

The Social Construction Of School Bullying: A Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

Hidayati¹, Tiara Ramadhani², Wilda Afriani³, Eka Fitriyanti⁴

¹ Universitas Bangka Belitung, Indonesia; hidayatisosio@ubb.ac.id

² Universitas Bangka Belitung, Indonesia; tiaramadhani30@yahoo.co.id

³ Universitas Bangka Belitung, Indonesia; wilda@ubb.ac.id

⁴ Universitas Bangka Belitung, Indonesia; ekafy1104@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study aimed to describe junior high school students' experiences and perceptions of bullying in Pangkalpinang and to examine how these experiences construct the social meaning of bullying through George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism. A descriptive quantitative design was employed, complemented by thematic analysis of students' responses to open-ended questions. The study involved 324 students from five junior high schools in Pangkalpinang. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations), while qualitative data were analyzed thematically using Mead's concepts of significant symbols, meaning, self, role-taking, significant others, and the generalized other. The results showed that verbal and relational bullying were the most frequently experienced forms of bullying. Although students generally perceived school policies and anti-bullying measures positively, many remained reluctant to report or intervene in bullying incidents. The qualitative findings revealed that bullying is socially constructed through interconnected processes of symbolic interaction, meaning construction, self-formation, role-taking, the influence of significant others, and the generalized other. This study concludes that Mead's six central concepts operate not as isolated analytical categories but as a dynamic sequence of social processes through which bullying is socially produced, reproduced, normalized, and potentially transformed. These findings provide a sociological perspective for strengthening school-based bullying prevention.

Keywords

bullying; symbolic interactionism; George Herbert Mead; social construction; junior high school students



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INTRODUCTION

Bullying remains one of the most serious social issues in education because it adversely affects students' psychological development, social relationships, and the quality of interactions between teachers and parents[1], [2], [3]. Olweus defines bullying as intentional aggressive behavior that is repeated over time and involves an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim, making it difficult for

victims to defend themselves[4]. Furthermore, bullying should not be understood merely as ordinary peer conflict but rather as a pattern of social relations characterized by domination and unequal power[4]. Within the school setting, bullying may take various forms, including physical, verbal, relational, and psychological aggression. These behaviors are often normalized as "just joking" among peers, making them difficult to recognize and address appropriately.

Bullying has evolved into a global educational concern. UNESCO estimates that approximately 246 million children and adolescents worldwide experience violence and bullying in school each year. The consequences extend beyond physical injuries to include declining academic achievement, mental health problems, anxiety, depression, diminished self-esteem, and an increased risk of school dropout. Moreover, bullying affects not only victims but also perpetrators and bystanders, thereby influencing the overall school climate and learning environment [5]. UNESCO's global report further emphasizes that effective bullying prevention requires a comprehensive approach involving strong school leadership, consistent anti-bullying policies, teacher capacity building, safe reporting mechanisms, and the creation of an inclusive school climate[6].

In Indonesia, bullying continues to pose a significant challenge to the provision of safe and inclusive education. National data indicate that approximately 20% of adolescents have experienced bullying within a one-month period[7]. Data from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia [KPAI]) show that in late 2025, school violence was still rising and urged a more comprehensive prevention, reporting, and response system in schools[8]. At the local level, Bullying remains an ongoing concern in several schools in Pangkalpinang. Although the number of reported cases is relatively limited, local authorities have continued to identify the issue as a serious challenge requiring sustained prevention and intervention efforts[9]. These findings suggest that schools have not yet become entirely safe environments for students and highlight the need to strengthen both bullying prevention and intervention strategies. More importantly, schools should move beyond merely enforcing disciplinary regulations and seek to understand the social dynamics that shape bullying behavior among students.

Although bullying has been widely investigated, previous studies have predominantly focused on measuring its prevalence and examining statistical relationships among variables [10], [7], identifying factors associated with bullying behavior [11], [12], or assessing its psychosocial consequences for victims [13], [14]. Most of these studies adopt perspectives from educational psychology, counseling, social welfare, or mental health, thereby conceptualizing bullying primarily as an individual behavioral problem. While these perspectives provide valuable insights, they do not sufficiently explain how bullying is produced, interpreted, and normalized through students' everyday social interactions. Consequently, bullying is frequently treated as a disciplinary issue rather than as a socially constructed phenomenon emerging from ongoing interpersonal relationships.

