


# A Systematic Review of Research Strategies Used in Qualitative Studies on School Bullying and Victimization

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## Abstract

School bullying and victimization are serious social problems in schools. Most empirical studies on bullying and peer victimization are quantitative and examine the prevalence of bullying, associated risk and protective factors, and negative outcomes. Conversely, there is limited qualitative research on the experiences of children and adolescents related to school bullying and victimization. We review qualitative research on school bullying and victimization published between 2004 and 2014. Twenty-four empirical research studies using qualitative methods were reviewed. We organize the findings from these studies into (1) emic, (2) context specific, (3) iterative, (4) power relations, and (5) naturalistic inquiry. We find that qualitative researchers have focused on elaborating on and explicating the experiences of bully perpetrators, victims, and bystanders in their own words. Directions for research and practice are also discussed.

## Keywords

bullying, children, peer victimization, qualitative research, school

School bullying is recognized as a serious social problem, affecting children globally (Garbarino, 2004). Over the past several decades, school bullying has been a major focus of research in several countries, particularly in Europe (Baldry & Farrington, 1998; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Rivers, 2000; Smith, 2004; Swearer & Espelage, 2004). However in the United States, it was not until the aftermath of several school shooting incidents (e.g., Columbine) that bullying behavior in schools received considerable attention from school officials, policy makers, and researchers (Garbarino, 2004). The U.S. Department of Education found that 23% of public school students between the age of 12 and 18 reported being bullied (Robers, Kemp, & Truman, 2013). A report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also indicated, from a nationally representative sample of students aged 12–18, that 28% of youth reported being bullied in school (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012).

Although school bullying is pervasive, the definition of bullying varies among researchers (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Many American researchers (Bosworth, Espelage, & Simon, 1999; Colvin, Tobin, Beard, Hagan, & Sprague, 1998; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Nansel et al., 2001; Newman, Murray, & Lussier, 2001) define bullying as a form of aggression that involves a victim, perpetrator, or youth who is both bully and victim. Others have adopted Olweus' (1993) definition, which characterizes bullying as an aggressive act that causes injury or discomfort to another person either physically (e.g., hitting,

pushing, kicking) or verbally (e.g., taunting, teasing; see Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Ballard, Argus, & Remley, Jr., 1999; Bosworth et al., 1999; Green, 2007; Griffith & Gross, 2004; Pellegrini, 2002). In 2010, the U.S. Department of Education and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention developed a uniform research definition of bullying:

Bullying is any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014, p. 7).

Given the significance of school bullying and victimization among children and adolescents, a number of empirical studies

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and reviews have been published in several national and international journals (for reviews, see Bauman, 2008; Bjorkqvist, 1994; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Garandean & Cillessen, 2006; Griffin & Gross, 2004; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Monks et al., 2009; Pellegrini, 1998; Rigby, 2003; Salmivalli, 2010; Salmon, James, Cassidy, & Javaloyes, 2000; Smith, 2004; Smith & Brain, 2000; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). The majority of these studies employed quantitative methods, and it is surprising that qualitative research is less frequently used in school bullying than quantitative research (see Gamliel, Hoover, Daughtry, & Imbra, 2003; Mishna, 2004; Torrance, 2000), since understanding this phenomenon requires a deeper insight into children's perspectives.

The strength of qualitative research lies in its ability to empower participants by actively engaging them with research (Meyer, 2000). Qualitative researchers also address subjectivity, or the personal experiences, emotions, motivations, and inner life of study participants (Luhmann, 2006; Ortner, 2005). Unlike deductive quantitative research, qualitative research is usually inductive, allowing for the discovery of knowledge, an understanding of meaning, and the development of theory (Becker, 1996; Kral, 2008; Shweder, 1996). As a field of inquiry it emphasizes local points of view, the value-laden nature of inquiry, the social construction of experience, and rich description of the social world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Despite these strengths, researchers have focused on deductively exploring bullying rather than inductively understanding its existence, an approach that has generated *incomplete* results (Torrance, 2000).

A better understanding of school bullying can most effectively be achieved by exploring the subtle contexts of bullying and peer victimization. Qualitative methods enable researchers to pay particular attention to children's presence, creativity, responsiveness, and resistance in shaping and re-shaping the contexts of their lives (Aitkens & Herman, 2009, p. 3). Although much of the research on bullying has been conducted using survey instruments, developing a deeper understanding of bullying and peer victimization within a particular setting (e.g., schools, playgrounds) is essential, and a critical need exists for qualitative studies (see Torrance, 2000) that can expand and enhance the validity of quantitative research findings (e.g., Espelage & Asidao, 2001; Oliver & Candappa, 2007). To illustrate, Espelage and Asidao (2001) conducted an interview with 89 middle-school students (grades 6-8) in three schools located in a Mid-western state. Participants were asked to define bullying, identify where bullying takes place within their school, explain why some students were bullies and victims, discuss what teachers and school administrators did to handle bullying situations, and suggest some helpful strategies for addressing bullying in the classroom. The authors reported that the major themes of the in-depth interviews expanded previous (quantitative) research findings. Participants' responses to the unstructured interview helped clarify much of the existing information found in bullying research and provided some direction for bullying prevention and intervention efforts (Espelage & Asidao, 2001).

