

UNDERSTANDING ACADEMIC BULLYING: A PHENOMENOLOGY STUDY OF EVERYDAY LIFE EXPERIENCES OF ACADEMICS IN NIGERIAN TERTIARY INSTITUTION

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Abstract

The study focused on the everyday life experiences of academic bully among academics in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Three research objectives were raised; to find out the causes of academic bullying among academics in tertiary institutions of learning in Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria; to find out forms of academic bullying experienced by academics in tertiary institutions of learning in Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria and to identify how information on academic bullying is shared among academics in tertiary institutions of learning in Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria. Population for this study consisted of academics in Nigerian educational institutions. The study used a qualitative research methodology and phenomenology approach. Note taking was used as the method of data collection. Selection of eighteen academics who constituted the study sample was through snowball sampling technique. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis. Finding revealed that cause of academic bully in this study setting is ideology. The study found that forms of academic bully in this setting are verbal abuse and mocking. Findings further revealed that information on bullying is shared by academics through colleagues and family members. It concluded that academic has become a common occurrence left unattended to, overlooked and swept under the carpet. Academic bullying is gradually turning into a mafia. It recommended among others that the institution's administration should establish a committee charged with the responsibility of monitoring, arresting and tackling the incidence of academic bullying among academics in the institutions.

Keywords: *Academics, Academic bullying, Everyday Life, Phenomenology, Qualitative research Methodology*

Introduction

Academic bullying is a common phenomenon in higher institution of learning in Nigeria. But often go unreported for fear of making academic life difficult for the victims.

Bullying is a rising trend globally and tertiary institutions are not an exception. Academic bullying is scenario whereby an individual underscore the worldview of others. Bullying behaviour amongst scholars is becoming a significant public challenge in the academics. Bullying is a pattern of behaviour in which one individual is chosen as the target of repeated aggression by one or others; the target person generally has less power than those in aggression (Brown & Bryne, 2005; Brittan, 2023). It is a common occurrence that is always swept under the carpet. Bullying can sometimes take unequivocal forms such as yelling at and or publicly disapproving the victim. Bullying is usually defined as a specific form of aggression which is intentional, repeated and involves a disparity of power between the victim and the perpetrator (Olweus, 1993; Kakumba, Wamala & Wanyama, 2014; The Organization Plumber, 2022). Bullying is a very crucial issue among other vices (Ada, Okoli, Obeten & Akeke, 2016). Whilst the traditional and electronic bullying as reported by victims has been widely reported, surveys amongst perpetrators, particularly in Africa, are still lacking (Akanni, Olashore, Osasona & Uwadiae, 2020). Recurrent bullying leads to acts of terrorism against concerned person/s.

Academic bullying is a serious problem faced by many academicians in everyday life. This in could either through victimization, being a witness, or a perpetrator bullying others. Bullying is often defined as the systematic and intentional abuse of others (Olweus, 1993; Brittan, 2023). It is established that power imbalance is an important constituent of bullying. Bullies are usually physically or socially stronger than their victims, making it particularly difficult for the victims to defend themselves. Common forms of bullying are physical bullying such as hitting or kicking; verbal bullying such as insulting or name-calling; relational bullying such as gossiping or excluding; material bullying like damaging or stealing belongings; and cyber bullying. All these types of academic bullying impact the everyday life experiences of individuals.

Studies (Ada, Okoli, Obeten & Akeke, 2016; Oldenburg, 2017) has been conducted that reported several incidence of academic bullying in schools at both secondary and tertiary institutions. It is reported that a high number of academicians have been sent on leave of absence as a result of incessant bullying and harassment.

Statement of the Problem

Academic bullying is a common unreported phenomenon. It is common occurrence in everyday lives of academic. Academic bullying is one of the major issues facing educators, learners and school communities (Mweli, 2013; Bosetti, 2021). Academic bullying is a rising trend globally and tertiary institutions are not an exception (Ada, Okoli, Obeten & Akeke, 2016; Wamala & Wanyama, 2014; The Organization Plumber, 2022). Academic bullying breeds hatred, depression and low self-esteem. It is observed that academics have experienced bullying in form of verbal attack, vulgar statements, ridiculing colleagues in the presence of students. In most cases, this form of bullying runs down people to make them not

to belief in oneself. To further scare away students from getting close to the individual been bullied. It is reported that bullying in schools is a worldwide problem that can have negative consequences on the general school climate and on the rights of students to learn in a safe environment without fear (Ada, et al, 2016). Bullying also has depressing lifelong consequences for academics. This study was derived from my personal experiences of the researchers. Their personal experience has been acquired during their postgraduate studies as staff- in- training and also working in a tertiary institution.

Research Objectives

The research objectives for this study are reflected as follows;

1. To find out the causes of academic bullying among academics in tertiary institutions of learning in Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria.
2. To find out forms of academic bullying experienced by academics in tertiary institutions of learning in Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria.
3. To identify how information on academic bullying is shared among academics in tertiary institutions of learning in Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria.