From a sociological perspective, bullying can be understood as a product of continuous social interaction among members of a peer group. Mocking physical appearance, assigning derogatory nicknames, social exclusion, and the circulation of stigmatizing labels function as significant symbols whose meanings are negotiated through interaction [15]. Therefore, George Herbert Mead's theory of symbolic interactionism provides a relevant theoretical framework for understanding how students construct meanings of bullying. As Mead argued, "Meaning arises out of the social act; it is not inherent in objects but emerges through interaction." According to Mead, social action is shaped through interconnected processes involving meaning, significant symbols, the self, role-taking, significant others, and the generalized other [16]. These concepts make it possible to examine how students assign meanings to bullying, how victims develop their self-concept, how bystanders decide whether to intervene or remain silent, and how perpetrators gain social legitimacy through peer interaction. Accordingly, bullying should be understood not merely as aggressive behavior but as a socially constructed phenomenon produced through everyday interactions within the school community.

Despite the growing body of bullying research, empirical studies focusing on Pangkalpinang remain limited. To date, few studies have systematically examined students' experiences of bullying, their perceptions of bullying, and their views on school policies for bullying prevention and intervention in junior high schools across the city. This lack of local evidence means that school policies are often developed without sufficient consideration of students' lived experiences as victims, witnesses, or participants in bullying incidents. Yet these experiences provide valuable insights into how bullying is perceived, how victims respond to bullying, and how peers collectively construct meanings around bullying within their social environment.

The novelty of this study lies in its integration of a descriptive quantitative approach with sociological interpretation through symbolic interactionism. Quantitative data were employed to identify patterns of students' bullying experiences, perceptions of bullying, and perceptions of school regulations and anti-bullying measures. Meanwhile, students' responses to open-ended questions were analyzed to explore how they interpreted their experiences as victims, bystanders, and members of a school community in which bullying occurs. This approach enables the study not only to describe how frequently bullying is experienced but also to explain how students construct its social meaning through everyday interactions.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to describe the patterns of junior high school students' experiences and perceptions of bullying in Pangkalpinang and to examine how these experiences shape the meaning of bullying from the perspective of George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism. The study is expected to contribute empirically by mapping students' experiences and perceptions of bullying while also enriching the sociology of education through a deeper understanding of how bullying is socially constructed within everyday school interactions.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive quantitative design to examine students' experiences and perceptions of bullying in schools. The quantitative approach was selected to describe patterns of bullying based on students' reported experiences rather than to test causal relationships among variables. To enrich the interpretation of quantitative findings, students' responses to open-ended questions were incorporated as qualitative data and analyzed through the lens of George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism. This complementary approach enabled the study to explore not only the prevalence of bullying experiences but also the social meanings students constructed from those experiences.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in five junior high schools located in Pangkalpinang City, Bangka Belitung Islands Province, Indonesia: SMP Negeri 1 Pangkalpinang, SMP Negeri 7 Pangkalpinang, SMP IT Al Bina Pangkalpinang, SMP Swadaya Pangkalpinang, and SMP Muhammadiyah Pangkalpinang. Schools were selected purposively to represent both public and private educational institutions, thereby providing a broader picture of bullying experiences among junior high school students in Pangkalpinang. Data collection was carried out between July and December 2025.

Population and Participants

The study population consisted of all students enrolled in the five participating junior high schools. Participants were selected using non-probability sampling, combining purposive sampling at the school level and convenience sampling at the participant level. Schools were intentionally selected according to the objectives of the study, while students voluntarily completed the questionnaire after obtaining permission from their respective schools.

A total of 324 students participated in the study. The distribution of participants across schools was not proportional: 124 students from SMP Negeri 1 Pangkalpinang, 111 from SMP Negeri 7 Pangkalpinang, 43 from SMP IT Al Bina Pangkalpinang, 27 from SMP Muhammadiyah Pangkalpinang, and 19 from SMP Swadaya Pangkalpinang. The unequal distribution reflected differences in participation rates and school policies during the survey administration.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed from the literature on school bullying. The instrument consisted of four sections: (1) participants' demographic characteristics, (2) students' experiences of bullying (10 items), (3) students' perceptions of bullying (11 items), and (4) students' perceptions of school regulations and bullying management (10 items).

All close-ended items were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. In addition, the questionnaire included an open-ended question asking students to describe their experiences with bullying, either as victims or as witnesses. These qualitative responses were used to provide a

deeper sociological interpretation of the quantitative findings.