Some have recognized the importance and contributions of research that extends beyond traditional survey methods, and qualitative studies on school bullying and peer victimization have emerged over the years. However, when comparing quantitative and qualitative bodies of research on bullying, the absence of a literature review that integrates and synthesizes existing qualitative research is readily apparent. One notable exception is Thornberg's (2011) review of studies on bullying utilizing qualitative methods. This review aimed to develop a deep understanding of the culture and group processes of bullying as well as youth perspectives on peer harassment. Such reviews provide researchers and practitioners with up-to-date accounts and insights, as they integrate studies on bullying and peer victimization. Although Thornberg's (2011) review contributes to our understanding of the culture of bullying, no review to date considers research strategies in qualitative research studies on bullying. A review of research strategies employed is important, since it can offer guidance on conducting in-depth interviews, focus groups, ethnographic studies, and on using Photovoice. Identifying and reviewing the research strategies used in qualitative studies of youths' school bullying experiences have major research implications. Such a review can facilitate development of more rigorous, sophisticated qualitative techniques for understanding school bullying and peer victimization. The current review systematically surveys qualitative research findings on school bullying and identifies five qualitative research strategies used in the study of school bullying. These are followed by suggestions for future research and practice.

## Method

### Data Sources

We employed electronic databases to search for empirical studies that used qualitative research methodology. Although we discovered a paucity of qualitative research on school bullying, we were able to locate those studies published between 2004 and 2014. Databases accessed for this review include Google Scholar, ProQuest, ERIC, and PsycInfo. Reviews were conducted using the following key words and phrases: *aggression, aggressive behavior, bullying, bullying prevention, bystanders, case study, ethnography, focus groups, grounded theory, interviews, participant observation, peer conflict, peer victimization, relational aggression, and qualitative research*.

**Selection criteria.** Our search was limited to empirical studies that qualitatively examined bullying, peer aggression, peer victimization, and bullying intervention for school-aged children and middle- and high-school-aged adolescents published between 2004–2014. In accordance with the definition of bullying behavior introduced by Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, and Lumpkin (2014), we reviewed studies that empirically examined direct (e.g., hitting, punching, kicking, shoving) and indirect (e.g., teasing, taunting, spreading rumors, social exclusion, relational aggression) forms of bullying. We also searched for research on racial/ethnic, sexual, homophobic, and cyberbullying, and

**Table 1.** A Summary of Qualitative Research Strategies.

Studies	Emic	Context Specific	Iterative	Power Relations	Naturalistic Inquiry
Berguno, Leroux, McAinsh, & Shaikh, 2004	x				
Bibou-Nakou, Tsiantis, Assimopoulos, & Chatzilambou, 2013	x	x			
Bosacki, Marini, & Dane, 2006	x	x			
deLara, 2008	x				
deLara, 2012	x				x
Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999	x	x			
Hopkins, Taylor, Bowen, & Wood, 2013	x				
Humphrey & Symes, 2010	x				
Kvarme, Aabo, and Saeteren, 2013	x				
Lund, Ertesvag, & Roland, 2010	x				
Mishna, 2004	x				x
Mishna, Newman, Daley, and Solomon, 2007	x				x
Mishna, Pepler, & Wiener, 2006	x				x
Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener, 2005	x				x
Oliver & Candappa, 2007	x			x	
Paton, Crouch, & Camic, 2009	x	x			
Peterson & Ray, 2006	x				
Shute, Owens, & Slee, 2008	x		x		
Saladin-Subero & Hawkins, 2011	x				x
Wyatt, 2010	x		x		

included issues relevant to school bullying and peer victimization. Although we considered studies conducted in diverse Western societies, we limited our review to those published in the English language. Research that we reviewed for this article used any one of four types of elicitation techniques: *unstructured*, *semi-structured*, *structured*, and *mixed elicitation tasks*.

Studies examining bullying behaviors among adults (e.g., workplace bullying) or bullying perpetration against adults (e.g., bullying against teachers) as well as those using mixed methodology (i.e., combining quantitative and qualitative research methods) were excluded from this review. Given Hong and Espelage's (2012) review of mixed-methods research on school bullying and peer victimization, and our primary aim of providing scholars with an integrated understanding of qualitative research, the current literature review focuses on integrating qualitative studies of school bullying and peer victimization. Mixed-method research does involve corroborating findings that may be generalizable (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989). However, we are interested in qualitative studies on children and adolescents' experiences in bullying because results from these studies are framed by the narratives of the participants (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Moreover, mixed-methods research examines behavior in more than one context or condition (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). We are particularly interested in integrating studies that examine youth behavior occurring in a natural environment or context—a possibility inherent in qualitative research. In sum, we reviewed 20 qualitative empirical research studies. Please see Table 2 for additional details on the articles reviewed.

