

Original Paper

Exploring the Emotional Impact of Bullying: Insights from the Empty Chair Technique

Prof. Dr. Hakan Usakli¹

¹ Sinop University, Sinop, Turkiye

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Abstract

Bullying in schools is repeated, intentional behavior where a student uses aggression, intimidation, or exclusion to harm, dominate, or humiliate another student. The empty chair technique is a therapeutic exercise used in Gestalt therapy, developed by Fritz Perls. It involves the client imagining a person, aspect of themselves, or situation represented by an empty chair and engaging in a conversation as if the entity were present. This technique is important because it helps clients explore unresolved emotions, gain insights, and develop self-awareness by externalizing internal conflicts. To practice it, the therapist guides the client to speak to the empty chair, then switch roles by moving to the chair and responding from the perspective of the imagined entity. This study investigates the emotional experiences of twelve students who endured bullying during their primary school years, using the empty chair technique as a therapeutic intervention. The research explores participants' feelings, coping mechanisms, and retrospective reflections on their bullying experiences. The findings illuminate the psychological effects of bullying and offer insights into the potential of the empty chair technique as a means of fostering emotional expression and healing. Implications for educators, therapists, and policymakers are discussed.

Keywords

Bullying, Empty Chair Technique, Psychological Effects

1. Introduction

Bullying in primary schools is a pervasive issue with long-lasting effects on victims. It affects the mental, emotional, and social well-being of children, often extending into adulthood (Olweus, 1993). Despite extensive research on bullying, understanding the victims' lived experiences remains a critical gap. This study employs the empty chair technique, a therapeutic method rooted in Gestalt therapy, to explore the emotional narratives of students who were bullied during their formative years. By

providing a safe space for participants to express their feelings, this research aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on therapeutic interventions for bullying survivors.

Bullying in primary schools is associated with severe psychological consequences, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and difficulties in forming relationships (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). Victims often lack avenues to articulate their pain and process their experiences. Traditional therapeutic approaches may not fully capture the depth of their emotions or facilitate healing. The empty chair technique, which encourages direct emotional engagement, offers a promising alternative. However, its application in addressing bullying-related trauma remains underexplored.

This study is significant for several reasons:

Filling Research Gaps: It contributes to the scant literature on using the empty chair technique for bullying survivors.

Practical Implications: Findings can inform therapeutic practices and interventions for victims of bullying.

Educational Relevance: Insights can help educators and school administrators create more supportive environments for students.

Bullying in Primary Schools

Bullying is defined as repeated aggressive behavior intended to harm or intimidate, characterized by a power imbalance (Smith et al., 2004). Research highlights its prevalence and detrimental effects on children's mental health (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007).

Psychological Impact of Bullying

Victims of bullying often experience long-term psychological challenges, including post-traumatic stress and difficulties in self-identity formation (Craig, 1998). Peer victimization during childhood is linked to adult mental health issues (Lereya et al., 2015).

Therapeutic Interventions

Therapeutic interventions for bullying victims range from cognitive-behavioral therapy to group counseling. However, these methods may not fully address the emotional depth of victims' experiences (Swearer et al., 2014).

The Empty Chair Technique

The empty chair technique, a cornerstone of Gestalt therapy, facilitates emotional expression by allowing individuals to "dialogue" with an imagined person or aspect of themselves (Perls, 1969). It has been used effectively in grief counseling and trauma recovery but remains underutilized in addressing bullying-related trauma.

2. Method

In this study, interview thematic analysis technique, one of the qualitative research methods, was used.

Research Design

The interview thematic analysis technique in qualitative research is a method used to systematically analyze data collected through interviews. It involves a detailed and often iterative process of examining, organizing, and interpreting interview transcripts to extract meaningful patterns, themes, and insights (Creswell, 2013). The technique focuses on understanding participants' experiences, perceptions, and meanings through their own words, often leading to the development of deeper insights into a specific topic or phenomenon. This approach allows researchers to analyze qualitative interview data in a way that preserves the depth and complexity of participants' experiences, providing rich insights into the research topic.

Key steps involved in interview analysis include:

Transcription: The first step is transcribing the audio or video recordings of interviews into written text. This provides a foundation for further analysis (Saldana, 2016).

Initial Reading: Researchers often begin by reading through the transcript multiple times to become familiar with the data (Creswell, 2013). This helps to get an overall sense of the content and context of the interviews.