Data Collection

Data were collected through an online survey administered via Google Forms in collaboration with participating schools. The study adhered to ethical principles for research involving human participants. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the participating schools, and informed consent was secured prior to data collection. Participants' identities were kept confidential, and all data were analyzed anonymously.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, descriptive statistical analysis was performed to summarize participants' demographic characteristics, bullying experiences, perceptions of bullying, and perceptions of school responses to bullying. Descriptive statistics included frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. The findings were presented using frequency distribution tables and descriptive statistical summaries to illustrate patterns in students' responses.

In the second stage, responses to the open-ended question were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis began with repeated readings of all responses, followed by open coding, theme development, and interpretation based on George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism. The analysis focused on six key concepts: significant symbols, meaning, self, role-taking, significant others, and the generalized other. These concepts were used to explain how students constructed meanings of bullying, how bullying experiences shaped their self-concept, and how peer interaction and collective social norms influenced students' responses to bullying.

Finally, the quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated during the discussion. Quantitative data were used to identify empirical patterns of bullying, whereas qualitative findings were employed to explain the social meanings underlying those patterns from a symbolic interactionist perspective.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

1. Participant Characteristics

A total of 324 junior high school students from five public and private schools in Pangkalpinang participated in this study. The participants represented diverse demographic backgrounds in terms of gender, age, grade level, and school affiliation. Their demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Characteristics	Category	School Type	n	%
Gender	Male		130	40.1
	Female		194	59.9

Age	12 years		49	15.1
	13 years		97	29.9
	14 years		123	38.0
	15 years		45	13.9
	16 years		10	3.1
Grade	Grade VII		96	29.6
	Grade VIII		103	31.8
	Grade IX		125	38.6
School	SMP Negeri 1 Pangkalpinang	Public	124	38.3
	SMP Negeri 7 Pangkalpinang	Public	111	34.3
	SMP IT Al Bina Pangkalpinang	Private	43	13.3
	SMP Muhammadiyah Pangkalpinang	Private	27	8.3
	SMP Swadaya Pangkalpinang	Private	19	5.9

Source: Authors' calculation (2026).

As shown in Table 1, female students constituted the majority of participants (59.9%), while male students accounted for 40.1%. Most participants were between 13 and 14 years old (67.9%), reflecting the typical age range of early adolescence in Indonesian junior high schools. Participants were relatively evenly distributed across grade levels, with Grade IX students representing the largest proportion (38.6%), followed by Grade VIII (31.8%) and Grade VII (29.6%). Regarding school affiliation, most participants were drawn from SMP Negeri 1 Pangkalpinang (38.3%) and SMP Negeri 7 Pangkalpinang (34.3%), while the remaining participants attended three private junior high schools.

Overall, the participant profile demonstrates adequate demographic variation in terms of gender, age, grade level, and school type, providing a broad empirical basis for describing students' experiences and perceptions of bullying across different junior high school contexts in Pangkalpinang.

2. Patterns of Bullying Experiences

Students' experiences of bullying were examined using ten questionnaire items representing different forms of bullying, including verbal, physical, relational, and cyberbullying, as well as reporting behavior, perceptions of school support, and involvement as perpetrators. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were used to identify patterns in students' experiences. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Students' Bullying Experiences (BE)

Item	Bullying Experiences	Mean	SD
BE1	Experienced verbal bullying (being mocked or insulted at school)	2,31	1,33
BE2	Experienced physical bullying (being hit or pushed)	1,67	1,06
BE3	Experienced relational bullying (being excluded or ignored by peers)	2,12	1,40

BE4	Experienced cyberbullying (being mocked on social media)	1,67	1,12
BE5	Felt afraid of attending school because of bullying	1,76	1,25
BE6	Reported bullying incidents to teachers or school authorities	2,19	1,44
BE7	Perceived that the school provided adequate support for bullying victims	3,06	1,56
BE8	Participated in bullying other students	1,49	0,90
BE9	Felt unsafe at school because of bullying	1,76	1,18
BE10	Preferred to remain silent rather than report bullying	2,00	1,39

Source: Authors' calculation (2026)

As shown in Table 2, students reported experiencing various forms of bullying, although the frequency differed across bullying types. Verbal bullying was the most frequently reported experience ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 1.33$), followed by relational bullying, particularly social exclusion or being ignored by peers ($M = 2.12$, $SD = 1.40$). In contrast, physical bullying ($M = 1.67$, $SD = 1.06$) and cyberbullying ($M = 1.67$, $SD = 1.12$) were reported less frequently. These findings suggest that bullying among junior high school students in Pangkalpinang predominantly occurs through verbal interactions and peer relationships rather than through direct physical aggression.