## Findings From the Review

Qualitative research on school bullying has focused mainly on elaborating and explicating the experiences of bullies, victims,

and bystanders as well as relevant adults (e.g., parents, teachers, school counselors) in their own words (see Ma, Stewin, & Mah, 2010). The two most commonly used techniques have been individual interviews (Athanasziades & Deliyanni-Kouimtzis, 2010; Berguno, Leroux, McAinsh, & Shaikh, 2004; Bosacki, Marini, & Dane, 2006; Boulton, 2005; Bourke & Burgman, 2010; Cunningham, Cunningham, Ratcliffe, & Vaillancourt, 2010; Humphrey & Symes, 2010; Lund, Ertesvag, & Roland, 2010; Mishna, 2004; Mishna, Newman, Daley, & Solomon, 2007; Mishna, Pepler, & Wiener, 2006; Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener, 2005; Mishna, Wiener, & Pepler, 2008; Paton, Crouch, & Camic, 2009; Peterson & Ray, 2006; Varjas et al., 2008; Willis & Griffith, 2010; Wyatt, 2010) and focus group interviews (e.g., Agatston, Kowalski, & Limber, 2007; deLara, 2008; Mishna, Saini, & Solomon, 2009; Oliver & Candappa, 2007; Shute, Owens, & Slee, 2008; Tenenbaum, Varjas, Meyers, & Parris, 2011; Wyatt, 2010).

Findings from the aforementioned studies all use an emic approach. Foundational to an *emic* approach is the insider's perspective (i.e., research participants) and experience to understand the meaning constructions of an individual, group, or community in relation to a specific phenomenon. In utilizing an emic approach, the researcher sets aside prior theories and assumptions to allow the data to speak for itself. As such the outcomes reflected in bullying research that uses this perspective are context driven and are likely to uncover unexpected findings. We organized the findings from these studies based on their unifying emic principles and on four additional qualitative research strategies (1) *context specific*, (2) *iterative*, (3) *power relations*, and (4) *naturalistic inquiry*. Studies may often utilize multiple qualitative research strategies. Please see Table 1 for additional details on how the articles fit within the four qualitative research strategies. We find that examining the bullying literature across these categories helps clarify critical

4 **Table 2.** Summary of the Findings From Qualitative Research on School Bullying and Victimization, 2004–2014.

Study	Country	Participants	Methodology	Findings
Berguno, Leroux, McAinsh, & Shaikh, 2004	England	42 Children (age 8–10)	Individual semi-structured interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eighty percent felt lonely at school, which were associated with boredom, inactivity, a tendency to withdraw into fantasy, and a passive attitude toward social interaction in school.</li> <li>• Sixty-eight percent reported experiencing peer victimization.</li> <li>• Children reported that teacher intervention were not helpful.</li> <li>• Bullying and teacher intervention were associated with children's sense of loneliness at school.</li> </ul>
Bibou-Nakou, Tsiantis, Assimopoulos, & Chatzilambou, 2013	Central and Eastern Europe	90 Students (age 13–15)	14 Focus groups, semi-structured interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three family-related factors contribute to bullying victimization: difficult home environment (e.g., conflicts between spouses or between parents and the participants), parenting styles (e.g., parental overprotection, lack of supervision, or excessive control), and interparental abuse.</li> </ul>
Bosacki, Marini, & Dane, 2006	Canada	82 Children (age 8–12)	Drawings, narratives, and individual interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bullies' comments indicated proactive/instrumental and reactive/emotional aggression.</li> <li>• Sadistic aspects of bullying were suggested.</li> <li>• It is crucial to create an intervention that includes moral education.</li> </ul>
deLara, 2008	United States	122 High school students	5 Focus groups, 52 individual interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students used cognitive coping strategies to handle bullying.</li> </ul>
deLara, 2012	United States	97 high schools students (age 14–18)	Individual interviews, focus groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students expressed concerns over inappropriate adult action and differences between children and adults concerning the definition of bullying.</li> </ul>
Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999	United States	20 Children (age 3–9)	Individual interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children, even as young as 3 years old, can give graphic descriptions and have excellent recall of experiences related to adverse events, such as illness and hospitalization.</li> </ul>
Hopkins, Taylor, Bowen, & Wood, 2013	United Kingdom	57 Students (age 11–17)	Focus groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children use scripts as the primary means of anticipating, comprehending, and recreating real-life experience.</li> <li>• The content, timing, number, and structure of interviews will influence the completeness, accuracy, and consistency of children's recall of events.</li> </ul>
Humphrey & Symes, 2010	England	36 Students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD); age 11–16)	Phenomenological, semi-structured interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appearance, disability, and sexual orientation contributed to being victimized, categorizing victims as belonging to disadvantaged minority groups.</li> <li>• Students responded to bullying using a variety of strategies.</li> <li>• There were major differences when considering which teacher would be informed.</li> <li>• Students were less likely to seek help if they did not think it would be helpful or could not predict how teachers would respond.</li> </ul>
Kvarme, Aabo, and Saeteren, 2013	Central and Eastern Europe	17 Children (age 12–13)	Semi-structured interviews, focus groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The likelihood of seeking help from peers, teachers, and others was mediated by the students' relationship histories.</li> <li>• Bullying ceased when the victims received assistance from their support group.</li> </ul>

(continued)