Coding: After familiarization, researchers break the transcript down into smaller units, often called "codes", which represent key concepts or themes in the data. These codes are typically short phrases that summarize the essence of each passage (Saldaña, 2016).

Theme Development: The research groups related codes together to form broader themes. Themes are essentially patterns that capture significant aspects of the participants' experiences or perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Interpretation: Once themes are developed, researchers interpret these findings in the context of the research question and the theoretical framework. This is a crucial step for linking the data to broader theories or concepts.

Verification: Throughout the analysis, it is important to ensure that the findings are credible. Techniques such as member checking (where participants review and validate the analysis), triangulation (using multiple data sources), and peer debriefing (consulting colleagues for feedback) can help strengthen the reliability of the analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This qualitative study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of bullying survivors. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and sessions involving the empty chair technique.

3. Participants

Twelve participants (aged 18-25) who experienced bullying during primary school were purposively selected. Inclusion criteria required participants to recall specific bullying incidents and express willingness to engage in the empty chair technique.

Procedure

There are three phases of one session. First one initial interview that includes participants shared their bullying experiences in detail. In empty chair phase, participants addressed an “imagined” bully, teacher, or younger self. The final phase is follow-up interviews which participants reflected on their emotional responses to the technique.

4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes in the participants’ narratives. Transcriptions were coded and analyzed iteratively to ensure accuracy and depth.

5. Results

Emotional Themes

Anger and Resentment: Participants expressed anger toward their bullies and the adults who failed to intervene.

Sadness and Loss: Many described feelings of loneliness and a sense of lost childhood.

Empowerment and Closure: Several participants reported a sense of relief and empowerment after engaging in the empty chair technique.

Coping Mechanisms

Participants highlighted various coping mechanisms, including seeking support from peers and family, engaging in creative outlets, and pursuing personal development.

6. Findings

The empty chair technique provided a safe and structured environment for participants to confront unresolved emotions.

Participants gained new insights into their experiences and developed a greater sense of self-compassion.

The technique revealed the importance of addressing bullying from multiple perspectives, including the role of bystanders and educators.

Table 1. Themes, Categories, Codes and Examples of Results

Themes	Categories	Codes	Examples
Emotional Impact of Bullying	Negative Emotions	Fear, Anxiety, Anger, Sadness, Loneliness	“I was scared to go to school every day”.
			“It made me feel like I was worthless”.
Social Impact of Bullying	Long-term Emotional Effects	Low self-esteem, Trust issues, Emotional numbness	“Even now, I find it hard to trust people”.
	Peer Relationships	Isolation, Exclusion, Lack of friends	“They never let me sit with them during lunch”.
	Impact on Family Dynamics	Reluctance to share with family, Family tension	“I always felt left out”.
	Internal Coping	Suppressing emotions, Imagining revenge, Self-blame	“I never told my parents because I didn’t want them to worry”.
Coping Mechanisms	Internal Coping	Suppressing emotions, Imagining revenge, Self-blame	“I thought maybe it was my fault that they bullied me”.
	Seeking Support	Talking to teachers or counselors, Finding comfort in hobbies	“I thought maybe it was my fault that they bullied me”.
Reflections on the Empty Chair Technique	Experience of Expressing Feelings	Relief, Vulnerability, Catharsis	“Art became my safe space”.
			“Perhaps self-sports are my best friends”.
			“It felt good to finally say everything I wanted to”.
Perception of Bullies	Perceived Effectiveness	Emotional release, Better understanding of feelings	“It was hard to speak, but it helped me let go”.
	Understanding the Bully	Anger toward the bully, Curiosity about their behavior, Empathy	“Talking to the chair helped me understand what I was really feeling”.
	Unresolved Feelings	Desire for closure, Ongoing fear or resentment	“Maybe they were going through something too”.
Impact on Academic Life	School Avoidance	Skipping classes, Faking illness to avoid school	“I still don’t know why they did it, and it haunts me”.
	Academic Performance	Decreased focus, Poor grades	“I’d pretend to be sick just so I didn’t have to face them”.
			“I couldn’t concentrate because I was always on edge”.

This thematic structure can guide further analysis and help in drawing meaningful conclusions about the students' experiences and the utility of the empty chair technique in facilitating emotional expression.

7. Discussion

The results align with existing literature on the therapeutic benefits of expressive techniques. The study discusses how schools can implement similar interventions and the role of emotional literacy in fostering resilience among students (Olweus, 1993).