Students generally reported relatively low levels of fear of attending school because of bullying ($M = 1.76$, $SD = 1.25$) and feeling unsafe at school ($M = 1.76$, $SD = 1.18$). However, these findings indicate that bullying continues to generate psychological concerns among a proportion of students, even when incidents are not frequent.

Regarding students' responses to bullying, perceptions of school support for victims received the highest mean score ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.56$), indicating that many participants believed their schools had made efforts to assist victims of bullying. Nevertheless, students were less likely to report bullying incidents to teachers or school authorities ($M = 2.19$, $SD = 1.44$) and tended to remain silent rather than seek help ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.39$). Furthermore, self-reported involvement as perpetrators was relatively low ($M = 1.49$, $SD = 0.90$), suggesting that only a small proportion of participants admitted engaging in bullying behavior.

Overall, the descriptive findings reveal three notable patterns. First, bullying is experienced primarily in verbal and relational forms rather than physical or cyber forms. Second, although schools are generally perceived as supportive of bullying victims, students remain reluctant to report bullying incidents. Third, the relatively low self-reported involvement as perpetrators suggests that students are more willing to disclose victimization than participation in bullying. These patterns provide an empirical foundation for exploring how bullying is socially interpreted and experienced, which is further examined through the perspective of symbolic interactionism in the subsequent analysis.

3. Students' Perceptions of Bullying

In addition to students' direct experiences, the study examined how students

perceived bullying within their school environment. Eleven questionnaire items assessed students' perceptions of the seriousness of bullying, school policies, teachers' responses, peer support, and students' willingness to respond to bullying incidents. Descriptive statistics were used to identify patterns in students' perceptions. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Students' Perceptions of Bullying (BP)

Item	Students' Perceptions of Bullying	Mean	SD
BP1	Bullying is a serious problem in my school.	3.57	1.49
BP2	My school has rules to prevent bullying.	4.39	1.05
BP3	Teachers and school staff care about bullying incidents.	4.20	1.09
BP4	I feel comfortable reporting bullying to my teacher or homeroom teacher.	3.53	1.35
BP5	Students help classmates who experience bullying.	3.61	1.31
BP6	Students who bully others are usually disciplined appropriately.	3.95	1.30
BP7	Anti-bullying campaigns or awareness programs are helpful.	3.93	1.19
BP8	I have witnessed bullying but was afraid to help the victim.	2.27	1.33
BP9	My school promotes healthy competition rather than bullying.	3.94	1.20
BP10	I believe my school provides support for students who experience bullying.	4.06	1.21
BP11	I frequently see or hear bullying occurring at school.	2.77	1.41

Source: Authors' calculation (2026)

As presented in Table 3, students generally expressed positive perceptions of their schools' commitment to preventing and addressing bullying. The highest mean score was recorded for the existence of school rules to prevent bullying ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 1.05$), followed by teachers' and school staff's concern for bullying incidents ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.09$) and students' confidence that schools provide support for bullying victims ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.21$). These findings suggest that participants recognized the presence of formal policies and institutional efforts to create a safer school environment.

Students also viewed anti-bullying initiatives positively. They perceived that students who engaged in bullying were generally disciplined appropriately ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.30$), that schools promoted healthy competition rather than bullying ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.20$), and that anti-bullying awareness programs were beneficial ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.19$). In addition, participants moderately agreed that classmates tended to support victims of bullying ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.31$) and reported feeling relatively comfortable discussing bullying incidents with teachers ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.35$).

Despite these positive perceptions, students' responses revealed an important inconsistency. While bullying was widely recognized as a serious problem ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.49$), many participants acknowledged that they had witnessed bullying without intervening ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 1.33$). Furthermore, a considerable proportion reported that bullying incidents were still visible within the school environment ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 1.41$). These findings indicate that awareness of bullying does not necessarily translate

into active intervention when bullying occurs.