Literature Review

Akanni, Olashore, Osasona & Uwadiae (2020) reported from their study of predictors of bullying as indicated by perpetrators that bullying is intended to harm or disturb a victim despite the victim's apparent distress. The study identified the factors that lead to bully as antisocial behaviours and poor relationship with teachers amongst others. The study used a sample of 492 drawn from both Public and Private Schools using a multistage sampling technique. Findings of the study revealed that the lifetime prevalence of bullying was 16.3%. Binary logistic regression revealed bullying to be significantly associated with students who are male, have poor relations with their teachers, have used alcohol and are involved in cult and gangsterism. The study concluded that the rate of bullying perpetration by youth in Benin City, Nigeria, is significant and is comparable to global occurrence. The predictors of bullying in this study suggest that perpetrators are individuals who may benefit from rehabilitative measures.

Wilkin (2020) investigated work place bully in the academic using the qualitative approach and grounded theory to explore how targets of workplace bullying in academe may begin to heal from the aftermath of their ill-treatment. The emphasis of the study was to understand the experiences of university faculty members who had been targets of workplace bullying. A key factor in this study was to discover how the university leaders' responses to faculty reports of bullying behavior impacted the faculty member's experience. In addition, the explored whether or not the category of bullying the target was exposed to influenced their coping strategy. The research included semi-structured face-to-face interviews with faculty who had been targets of a workplace bully. The recruitment methods, snowball

sampling and placing a notice on a blog created to give targets a voice, resulted in all participants being either current or former faculty at a large state university in the southeast area of the country. Findings of the study revealed that targets of workplace bullying often experience stress-related illnesses, they leave their jobs, and their personal relationships suffer. Like victims of other interpersonal injustices, targets of workplace bullying may find it difficult to heal while they hold on to anger, blame, and resentment toward the bully and an organizational culture that supports bullying. The study generated a theory to help understand how targets can begin to let go of negative emotions that produce toxic side effects and move toward enhanced peace of mind, improved relationships, and generally improved physical and emotional health.

In another similar study by Ada, Okoli, Obeten & Akeke (2016) on the prevalence, causes and effect of bullying in tertiary institutions in Cross Rivers State, Nigeria; the authors evaluated the causes, consequences and effects of bullying in academic setting on student academic performance in tertiary institutions in Cross River State, Nigeria. The study adopted quantitative method and selected sample using purposive and random sampling techniques. Questionnaire was used as instrument for data collection. Coded and analyzed data showed that vocal assaults were the common forms of bullying in the tertiary institutions. Family, personality and school related factors were all determinants of bullying behaviors. Findings also revealed that the major effects of bullying were destruction of lives and properties, inability to fulfill destinies and family instability, breed social maladjustments, engender low self-esteem for victims, is stressful for both perpetrators and their victims and has brought about poor health status for victims generally. Bullying was also found to have negative effects on students' academic performance. The study concluded that bulling is a great monster in the Nigeria Tertiary Institutions today. Bulling is one way or another leads to depression. The study recommended that anti- bullying laws be enacted in the universities.

Academic bullying in another context is expressed as academic mobbing. According to Khoo (2010), academic mobbing is a non-violent, sophisticated and ganging up behaviour adopted by academicians to wear and tear a colleague down emotionally through unjustified accusation, humiliation, general harassment and emotional abuse. These are directed at the target under a veil of lies and justifications so that they are hidden to others and difficult to prove. Bullies use mobbing activities to hide their own weaknesses and incompetence. Targets selected are often intelligent, innovative high achievers, with good integrity and principles. Mobbing activities appear trivial and innocuous on its own but the frequency and pattern of their occurrence over long period of time indicates an aggressive manipulation to eliminate the target. Mobbing activities typically progress through five stereotypical phases that begins with an unsolved minor conflict between two workers and ultimately escalates into a senseless mobbing whereby the target is stigmatized and victimized to justify the behaviours of the bullies. The author reported the impact is always physical, mental, social

distress or illness and, most often, expulsion of target from the workplace. Organizations are subjected to great financial loss, loss of key workers and a tarnished public image and reputation. It is recommended that public awareness, education, effective counseling, establishment of anti-bullying policies and legislations at all levels are necessary to curb academic mobbing. General practitioners (GPs) play an important role in supporting patients subjected to mental and physical health injury caused by workplace bullying and mobbing.