**Table 2.** (continued)

Study	Country	Participants	Methodology	Findings
Lund, Ertesvag, & Roland, 2010	Norway	15 Female students (age 14–18)	In-depth interviews and observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shy adolescents perceive a nonsupportive class environment as an underlying factor for bullying victimization.</li> </ul>
Mishna, 2004	Canada	61 Students (Grades 4 and 5), parent of each student, students' teacher, vice principal, principal	Individual semi-structured interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Difficulty determining whether the incident is bullying due to difficulty in defining bullying.</li> <li>All of the children reported telling their friends when they were bullied.</li> <li>Some told their parents.</li> <li>Children were bullied by friends.</li> </ul>
Mishna, Pepler, & Wiener, 2006	Canada	159 Students (Grades 4–5) self-identified as being bullied, their parents, and teachers	Safe school questionnaire, semi-structured interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students and adults generally understood bullying, which they consider as harmful.</li> <li>Most defined bullying as a power imbalance, intent to cause harm, and direct and indirect behaviors.</li> <li>Few mentioned the effects of repetitious bullying.</li> <li>Participants considered indirect bullying as less serious.</li> <li>Indirect bullying were less likely to be perceived as bullying by adults.</li> </ul>
Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener, 2005	Canada	13 Teachers	Safe school questionnaire, semi-structured interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Findings correspond to results from previous studies.</li> <li>Teachers were unaware that 10 of 17 students were bullied (according to the questionnaire).</li> <li>Teachers were aware of the power imbalance between bullying perpetrator and victim, and majority defined bullying as intentional.</li> <li>Teachers had difficulty in identifying bullying incident and knowing how to intervene.</li> <li>Nonphysical bullying was considered to be nonserious and overlooked.</li> <li>Teachers' response was influenced by their compassion.</li> <li>Almost all of the teachers were bullied as children and the effects persisted.</li> </ul>
Mishna, Newman, Daley, & Solomon, 2007	Canada	9 Key informants from educational and social service settings (age 25–44)	Semi-structured interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bullying of sexual minority youth was reported to be pervasive, occurring across multiple contexts.</li> <li>Sexual minority youth were victimized almost everywhere by peers and adults.</li> <li>Bullying of sexual minority youth occurred in settings that are designed to address the issues of peer victimization of sexual minority youth.</li> <li>A number of community-level factors foster or inhibit bullying of sexual minority youth.</li> <li>Respondents reported psychological, academic, and social effects of bullying.</li> <li>Respondents expressed concern that homophobic bullying was inadequately addressed.</li> </ul>

(continued)



**Table 2.** (continued)

Study	Country	Participants	Methodology	Findings
Oliver & Candappa, 2007	England	230 Students (Grades 5–8)	Focus group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Older students were more reluctant to tell adults about their experiences in bullying.</li> <li>• Students were more likely to tell friends.</li> </ul>
Paton, Crouch, & Camic, 2009	England	8 Youth offenders	Semi-structured interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth experienced violence at home, in the community, and in custody.</li> <li>• Instability and transition were major issues in relations to home and school.</li> <li>• Youth also experienced deprivation due to poverty and emotional/behavioral absence of parents.</li> <li>• These youth responded to adverse/traumatic experiences via aggression to self and others.</li> <li>• Barriers to help seeking and professional support were also identified.</li> </ul>
Peterson & Ray, 2006	United States	58 Gifted Eighth graders	Structured interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Even one incident was distressing to some of the students.</li> <li>• Many victims were silent about their experiences, trying to understand bullying.</li> <li>• Many thought they are responsible for stopping bullying.</li> <li>• Many expressed despair and reported violent thoughts.</li> <li>• Intelligence helped to make sense of bullying.</li> <li>• Being unknown contributed to bullying.</li> </ul>
Shute, Owens, & Slee, 2008	Australia	72 of 15-year-old, 7 teachers	Focus group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Verbal and indirect bullying was reported to be everyday occurrence, and almost entirely sexual in nature.</li> <li>• “Sexual bullying” appropriately captured the gendered power structure, which underlie these experiences.</li> </ul>
Saladin-Subero & Hawkins, 2011	United States	14 Mothers, 4 volunteers	Individual interviews, focus groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hispanic parents of children between 9 and 13 years old, and other adults influencing them, would benefit from increased access to the Spanish material regarding bullying.</li> <li>• Parents had little awareness of the SBN: resources that could help them formulate appropriate responses to others, should their child be bullied, bully others, or witness bullying.</li> </ul>
Wyatt, 2010	United States	48 Students (age 14–16)	Focus groups, individual interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Findings indicate that influences on violent and aggressive behavior, peer relationships, popularity, and emotions are gender specific.</li> </ul>

Note. SBN = Stop Bullying Now!

conditions, processes, and factors that describe how and why school bullying and victimization occur.

### *Emic Approach*

Emic approaches in qualitative methods center the participant as the expert on the topic or phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 1998). One way to collect data from an emic perspective is to engage in conversations with participants through one-on-one interviews. In-depth interviews (or guided conversations) are typically a face-to-face interaction between the researcher and the study participant, which allow for the exploration of individual experiences and perceptions in great depth (Curry, Nembhard, & Bradley, 2009). For example, Humphrey and Symes (2010) conducted semi-structured interviews with 36 students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) between the ages 11 and 16. The authors found that traits associated with ASD (e.g., lack of trust in others and a desire for solitude) increased isolation of students with ASD and, subsequently, their vulnerability to peer victimization and teasing. Consistent with the emic approach, semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity for the participants to become the experts by voicing their thoughts, feelings, and unique experiences and allowing researchers to clarify participants' expressions of their lived experiences.