Overall, the findings reveal three major patterns. First, students demonstrated strong confidence in school regulations and institutional responses to bullying. Second, they generally perceived teachers and peers as supportive of bullying prevention efforts. Third, despite this positive institutional climate, students remained hesitant to intervene directly when witnessing bullying. This discrepancy suggests that recognizing bullying as a problem does not automatically encourage students to become active bystanders, a finding that is further explored through symbolic interactionism in the subsequent analysis.

4. Students' Perceptions of School Responses to Bullying

Effective bullying prevention depends not only on the existence of school policies but also on how students perceive their implementation in everyday school life. Therefore, this study examined students' perceptions of school responses to bullying through ten questionnaire items addressing school regulations, preventive programs, victim protection, disciplinary measures, counseling services, and institutional follow-up of bullying reports. Descriptive statistics were used to identify patterns in students' evaluations of school responses. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Students' Perceptions of School Responses (SR) to Bullying

Item	Students' Perceptions of School Responses to Bullying	Mean	SD
SR1	My school has rules prohibiting bullying.	4.30	1.05
SR2	My school provides educational activities to prevent bullying.	4.02	1.17
SR3	I have participated in school activities about bullying prevention.	3.89	1.25
SR4	My school protects students who experience bullying.	4.06	1.10
SR5	Disciplinary actions against students who bully others are effective.	3.63	1.22
SR6	School policies for preventing bullying are effective.	3.82	1.18
SR7	My school provides counseling services for students affected by bullying.	3.80	1.25
SR8	My school follows up reports of bullying appropriately.	3.99	1.16
SR9	In my opinion, disciplinary actions against bullying are not sufficiently strict.	2.96	1.38
SR10	School policies focus more on punishment than prevention.	2.93	1.35

Source: Authors' calculation (2026)

As shown in Table 4, students generally expressed positive evaluations of their schools' responses to bullying. The highest mean score was recorded for the existence of school rules prohibiting bullying ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.05$), followed by perceptions that schools protect students who experience bullying ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.10$) and appropriately follow up reports of bullying ($M = 3.99$, $SD = 1.16$). These findings

suggest that students recognize the presence of formal institutional mechanisms intended to prevent and respond to bullying.

Participants also viewed preventive efforts positively. They agreed that schools provided educational activities addressing bullying ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.17$), that many students had participated in anti-bullying programs ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.25$), and that school policies ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.18$) and counseling services ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.25$) contributed to creating a supportive environment for students affected by bullying.

Despite these positive evaluations, students expressed more critical views regarding disciplinary practices. The comparatively lower mean scores for the statements that disciplinary measures were insufficiently strict ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 1.38$) and that school policies emphasized punishment more than prevention ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.35$) indicate that some students questioned the effectiveness of existing disciplinary approaches. These responses suggest that students expect anti-bullying strategies to balance disciplinary measures with preventive and supportive interventions.

5. Summary of Quantitative Findings

The descriptive findings presented in Tables 2–4 reveal three overarching patterns that connect students' experiences, perceptions, and evaluations of school responses to bullying.

First, verbal and relational bullying emerged as the most common forms of bullying experienced by students. These findings indicate that bullying is primarily expressed through negative interpersonal interactions, such as teasing, insults, and social exclusion, rather than through physical aggression.

Second, students generally expressed positive perceptions of school policies and teachers' commitment to addressing bullying. Nevertheless, many students remained reluctant to intervene or report bullying incidents, suggesting a discrepancy between students' awareness of bullying and their actual behavioral responses.

Third, students positively evaluated schools' institutional responses, particularly regarding anti-bullying regulations, victim protection, and follow-up procedures. However, they also expressed concerns that disciplinary measures alone were insufficient and that greater emphasis should be placed on preventive and supportive strategies.

Taken together, these findings indicate that bullying in schools cannot be understood solely as an individual behavioral problem. Instead, students' experiences, perceptions, and evaluations collectively suggest that bullying is embedded within broader patterns of social interaction. These quantitative findings provide the empirical foundation for the subsequent qualitative analysis, which explores how students construct the social meaning of bullying through the perspective of George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism.

6. The Social Construction of Bullying Through Symbolic Interaction

Analysis of students' responses to the open-ended questions revealed that bullying was not perceived as an isolated event but rather as a social process

constructed through everyday interactions within the school environment. The thematic analysis identified five interconnected themes: (1) bullying as a social symbol, (2) the construction of the victim's self, (3) silence as a role-taking strategy, (4) the influence of significant others, and (5) the normalization of bullying through the generalized other. Rather than representing separate phenomena, these themes form a continuous process of meaning construction consistent with George Herbert Mead's theory of symbolic interactionism. Accordingly, bullying is understood as a socially constructed reality that emerges, is maintained, and is reproduced through symbolic interpretation during students' daily interactions.