Implications for Therapy

The study underscores the efficacy of the empty chair technique in facilitating emotional expression and closure. Therapists working with bullying survivors should consider integrating this method into their practice (Swearer et al., 2014).

Educational Interventions

As Vreeman and Carroll (2007), stated schools must adopt proactive measures to address bullying, including training for teachers and implementing peer support programs. Early intervention is crucial to prevent long-term psychological harm.

Limitations

The study's small sample size and reliance on retrospective accounts may limit the generalizability of findings. Future research should explore the technique's applicability across diverse populations and contexts.

8. Recommendations

After the study, recommendations were made for three different groups of experts. Therapists can incorporate the empty chair technique into their interventions for victims of bullying. Educators can create a supportive school culture that prioritizes emotional well-being. Finally, researchers are encouraged to conduct longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term impact of therapeutic interventions for bullying survivors.

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Appendix

Annex 1 A sample session

Session Overview:

The goal of this Empty Chair session is to help the young man process and express his feelings related to the bullying he experienced in primary school. He will use the empty chair to either address the bully, his younger self, or anyone involved in the situation.

Setting:

A quiet, private space with two chairs. One chair will be empty, representing the person or part of the situation the individual wants to confront or express feelings toward.

Introduction:

Therapist: "Today, we're going to use the Empty Chair technique. The purpose is to help you express what you were feeling and still may feel about your experience with bullying in primary school. It might feel uncomfortable, and that's okay. This is a space for you to say things you may not have been able to say back then, and maybe even to say things you haven't been able to express until now".

Step 1: Establish the Chair Focus

The therapist will ask the young man to decide who or what the empty chair will represent. This could be:

- 1) The Bully: If the young man wants to confront the person who bullied him.
- 2) His Younger Self: If he feels the need to address how he was feeling back then.
- 3) A Bystander or Friend: If someone was around but didn't intervene.
- 4) A Parent or Teacher: If he feels like an adult figure, he failed to support him.

Therapist: "Who would you like this chair to represent? Is it the bully? Your younger self? Or maybe someone else from that time? Whoever or whatever you feel is important to address right now."

Step 2: Role Play and Expression

Once the young man has chosen who or what the chair represents, the therapist guides him through the process of speaking to the empty chair. The idea is to fully embody the role of either the person or himself at that time.

If speaking to the bully:

Therapist: "Imagine the bully is sitting in that chair. Take a moment to really see them there. What would you want to say to them? What did you feel at the time but didn't get to express? Speak directly to them now. Let yourself say what you need to say."

The young man then speaks to the empty chair as though the bully is present, expressing his thoughts, feelings, anger, confusion, or hurt.

If speaking to his younger self:

Therapist: "Now, imagine yourself as you were back then—what did you need to hear? What do you wish you could have said to yourself when you were being bullied? Talk to yourself as the younger you now, comforting, understanding, or expressing whatever emotions come up."

The young man speaks to his younger self, offering compassion, advice, or even expressing regret or anger over the circumstances.

Step 3: Switch Seats (Role Reversal)

After the young man has expressed himself, the therapist will invite him to switch chairs and adopt the role of the person he just addressed. This helps him step into their perspective and understand the situation from another angle.

If speaking to the bully, the young man will now sit in the chair and "be" the bully.

Therapist: "Now, switch places and imagine you're the bully. From this chair, speak back to what the young you just said. What might the bully say? Try to respond as they would—this can help us see things in a different light."

If speaking to his younger self, the young man will sit in the other chair and try to step into the mindset of his younger self.

Therapist: “Now, go back to that time. Imagine you are your younger self again. How do you feel? What are you struggling with, and what would you have wanted others to know or do for you?”

Step 4: Reflection

Once the young man has had the chance to express both sides of the conversation, the therapist guides him through some reflection.

Therapist: “Now that you’ve spoken from both perspectives, how are you feeling? What new understanding or feelings have come up for you about the situation or about yourself? Do you feel more empathy for that younger version of you? Or do you feel more closure or anger toward the bully?”

Step 5: Closing

The therapist will end the session by bringing the young man’s focus back to the present moment and guiding him to process any emotions that arose.

Therapist: “This was a difficult conversation to have, and I want you to know that it’s okay to still feel strong emotions about this experience. You’ve done a lot of work today. Take some time to reflect on the feelings that came up and know that this process is part of your healing journey.”