Research also suggests that qualitative data collection methods, such as open-ended interviews, may be more effective than surveys—particularly among populations historically marginalized or underrepresented in research (Curry et al., 2009). In studies using the emic approach, participants rather than researchers highlight their unique experiences as disadvantaged minority groups during in-depth interviews. For instance, Mishna, Newman, Daley, and Solomon (2007) used semi-structured interviews to understand the effects of homophobic victimization experienced by lesbian and gay students. Participants reported varied psychological, academic, and social effects of homophobic victimization, including low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression. One participant explained, "You would begin to feel that you weren't worth being protected if you weren't protected by your school or your parents or the other kids." (Mishna, Newman, Daley, & Solomon, 2007, p. 1604). Qualitative researchers using an emic approach also provide opportunities for participants to voice the long-term impact of bullying on the psychosocial development of adolescent youth. For example, in Peterson and Ray's (2006) study, participants (gifted students), expressed a need to "release the anger inside of me," wanting "to be mean back" and feeling like "punching their lights out—retaliating in any way I could." Using semi-structured interviews, which allowed the study participants to express and share their feelings and experiences, the researchers discovered a link between being bullied and violent ideations.

The use of focus groups is another method that enables researchers to collect data from an emic perspective. Focus groups are guided discussions among individuals in a small group. They widen the range of responses, activate forgotten

details of individual experiences, or release inhibitions that otherwise discourage participants from disclosing information (Curry et al., 2009). Similar to in-depth interview research, focus-group research recognizes study participants as the experts of their own lived experiences. Hopkins, Taylor, Bowen, and Wood (2013) reported discovering that bullying victims often expressed feeling different from their non-victimized peers during focusgroups composed of participants aged 11–17 ( $N = 57$ ). Participants reported that their appearance, disability, and sexual orientation made them vulnerable to victimization, placing them in the category of disadvantaged minority group. In taking an emic approach, researchers benefited from participant expertise and gained an insider's perspective of participants' personal experiences. Wyatt (2010) also used focus groups to ascertain participants' perceptions of critical triggers to violence and aggression. The primary purpose of these focus groups was to induce names and primary characteristics of the "building blocks" (affinities) of participants' violence-meaning system. In this study, focus groups served as a catalyst to generate unique insights, allowing study participants to identify nine primary triggers of violence: bullying, consequences, emotions, gangs, peer relationships, physical fighting, popularity, trash talking, and weapon carrying/use.

Focus groups may be especially effective in empowering socially marginalized populations because they offer opportunities to provide insights into personal experiences. Focus groups can also be useful in providing comfort among participants discussing potentially sensitive experiences. For example, Shute, Owens, and Slee (2008) conducted sex-segregated focus groups composed of 5–7 students across four public high schools in Australia to understand victimization of female students by male peers. Participants consisted of 40 males and 32 females (14- to 15-year-olds) and 7 teachers (4 males and 3 females). Participants revealed that female victimization by male students occurred daily. The behaviors described by male, female, and adult participants were explicitly sexual in nature (e.g., concerning appearance and sexual reputation), taking the form of verbal and indirect, rather than physical victimization. In this study, focus groups encouraged participants to describe and compare their experiences and opinions with other group members to uncover both convergent and divergent experiences regarding violence against females. Because the method encourages an emic approach, group members not only detailed their own experiences as "experts," but they also gained insights from other participant "experts" rather than researchers.

Although most qualitative research is comprised of interviews with older children and adolescents (e.g., Humphrey & Symes, 2010; Lund et al., 2010; Mishna et al., 2007; Peterson & Ray, 2006; Shute et al., 2008), children as young as 3 years old have the capability to vividly recall their experiences in school. Regrettably little guidance exists for adopting an emic approach when interviewing children (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999), although qualitative researchers have long argued that children themselves are the best sources of information about their school bullying experiences. Findings from the aforementioned studies suggest that listening to children's voices enables

them to provide intuitive and spontaneous comments about their experiences, thus broadening the knowledge of bullying and victimization.

The emic approach also provides an implicit understanding of participants, allowing them to interpret their experiences from their own point of view (Torrance, 2000). In fact, numerous qualitative studies on bullying have employed an emic approach, allowing the study participants to elaborate on and explain their experiences in their own words (Ma et al., 2010). For instance, Berguno, Leroux, McAinsh, and Shaikh's (2004) study, which consisted of interviews with 42 children between the ages of 8 and 10, found that 80% reported experiencing loneliness at school, which increased their likelihood of becoming bullying victims. Berguno et al. (2004) also noted, "... it strikes us ... that [Researchers] ... understand children's knowledgebase as if it were independent of the intersubjective world of shared meanings" (p. 496). The study participants ( $N = 42$ ) were interviewed individually for approximately 20 min each, using a semi-structured interview format. Children were encouraged to speak freely about their experiences in school, such as feeling lonely. The inclusion of open-ended questions gave participants an opportunity to identify new ways of seeing and understanding the topic at hand. The format also encouraged them to express their perceptions in their own words, which allowed researchers to gain a detailed, in-depth understanding of each child's unique experience with loneliness. As a result, the authors found the majority of children (68%) expressed having been bullied, with lonely children more likely to be victimized by their peers. Similarly, other studies have examined the experiences of adolescents exhibiting shyness as an emotional and behavioral problem in school (Lund et al., 2010). In-depth, semi-structured interviews with severely shy girls between the ages of 14 and 18 allowed participants to share their perspectives on their victimization. Participants' insights revealed that shy adolescents perceive that a nonsupportive classroom environment contributes to being victimized by their peers (Lund et al., 2010). In sum, the emic approach helped researchers to capture children's personal experiences and opinions in greater depth than they would have been able to through research methods that rely on survey instruments.