Stage 1. Bullying Begins as Symbolic Interaction

The findings indicate that students' experiences of bullying almost always began with seemingly ordinary interactions, such as teasing, derogatory nicknames, insults about physical appearance, social exclusion, or even minor physical aggression that some students described as "just joking." One participant explained, *"I was often teased about my physical appearance and sometimes even hit, although they said it was only a joke."* (Participant 296). From Mead's perspective, these actions do not automatically constitute bullying. They first appear as gestures, namely social acts that evoke responses from others. A gesture becomes a significant symbol only when both the actor and the recipient attach a shared social meaning to it. Thus, bullying does not reside in the action itself; rather, it emerges when that action acquires meaning through social interaction.

The findings further demonstrate that teasing and derogatory nicknames are more than simple words. They function as symbolic expressions that communicate dominance, superiority, and social positioning within peer groups. As Mead argued, "meaning arises out of the social act; it is not inherent in objects but emerges through interaction"[16]. Consequently, behaviors intended by perpetrators as "jokes" may be interpreted by victims as humiliation because both parties assign different meanings to the same symbolic act based on their respective social positions. This interpretation is consistent with Forsberg, who argues that bullying develops through everyday interactional practices that produce and reproduce power relations among students[15].

Stage 2. Meaning Reshapes the Victim's Self

The meanings attached to bullying experiences do not remain momentary emotional reactions; instead, they gradually become internalized into the victim's self-concept. Several participants described these experiences as follows: *"Their words made me feel deeply hurt and disappointed."* (Participant 21). Another participant stated, *"I became traumatized and wanted to transfer to another school."* (Participant 240). According to Mead, the self develops through the process of taking the attitude of the other, whereby individuals come to see themselves through the perspectives of others. Victims therefore do not develop feelings of inferiority merely because they are mocked; rather, they gradually internalize how others define and evaluate them. Repeated negative labels eventually become social identities that shape how victims

perceive themselves.

These findings suggest that the consequences of bullying are not solely psychological but also sociological. Victims' identities are continuously reconstructed through repeated interactions, allowing their self-concepts to develop according to the meanings attributed to them by their peer groups. Carter and Fuller [17] similarly argue that the self is a socially negotiated product of symbolic interaction rather than a fixed individual characteristic.

Stage 3. The Self Shapes Bystanders' Role-Taking

The findings further reveal that the construction of meaning extends beyond victims to include students who witness bullying. Many participants admitted choosing not to intervene because they feared becoming the next target. *"I didn't help because I was afraid that I would become the next victim."* (Participant 16). This finding reflects the process of role-taking, which Mead describes as individuals' ability to imagine themselves in another person's position before deciding how to act. From this perspective, bystanders' silence should not simply be interpreted as indifference; rather, it represents a reflective process through which students anticipate the possible social consequences of intervening.

Before deciding to remain silent, witnesses mentally place themselves in the victim's position and evaluate the risks they might face if they intervene. Silence therefore becomes a strategy for maintaining one's social position within the peer group. This interpretation suggests that bystander behavior is shaped through negotiated meanings rather than purely individual decisions. Similar findings have been reported by Thornberg [18], who argues that students' decisions to defend or ignore victims are strongly influenced by their interpretations of peer norms and perceived social risks.

Stage 4. Significant Others Reinforce or Challenge Bullying Meanings

Students' interpretations of bullying were further shaped by significant others, including teachers, parents, and close friends who play influential roles in their social lives. One participant explained, *"My parents told me not to listen to their insults and encouraged me to keep going to school."* (Participant 233). Conversely, some participants reported that peers, and in a few cases even teachers, ignored bullying incidents or laughed along with the perpetrators. According to Mead, the attitudes of significant others become incorporated into individuals' interpretations of social situations. When teachers provide protection and peers demonstrate empathy, bullying is interpreted as unacceptable behavior. Conversely, when important people within students' social environments tolerate or trivialize bullying, those attitudes reinforce its legitimacy. These findings indicate that significant others influence not only victims' coping strategies but also the broader meanings attached to bullying within the school community. Their responses determine whether bullying is socially condemned or implicitly accepted.

