different coping strategies, the empathy to help other victims, and the identification as well as gratitude toward protective factors. As to suggest coping strategies, most of the participants demonstrated limited knowledge of suitable coping methods and the awareness of their cognitive distortions. Therefore, I propose social emotional lessons, social communication courses, and anti-bullying tutorial books be available for children. I believe if these steps are taken, they can empower as well as establish a proper understanding of themselves and the bullying issue. In regard to empathy, to help others, I suggest their compassion should be taken as an advantage and applied in an anti-bullying program which would then help to create a much-needed supportive environment. Lastly, as confidence rebuilding is an important element underlying protective factors, I suggest cognitive behavior treatment should be adapted in bullying intervention programs besides the prevalent intervention programs that are based on social ecological theory.

In this research, I applied phenomenology to explore the longitudinal perception toward a victims' childhood bullying incidents. Through the horizon gained from multiple authentic first-person perspectives, I can probe the historical as well as contemporary contextual cognition of former victims. This horizon enables the research to grasp the structure of victims' experience and serves to find more accurate ways to mitigate and prevent future re-

victimizations and possibly help the victim solve bullying related issues in their life such as their children's bully cases, intimate relations, workplace bullying and social aggression.

The limitation of this research lies in the recollected self-reported data. Since this qualitative longitudinal research emphasis is to give voice to participants, the data might represent their subjective interpretation of bullying. Multiple informants might provide more accurate understanding of their childhood bully cases. Nevertheless, this research is aimed at demonstrating the victims' experience and perception towards bullying so we can provide suitable treatment and help to mitigate longitudinal influences that might come to play. It's also based on my personal wish that the victims deserve to regain their dignity, worthiness and resilience after unfair treatment in their lives. This is largely since research indicates victimization exacts an inferior economic, physical and psychological situation in the longitudinal results after 40 years of the bully cases (Takizawa, Maughan, & Arseneault, 2014). I hope through this intimate exploration, cognitive behavior treatment can be considered to address victims' psychological issues. Their moral dilemma and their cognitive changes can be taken seriously and eventually lead to more comprehensive legislation to stamp out school bullying, insightful cognitive therapy in bullying intervention programs, and societal change the convention that bullying equals competitive selection.

Finally, I would like to quote Gary Namie and Ruth Namie's (2009) words to finish my thesis: "*to thrive, bullies require secrecy, shame, and silent witnesses.*" Understanding young adults' cognition upon the occurrence of bullying victimization is the key to understand the causality of bullying and the continuity of re-victimization, and to mitigate the immediate and long-term harm that victims has suffered. Cognitive behavior therapy is recommended as a practical part of the bullying intervention programs.



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## Appendix 1-- Research Consent Form

### Consent for Participation in Interview Research

This form explains the purpose of this study, a description of the involvement required and your rights as a participant. The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the causality of childhood bully victimization experience and adult perception of their childhood bully experience to contribute to the longitudinal research in this area. The methods that will be used to meet this purpose include:

- one-on-one interviews (includes handwritten notes and an audio recording)
- possible follow-up questions (later on during the research process)

You are encouraged to ask questions for raising concerns at any time about the nature of the study or the methods I am using. Please contact me anytime at the e-mail address listed below.

- [hwen@student oulu.fi](mailto:hwen@student oulu.fi)

Our discussion will be recorded to help me accurately capture your insights in your own words and will be heard by me for the purpose of this study. The data will be stored securely on a private device and will not be uploaded to collaborative or cloud servers. This interview is voluntary. You also have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. In the event you choose to withdraw from the study all information you provide (including recordings) will be deleted and omitted from the final thesis.

Insights gathered by you and other participants will be exclusively used in the writing of my MA thesis which will be read by my professor(s) and potentially published/ shared with my cohort. Though direct quotes from you may be used in the paper, your name and other identifying information will be kept anonymous. If you would like to review the manuscript, you may request to see it before publication.

By signing this consent form I certify that I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to the terms of the interview as outlined above.

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher

Note: This consent form was created using the Finnish National Ethics Advisory Board guidelines on research ethics. See more:

<http://www.tenk.fi/sites/tenk.fi/files/ethicalprinciples.pdf>

## Appendix 2—Interview Questions

1. In your memory, what kind of bully you have experienced in your childhood? How old were you? How is the family, school, and community environment around you at that time?
2. In your opinion, what might be the reason for you been targeted (for the bully) in your childhood? Or what might be the reasons that contribute to the occurrence of bully?
3. What did you think when you were at the bully situation?
4. What did you do to confront/face the bully?
5. What are the influences of bully victimization at the time when you were bullied? (e. g.: academic, relational, personal influence)
6. When you reflect, what might be the long-term influences of bully to who you are today?
7. At present, what do you think of your former bully experience? Any opinion or reflection of this experience would be good.
8. What have you learnt from the childhood bully experience?
9. Do you think you can tackle potential bully situation in the future (in university, work environment, or society)? And Why?

Note:

1. Here childhood means age 1-18.
2. The bully is defined as repetitive aggressive acts with varied forms of physical, verbal or indirect such as sending nasty notes or relational ostracizing. In addition, there is an imbalance of power and the victim are usually unable to defend him/herself (Sourander et al., 2007, p. 398).