### Context Specific

Qualitative research is also context specific, capturing the conditions that influence study participants' narratives. More specifically, the context-specific nature of qualitative research identifies the complex relations between what participants do and how and where they live. In bullying research, developing a deeper understanding of how complex contextual forces (e.g., home, neighborhood, and school) interact to influence how and why bullying occurs can enhance our understanding of what triggers bullying (Wicks & Whiteford, 2006). This more robust, context-specific description of a particular reality construction is more likely to produce data that reflects victims' perceptions (Ungar & Nichol, 2002). For example, in an

interview-based study of young criminal offenders in the United Kingdom, Paton, Crouch, and Camic (2009) found that the participants had been exposed to violence at home and in their communities during childhood. The participants reported that social contexts, such as home (where they lacked parental support) and neighborhood (characterized by poverty, constant transition, and instability), were significantly related to bullying behavior in school. Paton et al. (2009) explored context as they conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. This type of interview allowed researchers to be flexible—probing areas suggested by participants' responses, thus acquiring information that the interviewer did not know to ask for or of which the interviewer had no prior knowledge. Studies structured to explore content examine bullying because they examine bullying within multiple contexts, providing deep, rich information regarding the impact of childhood experiences in bullying victimization. In addition, Bibou-Nakou, Tsiantis, Assimopoulos, and Chatzilambou (2013) use focus groups to explore how familial contexts are related to bullying victimization. After conducting 14 focus groups ( $n = 90$ ) across five schools, researchers identified three factors within familial context contributing to bullying victimization: difficult home environment characterized by conflicts between parents or between the parents and child (participants), parental overprotection, and lack of parental supervision (Bibou-Nakou, Tsiantis, Assimopoulos, & Chatzilambou, 2013). Few studies have linked aspects of factors within familial context, such as parenting and family functioning, to bullying using participant discourses (Bibou-Nakou et al., 2013).

As previously mentioned, qualitative research is context specific, using participants' drawings to uncover complexity in the social phenomenon of bullying. Using this approach, a number of researchers also found that children, particularly younger ones, may have an easier time expressing their thoughts and feelings visually rather than verbally. Young children frequently lose concentration and become restless because they feel that they spend needless energy relaying personal information through words (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999). Moreover, children can better contextualize their own thoughts about their experiences and their feelings and values about those experiences by drawing and doing other activities rather than by talking, with which they may be uncomfortable (Beste, 2010). For example, Bosacki, Marini, and Dane's (2006) approach consisted of drawings, narratives, and open-ended interviews with 82 children (aged 8–12) from a semi-urban area in Canada. The children were asked to draw and narrate stories of someone who was bullied, an exercise followed by a brief interview about their experiences. Children's drawings revealed that bullying is a complex social process, which involves a number of different characters and roles—victims, bullies, and bystanders—and becomes more complex as children age and are situated in different contexts. Thus, integrating children's drawings and other activities into research can support a more sophisticated discourse activity, especially for young children who may attempt to represent narratives with pictures (Ukrainetz, 1998). The use of drawing coupled with



storyinterviews also provided descriptive and contextual understanding of the participants' experiences of bullying and peer victimization.

### *Iterative*

An iterative approach is a system of repetitive, recursive processes that involve sequences of tasks carried out in the same way each time and executed several times (Bassett, 2010). Focus groups often involve iterative approaches, giving the researcher the ability to examine the same phenomenon across several different demographic groups by asking the same questions repeatedly. More specifically, the focus group technique allows researchers to learn about participants' perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and opinions in a more natural group setting that is common in one-to-one interviews. When combined with participant observation, researchers can use focus groups to learn about groups and their patterns of interaction. One prime example is a study by deLara (2008), which used focus groups to investigate 122 high-school students' perceptions of bullying and harassment in school, as well as their strategies for handling these problems. In this study, researchers conducted five focus groups with a total of 70 tenth-grade students in three high schools. Due to the iterative nature of the study, 12 students (4 from each school) were first interviewed in a focus group, followed by individual interviews that pursued themes and questions generated during the focus group conversation. Participants revealed in focus group discussions that school bullying and harassment were inevitable parts of their high school experiences and that they frequently struggled to figure out how to handle bullying situations. When this theme was explored in individual follow-up interviews, participants discussed cognitive coping strategies they used to manage the situation, such as telling themselves that the person identified as a bully had problems. Similarly, Kvarme, Aabo, and Saeteren (2013) utilized one-to-one interviews and focus groups with 19 school children (18 girls and 1 boy) to investigate bullied school children's experiences in a support group and to examine how members of the support group participated in the group. Following the iterative approach, researchers engaged in the process of continuous meaningmaking—first using interviews and then focus groups. In the interviews and focus groups, participants pointed out on several occasions that bullying stopped when they received assistance from the focus group. Interviews allowed participants to share their experiences, opinions, wishes, and concerns in their own words while focus groups allowed them to share and compare their experiences repeatedly with group members, enabling them to develop a peer-support network.