Methodology

Phenomenology approach was adopted for this study. This approach provides the avenue of capturing the lived experiences of individual/s a phenomenon. Phenomenology is specifically designed to delve into how individuals experience and make sense of their world. It prioritizes understanding the essence of these experiences from the perspective of the participants themselves, rather than imposing external theories or preconceptions. This approach was used for this study due to the fact that it allowed the capturing and presenting the worldview of participants as experienced on academic bully. Selection of sample was through snowball sampling. The selection of participants was uneventful. Most of those approached acknowledged the occurrence of academic bullying among academicians but declined partaking in this study. As a result of the difficulty in getting participants to partake in the study, only 18 participants served as the sample for this study. The instrument used for data collection was through taking notes. In a normal scenario, instrument should have been through voice recording. Resistance from the participants made the researchers to revert to note taking. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis.

Result

Causes of academic bullying among academics in tertiary institutions of learning in Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria

This section consists of the narratives of participants on the causes of academic bullying among academics in this study setting. The participants' expressed that cause of the phenomenon is multifarious. One theme emerged from this objective. This is ideology. The theme is discussed as follows;

Theme one ideology: Participants stated that expression of idea not in alignment with some members is usually rebuffed. It is revealed by the participants in this study that having a contrary opinion to that of bullying perpetrators is usually met with resistance. This theme have one sub-themes; qualitative and quantitative paradigm. Discussion is as follows starting with qualitative paradigm.

Qualitative paradigm: This sub-theme consists of the narratives of the participants of how they were bullied as a result of the fact of been in alignment with the qualitative paradigm. This is revealed in the narratives of participants:

“anytime my postgraduate student is making seminar presentation, they will just be accusing my student that as far as they are concerned qualitative paradigm is nonsense and have no place in conducting research”.

“We are going to frustrate you till you stop encouraging your mentees from adopting this methodology”.

“As far as I am concerned, you have ended up confusing us the more. There is nothing like information practices. Qualitative this, qualitative that! I do not see the reason why the work should be allowed to continue”.

Forms of academic bullying experienced by academics in tertiary institutions of learning in Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria

This section consists of the narratives of participants on the forms of academic bullying experienced by academics in this study setting. Two themes emerged from this objective. These are verbal abuse and mocking. The themes are discussed as follows starting with verbal abuse;

Theme One Verbal abuse: This theme captured the revelations of participants who indicated that they experienced verbal abuse. All the three participants stated that abusive words were meted against them for having a contrary opinion different from that of bullies. The researcher found that out through that this form of usually leaves victims with long lasting trauma. Experiences of the participants are captured as follows;

“Stop coming to tell us nonsense. Is qualitative a methodology or an approach? We have been telling you that this methodology is not valid. What is rigour? Please stop wasting our time. All this is nonsense as far as I am concerned”.

“It is either you or your mentor that do not know what you are doing? You gather us here and waste our time. I would not be a party to this type of presentation”.

Theme Two Mocking: This theme discusses the experience of participation in relation to been mocked. Participants' related tat mocking tem amongst students and fellow colleagues discourages theme from attending routine postgraduate seminar. The researchers found out that persons bullied do not want to attend any meeting with those perpetrate the act of bullying. Following are utterances of participants;

“Is that interpretative paradigm again? You will come here and be blowing big grammar to confuse us. Why would not use terminology that we are used to”.

“Social constructionism is again? Must you always bring this terminology up? Qualitative researchers”

“Each you come here for anything presentation, you just end confusing everyone. Audience, do you understand anything out of what she just said?”

Information sharing on academic bullying among academics in tertiary institutions of learning in Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria

This section presents how bullied participants share information about bullying among colleagues and family members. Information sharing means that people or other entities pass information from one to another. The researchers found that act of sharing information have helped participants in coping with the humiliation melted against them for no just reasons. Two themes emerged from the analysis of the collected data. These are; I share information with my colleagues and family members. The discussion of the themes is as follows starting with the theme I share information with my colleagues.

Theme One- I share information with my colleagues: This theme consists of the narratives of the participants about how information sharing with colleagues had assisted them in coping with bullying. The researcher found out that sharing information is very instrumental to coping with consequential issues like bullying. For instance, participants expressed that; *“I wept bitterly after my encounter with a bully who is senior colleague. He told me I was very stupid and a foolish person. Upon coming out of his office, my colleagues met and insisted that I should not go back to the office in the state I was at that time. His presence at that time really helped me in overcoming my emotions”.*

“When I share my ordeal with my colleagues, they always tell me not to bother about their behaviours; that is obvious that their allegations are baseless and unprofessional. Sharing the information really helped me in overcoming the trauma of the incidence”.

Theme Two - I share information with my family members: This theme consists of the narratives of the participants about how information sharing with family members had assisted them in coping with bullying. Narratives of participants about how information sharing has helped is as follows:

Discussion of Findings

Causes of academic bullying among academics in tertiary institutions of learning in Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria

Finding revealed that cause of bullying in this study setting is mainly ideology. Participants expressed that not been in alignment with ideas and worldview of the opposing group exposes them attack and humiliated every time in front of students during seminar presentation. This attack comes in form of molestations and at times use of vulgar utterances. Participations related that they usually do not react because such attack is usually carried out by senior colleagues and would not want to be rude to them.