Stage 5. Repeated Meanings Become the Generalized Other

The final stage illustrates how individual experiences gradually develop into

shared social norms. Several students perceived teasing as "normal" or "just joking," and therefore no longer regarded it as bullying. *"It was only a joke, and I thought it was completely normal."* (Participant 25). From Mead's perspective, this reflects the emergence of the generalized other, namely the collective expectations and social norms that guide individual behavior. When most members of a peer group accept teasing as an ordinary part of everyday interaction, bullying becomes normalized within the school culture. As a consequence, perpetrators gain social legitimacy to repeat their actions, victims come to accept their experiences as inevitable, and bystanders remain silent in order to preserve their own positions within the group. In this way, bullying is sustained not only by individual perpetrators but also by collectively shared norms embedded in the school community.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that bullying is not merely an individual act of aggression but a socially constructed phenomenon that develops through continuous symbolic interactions among students. While previous studies have primarily examined bullying from psychological perspectives by focusing on its prevalence, determinants, and psychological consequences [19], [18], [6], the present study offers a sociological explanation by illustrating how bullying acquires meaning, becomes normalized, and is reproduced through everyday interactions in school settings. By applying George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism, this study extends existing bullying research beyond behavioral explanations toward an understanding of bullying as a process of social meaning construction.

One of the most significant findings is that students simultaneously interpreted bullying in two contrasting ways. On the one hand, victims perceived bullying as an experience of humiliation, fear, and emotional suffering. On the other hand, many students, including perpetrators, witnesses, and even some victims, described verbal teasing and mild physical aggression as "just joking" or a normal part of peer interaction. This apparent contradiction suggests that bullying carries ambivalent social meanings. Rather than possessing a fixed meaning, bullying is continuously negotiated through interaction, allowing the same behavior to be interpreted either as violence or as harmless humor depending on the shared interpretations of those involved. This finding supports Mead's [16] proposition that meaning does not exist inherently within an action but emerges through social interaction.

The present study further demonstrates that significant symbols play a central role in initiating the bullying process. Teasing, derogatory nicknames, ridicule, and social exclusion function not merely as communicative expressions but as symbolic acts that convey dominance and unequal social status within peer groups. Through repeated interaction, these symbolic acts become meaningful for both perpetrators and victims. This finding reinforces Forsberg's [15] argument that bullying is reproduced through everyday interactional practices in which power relations are symbolically negotiated among students.

Another important contribution concerns the formation of the self. Mead proposed that the self develops through individuals' capacity to see themselves from the perspective of others. The findings support this proposition by demonstrating that victims gradually internalize negative labels assigned by peers. Consequently, bullying reshapes students' self-concepts, producing feelings of shame, insecurity, social withdrawal, and even intentions to leave school. These findings suggest that the psychological consequences of bullying are inseparable from the social processes through which identities are constructed. Rather than viewing low self-esteem as merely an individual outcome, this study highlights that weakened self-concepts are socially produced through repeated symbolic interaction [17].

The study also provides insight into the social position of bystanders. Students who witnessed bullying frequently chose not to intervene, not because they approved of bullying, but because they anticipated becoming future victims themselves. This finding illustrates Mead's concept of role-taking, whereby individuals imagine themselves occupying another person's position before deciding how to act. More importantly, role-taking was found to be strongly influenced by collective peer expectations. Students' decisions were shaped less by personal moral beliefs than by their interpretations of peer-group norms, indicating that silence is itself a socially negotiated response. This finding is consistent with Thornberg [18], who reported that bystander behavior is strongly influenced by perceived peer norms and anticipated social consequences.

The influence of significant others, including teachers, parents, and close friends, further demonstrates that bullying is sustained or challenged through social relationships. Supportive teachers and parents encouraged victims to reinterpret bullying as unacceptable behavior and strengthened their willingness to seek help. Conversely, when peers, teachers, or parents trivialized bullying as ordinary adolescent behavior, they unintentionally reinforced its legitimacy. This finding extends Mead's notion that significant others shape the development of self by demonstrating that they also shape the social meanings attached to bullying itself. Thus, significant others influence not only individual coping strategies but also the broader school culture surrounding bullying.