### *Power Relations*

*Power relations*, the unequal distribution of power between researcher and participant, is an important consideration in any study (Fontes, 1998). However, as pointed out previously, qualitative research methods that view participants as experts

regarding their own experiences may diminish the power differences between researchers and participants. This is particularly important when conducting studies with youth who have been the victims of bullying or those whose life challenges have led to bullying behavior (Wicks & Whiteford, 2006). Qualitative research can foster a rebalancing of power in the researcher–participant relationship and encourages a focus on marginalized understandings and experiences (O'Connor & O'Neill, 2004). A prime example is Oliver and Candappa's (2007) study, which revealed that students' experiences in school bullying are attributed to structural inequality such as racism—a theme previously unknown to these researchers. Consisting of focus groups in 12 schools in the United Kingdom, researchers focused on perceptions and experiences of primary and secondary students. Two focus groups of up to 10 students each were held in each of the 12 participating schools ( $N = 230$ ). In order to stimulate discussion, a range of different bullying scenarios were selected and adapted from published research on bullying (Oliver & Candappa, 2007). Subsequent discussions were structured to enable key avenues of inquiry to be further explored. The power relationship between participants and researchers shifted, because participants, rather than researchers, were the experts regarding their experiences. This shift in power relations allowed participants to share about sensitive experiences (e.g., racism). As the power differences between participants and researchers diminished, students more freely described their experiences—reporting a reluctance to tell adults, particularly teachers, about their experiences of bullying.

### *Naturalistic Inquiry*

Naturalistic inquiry is a fundamental qualitative research task, in which researchers investigate real-world situations as they unfold. Naturalistic inquiry involves researchers being open to emerging themes as the study progresses, rather than placing predetermined constraints on the process. Several qualitative studies on school bullying reported the emergence of new themes—notably differences in attitudes and perspectives between students and adults on school bullying—through in-depth interviews such relevant adults as parents, teachers, and professionals working with children (Mishna, 2004; Mishna, Pepler, et al., 2006; Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, et al., 2005; Saladin-Subero & Hawkins, 2011). Mishna (2004), for example, examined students' experiences of bullying from the perspectives of victims, parents, and teachers. A grounded theory approach was used, consisting of conducting semi-structured interviews with victims (Grades 4 and 5), one parent and one teacher of each child, and school administrators. The semi-structured interview format captured new and emerging information, allowing researchers to develop specific categories and themes of participants' perspectives, and to determine similarities and differences among these themes. A new theme emerged when adult participants were asked about their awareness of children's experiences of bullying and how the adults interacted with children. The researchers discovered that

parents and teachers conceptualized bullying differently than children. Mishna, Pepler, and Wiener (2006) utilized one-to-one interviews with children, their parents, and their teachers to understand factors that influence individuals' perceptions of and responses to bullying. The semi-structured interview format allowed researchers to generate theory and insights to describe individuals' perceptions of bullying. Through this process, factors such as whether the incident is consistent with an individual's definition, the child "fits" the bullying-victim profile, and "normal" developmental features of bullying were found to influence how parents and teachers react to children's experiences in bullying circumstances (Mishna, Pepler, et al., 2006).

To further understand teachers' conceptualizations of and responses to bullying situations, Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, and Wiener (2005) conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 teachers and 17 students in four urban public school districts. Through in-depth interviews, researchers identified several factors that influenced how teachers understood and responded to bullying: whether teachers viewed an incident as serious, whether they considered the victimized child as culpable, whether the child fits their assumptions of typical characteristics and behaviors of a bullying victim, and whether they described feeling empathy for the child (Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, et al., 2005). The authors also utilized a grounded theory approach to identify consistent themes that emerged from participant interviews related to a teacher's understanding of bullying. Consistent with naturalistic inquiry, new themes emerged from the grounded theory approach, such as students' reluctance to seek support from teachers (Mishna et al., 2005). In this study, grounded theory was also used to analyze semi-structured interviews with students and to detect new patterns in the data. Their findings revealed several emerging themes, including concerns over inappropriate adult action, self-reliance, and differences between children and adults' definitions of bullying. In sum, interviews allowed students' and teachers' divergent perceptions to emerge regarding factors that influence bullying, and interviews further enabled researchers to discover these emerging themes.

*Limitations of qualitative research on school bullying.* Despite the new insights gained from qualitative research through interviews and focus group studies, there are limitations to conducting qualitative research on school bullying. For example, data gleaned from qualitative method studies are generally not generalizable beyond the research sample. However, qualitative research can produce testable hypotheses and new research directions and can also describe phenomena to be further explored in quantitative and qualitative research studies. Focus groups, in some cases, may not be the most appropriate research method for in-depth study of sensitive, controversial issues concerning children (Morgan, Gibbs, Maxwell, & Britten, 2002). For example, youth who have been bullied or victimized may be uncomfortable sharing their personal stories in a group. Researchers who conduct in-depth interviews with children must also proceed with caution. The purpose of the interview, or the type of events that are of interest to the

researcher, may affect how well children remember and communicate that event (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999). Children frequently mask negative events in order to avoid negative responses from the researcher interviewing them.