Resultant attack from groups is usually stem out of the fear of the unknown and change. Change is normally met with resistant. This is done mainly to remain in control and turn them into control freak. This finding has been reported by Oldenburg (2017) who captured the three insights of bullying and revealed scenarios that fostered the phenomenon. Similarly, bullying is caused by many factors such as growing up in a maladjusted society (Inamullah, Irsadullah & Shah, 2016). It makes bullies to always want to remain relevant and be in control

all the time. This implies that information and knowledge sharing would thrive as expected in an academic setting. Since individual with contrary idea or new are usually bullied in order to shut them up.

Forms of academic bullying experienced by academics in tertiary institutions of learning in Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria

Findings revealed that participants experienced two typologies of bullying. These are verbal abuse and mocking. Verbal abuse (also known as verbal aggression, verbal attack, verbal violence, verbal assault, psychic violence) is a type of psychological/mental abuse that involves the use of oral language, gestured language, and written language directed to a victim (Evans, 2010). Verbal abuse is very demeaning to anyone who is been bullied. Bullying and mocking are interwoven. In that, the end result of both acts is tantamount to reducing the concerned individual to nothing. Participants in this study setting expressed that been bullied and mocked has made them to get withdrawn from colleagues and humiliated. Withdrawal from peers and colleagues could result into situations with dire consequences.

Studies have reported the impact of verbal abuse on people. For instance, Hu, Ellis, Hewitt, Yang, Cheung, Moskowitz.... &Bilimoria (2019) stated that 30.3% of 7409 residents reported verbal or physical abuse (or both). Verbal abuse can result into depression or thought of suicide. It reported that this act can result in mental and/or emotional distress for the victim. Verbally abusing or attacking one another is a maladaptive behavior that can be occasionally displayed by anyone, especially during stressful times or times when one is experiencing significant physical discomfort (UIA, 2020).

This finding implies that verbal abuse could lead to the development of negative attitudes among victims if left unattended to.

Information sharing on academic bullying among academics in tertiary institutions of learning in Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria

Finding revealed that participants in this setting share information through colleagues and family members. Information sharing are a set of activities by which information is provided to others, either proactively or upon request, such that the information has an impact on another person's (or persons') image of the world (Sonnenwald, 2006; Savolainen, 2017; Rusteholz, Mediavilla, & Jimenez, 2021). The researchers found that sharing of information about bullying has assisted the victims in coping and managing the phenomenon. It is believed that problem shared is half solved. Participants expressed that sharing of their experiences helped in reducing the effects of the acts on them.

Studies have reported that information sharing can be instrumental to coping and managing critical issues like bullying. Yüksel-Şahin (2015; Masele, 2021) stated sharing information about bullying necessitated the organization of programmes by school counselors to prevent bullying.

This finding implies that support should be given to identified victims of bullying. Support is essential for managing critical situation. Extending helps during to people could save a life.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that academic bullying is evident among academics. It has become a common occurrence left unattended to, overlooked and swept under the carpet. Academic bullying is gradually turning into a mafia' if one does not belong to the bullying group; then one becomes an easy target. *Mafia* in the context of this study signifies association with particular think tank who sees themselves as authority that must be conformed with. This study highlighted the significant role of qualitative paradigm in understanding the incidence of academic bullying. By employing qualitative methods, authors were able to gain deeper insights into the nuanced and complex dynamics of academic bullying, which quantitative approaches alone might overlook. The qualitative findings reveal that academic bullying is not just a series of isolated incidents but a systemic issue influenced by various factors such as institutional culture, individual behaviors, and interpersonal relationships. The qualitative data suggests that the prevalence and impact of academic bullying are shaped by the subjective experiences of those involved, including the emotional and psychological effects on victims. Through detailed interviews, observations, and thematic analysis, it became clear that academic bullying is often embedded within the power structures and social hierarchies of educational institutions.

Moreover, the qualitative paradigm has proven essential in uncovering the underlying motives and contextual factors that contribute to academic bullying. This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, which can inform more effective interventions and policies aimed at preventing and addressing academic bullying.

Recommendations

1. The academic Board of the institutions should organize workshops to enlighten academics on the various approaches to conducting researches. Each academic should have the freedom to be in alignment with desired ideological views.
2. It is recommended that the institution's administration should establish a committee charged with the responsibility of monitoring, controlling and prompt tacking of the incidence of academic bullying in the institutions. Also, victims should be encouraged to speak out and interest of such academics should be protected by the committee.
3. Victims of academic bullying should be encouraged to speak out in order to reduce the impact of the psychology trauma. Future research should continue to leverage qualitative methods to explore these complex issues further and to develop strategies that foster a more supportive and respectful academic environment.

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