Perhaps the most important theoretical contribution of this study lies in its explanation of the generalized other. The findings reveal that repeated symbolic interactions gradually develop into collectively shared norms within the school community. When teasing and verbal humiliation become accepted as ordinary jokes, students internalize these practices as normal aspects of peer relationships. Consequently, perpetrators obtain social legitimacy, victims become more likely to accept victimization as inevitable, and bystanders remain silent in order to preserve their social position. This finding suggests that bullying persists not simply because of individual intentions but because it becomes embedded within collectively shared meanings. In this sense, the generalized other functions as a mechanism through which bullying is normalized and socially reproduced.

Taken together, these findings extend Mead's symbolic interactionist theory by demonstrating that its central concepts operate not as isolated analytical categories but as a dynamic sequence of social processes. The study therefore proposes a conceptual model in which bullying begins as symbolic interaction, acquires meaning through interpretation, reshapes victims' and bystanders' selves, is reinforced or challenged by significant others, and ultimately becomes either normalized or resisted through the generalized other. This sequential explanation represents the principal theoretical contribution of the present study to the sociology of education and to bullying research.

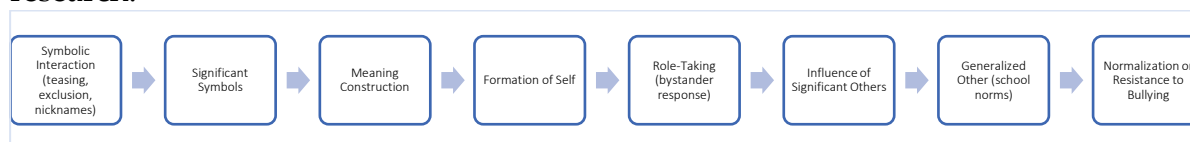


Figure 1. A Process Model of the Social Construction of Bullying Through Symbolic Interaction

From a practical perspective, these findings suggest that anti-bullying interventions should move beyond punitive approaches that focus exclusively on perpetrators. Schools should establish clear and consistently enforced anti-bullying policies that function as significant symbols, communicating collective intolerance toward bullying. Teachers and parents, as significant others, should receive training to recognize early signs of bullying, respond empathically to victims, and encourage bystanders to intervene safely or report incidents. In addition, schools should strengthen counseling services to help victims reconstruct positive self-concepts and prevent the long-term internalization of negative social identities. More fundamentally, bullying prevention should aim to transform the collective meanings that normalize bullying within peer culture, thereby reshaping the generalized other toward norms of empathy, inclusion, and mutual respect.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that bullying among junior high school students in Pangkalpinang is not merely an individual act of aggression but a socially constructed phenomenon that develops through everyday interactions within the school environment. Quantitative findings indicate that verbal and relational bullying constitute the most common forms of bullying experienced by students. Although participants generally expressed positive perceptions of school policies and institutional responses to bullying, many remained reluctant to intervene or report bullying incidents, revealing a gap between normative awareness and actual behavior.

The qualitative findings further reveal that students construct the meaning of bullying through continuous symbolic interaction. Bullying begins with everyday symbolic acts such as teasing, derogatory nicknames, and social exclusion, which gradually acquire shared meanings through interaction. These meanings shape victims' self-concepts, influence bystanders' decisions to remain silent or intervene, are reinforced or challenged by significant others such as teachers, parents, and peers, and

ultimately become institutionalized as collective norms through the generalized other. Consequently, bullying is sustained not only by perpetrators' actions but also by the shared meanings and social expectations embedded within the school community.

The principal theoretical contribution of this study lies in extending George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism to the study of school bullying. The findings demonstrate that Mead's six central concepts (significant symbols, meaning, self, role-taking, significant others, and the generalized other) operate not as isolated analytical categories but as a dynamic sequence of social processes through which bullying is socially produced, interpreted, reproduced, and, importantly, may also be transformed. This sequential mechanism suggests that bullying develops from symbolic interaction, progresses through meaning construction and identity formation, is mediated by social relationships, and ultimately culminates in either the normalization or the rejection of bullying within the school culture. In this respect, the study contributes to the sociology of education by proposing a process-oriented interpretation of symbolic interactionism that explains how bullying becomes embedded in, or challenged by, everyday social life in schools.

From a practical perspective, effective bullying prevention should move beyond punitive approaches that focus solely on perpetrators. Schools need to establish consistent anti-bullying policies that function as significant symbols of shared values, strengthen teachers' and parents' capacities as significant others who foster positive self-development and encourage active bystander intervention, and cultivate a school culture that rejects the normalization of bullying. Transforming the collective meanings attached to bullying is therefore essential for creating safer, more inclusive, and socially supportive school environments.

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