## Discussion

Bullying behavior is complex and requires a robust understanding of mechanisms and processes that recognize youth as experts in their experience of bullying—whether perpetrator or victim. Qualitative studies on bullying complement current quantitative studies by addressing contextual gaps in knowledge that link the bullying experience with race, class, gender, childhood, and school. When conducting school bullying research, qualitative methods should be considered to develop testable hypotheses and determine future research directions that bring researchers closer to developing well-informed prevention and intervention strategies aimed at reducing bullying (Curry et al., 2009). Qualitative methodology is particularly meaningful because it enables researchers to discover from participants the *meanings* participants assign their experiences of bullying. Such meanings may identify potential sources of bullying behavior. Further, qualitative approaches provide a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of factors and conditions that affect school bullying and victimization.

One enduring strength of qualitative bullying research emerges from the researcher's effort to bracket any related previous experiences of school bullying. *Bracketing* in qualitative research is "a method used by some researchers to mitigate the potential deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research and thereby to increase the rigor of the project" (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 81). It is also an opportunity for researchers to engage in self-reflection, acknowledge personal reasons for pursuing bullying research, and consider how experience influences how they interpret the findings.

Conducting qualitative school bullying and victimization research that yields credible findings requires researchers to build a trusting relationship with interviewees, which is essential for obtaining valid (or credible) observations. It is also critical that highly vulnerable participants feel comfortable with researchers (Haight, 2002). When participants feel comfortable with interviewers, the researchers are able to ask whether their interpretations are consistent with participants' understandings (Haight, 2002). The process of being interviewed may itself be intimidating or inhibiting for some children and adolescents (Hill, 1997), unless trust and rapport have been established between researcher and subjects.

## Research Implications

Anti-bullying initiatives are on the rise, but bullying remains a persistent problem. A gap exists in linking empirically based bullying interventions to those actually delivered in schools. Qualitative approaches to bullying research can help to eliminate this gap by explicating how, and under what conditions,

individual students create meaning in their lives and how that meaning influences current and future behavioral responses and life course outcomes. For example, future research using a longitudinal qualitative design may uncover important micro (e.g., teacher–student relationships) or macro (e.g., federal and school-level policy) changes that identify new strengths and weakness within a school building and shape students' experiences with bullying.

Future research on school bullying and victimization could include the development of quantitative measures, informed by qualitative research, which identify trends in the broader population regarding how and why bullying occurs. For example, researchers should further consider how loneliness among students across multiple contexts affects possible future perpetration and victimization. Researchers should also consider bullying in various contexts—among them, how online environments affect attitudes and beliefs about bullying. According to Patton, Eshmann, and Butler (2013), youth who live in violent communities may view bullying—including violent and aggressive communication on various social media platforms—as a strategy protecting them from future victimization there. Thus, researchers may consider asking to what extent social media facilitates bullying behavior in and outside of school.

Researchers should also consider developing measures that assess the multiple coping strategies students employ to manage their proximal and distal experiences with school bullying and victimization. Moreover, researchers should consider the role of prevention and intervention strategies, including collaborations among parents, teachers, administrators, and youth. Finally, school bullying researchers should consider methods of study that facilitate ethnographic rapport and trust between and among the researchers and the participants. School ethnographies have demonstrated how status hierarchy among children (particularly with respect to race and ethnicity) affects their well-being, an insight that could shed light on the peer dynamics of bullying and victimization (e.g., Frisen, Holmqvist, & Oscarsson, 2008). Establishing and maintaining a strong rapport could also facilitate accurate interpretation of data obtained.

### Practice Implications

Our review of qualitative research on school bullying and victimization also has major implications for practice. Practitioners working with children and adolescents in school bullying must assess situations qualitatively through focus groups to ensure that their voices are heard accurately and completely. This might be achieved through focus groups that offer students involved in bullying, particularly victims, opportunity to share their perceptions of the circumstance and explore whether these problems are being effectively addressed by parents, teachers, and school officials. Further, school bullying programs are only as good as their facilitators. Teachers play an important role in bullying prevention, and they are often implementers of classroom-level prevention or intervention

programs. However, they face many other demands and are likely to vary in their ability to prevent or intervene in bullying situations. Thus, more qualitative assessments of teachers' perceptions and knowledge of school bullying, which determine how they implement programs and what strategies they employ in bullying situations, would be very helpful (Hong & Espelage, 2012). In addition to assessment, qualitative methods can also be used to evaluate the existing bullying prevention programs and policies in school districts, increasing our understanding of which components of which programs are effective, and which may need to be modified.

### Conclusion

Our review of empirical research studies reveals that qualitative methodologies can enhance our understanding of specific conditions, processes, and factors associated with school bullying. If teachers, officials, psychologists, and social workers in schools aim to develop effective intervention strategies and preventative measures, they first must understand the subtle nuances that accompany interpersonal relations among children and adolescents, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

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