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"A freak that no one can love": difficult knowledge in testimonials on school bullying

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ABSTRACT

This study adopts a testimonial approach to bullying victimisation, and aims to create a deeper understanding of the experiences and effects of being a bullying target. Four written narratives about being subjected to school bullying were analysed according to interpretative phenomenological analysis. From the analysis, four themes were constructed, which represented different elements of victimhood: (1) Self-blame in which victims view themselves as the cause of the bullying, (2) Abandonment in which victims describe feelings of standing alone in their exposed situation, (3) Turning points in which the victims recount a variety of restorative events, and (4) Continued victimhood in which the victims relate how the feeling of victimhood and vulnerability continues even though the bullying has ended. In conclusion, school bullying is something that continues to affect the individual adversely long after it has stopped, although stable friendship relations might have a mitigating influence. Through such relations, victimhood can be neutralised and a more positive self-image develop. Moreover, as numerous other kinds of victims emphasise, an essential part of the rehabilitation process is to finally be able to tell one's story, to lay bare one's difficult knowledge to a wider audience.

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Introduction

Whether we prefer to explain school bullying by reference to individual characteristics among bullies and victims (Book, Volk, and Hosker 2012; Goodboy and Martin 2015; Olweus 1993), social-psychological processes among all parties involved (Eder 1985; Salmivalli 2010; Søndergaard 2012), or organisational, discursive, and highly routinised features of schools (Ellwood and Davies 2010; Ringrose and Renold 2010; Yoneyama and Naito 2003), it is an indisputable fact that many victims are deeply affected by their experiences (McDougall and Vaillancourt 2015). Given the high prevalence of bullying (Modecki et al. 2014), and the fact that victims are often unwilling to disclose their experiences (Athanasides and Deliyannis-Kouimtzis 2010; Bjereid 2016; Frisén, Holmqvist, and Oscarsson 2008), we can thus suspect that there are numerous untold stories of victimisation among the general public.

In this article, we focus on victimhood narratives that former bullying victims not only chose to express, but also did so before the broadest possible audience. These
narratives were collected from Aftonbladet, the most popular online newspaper in Sweden. While examining school harassment, two of its reporters invited people with experiences of bullying to ‘share their stories,’ and a total of 343 narratives were subsequently published on the Internet (Tagesson and Karin 2013), giving almost everyone in Sweden full access to them.

Many of the narratives are recounted in chronological order, beginning with descriptions of the bullying and ending with glimpses of the narrator’s present life. Often they contain elements that are deeply disturbing, and pick up the storyline of a ‘regressive narrative’ that proceeds from bad to worse (Gergen and Gergen 1986, 27). Yet, the stories we explore in this article also contain turning points, which make them somewhat less gloomy. In analysing these stories, we adopt a testimonial approach to victimisation (Blackmer Reyes and Rodriguez 2012) and lean on a phenomenological methodology (Smith, Flower, and Larkin 2009). Taking this point of departure, we seek to create a deeper understanding of the experiences and effects of being exposed to bullying. Thus, the purpose of this study is to lay bare the participants’ views of the victimisation processes rather than to attempt to uncover the ‘real’ processes.

More specifically, we restricted our final analytical attention to four narratives, which brought the following research questions to the fore: (1) How do the participants, in retrospect, understand their own victimisation? (2) How do the participants characterise their social situation at the time of the bullying? (3) How do the participants describe the turning point of the bullying, and their life after this? Observe that we did not identify and ask these questions before we turned to the material, but instead noted that many participants, not merely the ones we finally focused on, quite spontaneously oriented toward them.

### A testimonial approach to bullying victimisation

In their review of qualitative studies on school bullying, Patton et al. (2017) note that the school bullying research field is dominated by quantitative studies in which survey instruments are often deployed. Typically, the focus here is directed at the prevalence of bullying, risk and protective factors, causes and effects, and potential intervention. As the research field has grown exponentially (Volk, Veenstra, and Espelage 2017), these quantitative studies have equipped us with valuable insights into a multitude of bullying phenomena. However, qualitative studies may not only expand and enhance the validity of such quantitative research findings, but also allow researchers to ‘address subjectivity, or the personal experiences, emotions, motivations, and inner life of study participants’ (Patton et al. 2017, 4). This is where the testimonial approach comes in, which is well suited for such an undertaking, and which is well served by a phenomenological methodology.

Blackmer Reyes and Rodriguez (2012, 527) define the practice of ‘testimonio’ as ‘an account told in the first person by a narrator who is the real protagonist or witness of events.’ The genre has primarily been deployed by oppressed people throughout the world, particularly in Latin America, and some scholars would perhaps prefer to restrict the use of the term ‘testimonio’ to this context. However, in this article, we adopt a broader use of the term and argue that it is applicable to any kind of narrative that strives ‘to bring to light a wrong, a point of view, or an urgent call for action’ (Blackmer
Reyes and Rodríguez 2012, 525). Thus, whether we listen to victims of slavery (Douglass [1845] 1986), concentration camp imprisonment (Levi 1959), ethnic oppression (Menchú 1984), child abuse (Pelzer 1995), or rape (Louis 2018), there is a testimonial dimension to such stories, which forces us to grapple with ‘difficult knowledge’ (Britzman 2000, 201), i.e. painful insights into individual or collective suffering, lame responses by third parties, human indifference, and so on (see also Walton 2015).

A common denominator of the testimonials enumerated above is the victims’ willingness to go public, and this is also an important aspect of the narratives of our bullying victims. By agreeing to be published on the Aftonbladet website, they permit their stories to be vividly displayed before the broad masses. However, through this study, we, as researchers, partly take control of their testimonials. Not only do we allow ourselves to make a selection of narratives, but we also present and analyse them in a manner that necessarily reframes and rearranges them. Yet, as Blackmer Reyes and Rodríguez (2012, 527) point out, testimonials do require ‘active participatory readers or listeners who act on behalf of the speaker in an effort to arrive at justice and redemption.’ Thus, although we do not proclaim to represent the victims’ true voice, we hope, at least, to provide the reader with some insights into what it might mean to be subjected to bullying. Indeed, this phenomenological project is simply trying to raise the very same social awareness of the lived experiences of bullying victims that the victims themselves patently strive towards through their narratives. In this way, we hopefully, each in our own way, contribute to the ‘transformation of silence into language and action’ (Lorde 1984, 42).

Apart from this willingness to go public, the testimonial literature also reveals a number of other striking parallels to the bullying narratives of our study. An obvious aspect is the ways in which both types of testimonials often recount how the narrators encounter a social world that views them more or less as ‘abject’ beings. Introduced by Bataille ([1934] 1994, 9), this term was originally applied to exploited people who had been ‘[ejected] outside the moral community,’ but has since then been appropriated by many scholars who have focused on various types of the Other, most notably Kristeva (1982). Although the term never seems to be used by those who compose testimonials, vivid descriptions of being positioned as the object of contempt, loathing, rejection, and so on, fulfil the same function. Indeed, whether we listen to the voices of slaves, ethnic minorities, or victims of abuse or rape, it is precisely the ‘abject’ position that seems to justify the very mistrust, oppression, assault, and so on, directed at them. They are the Other, and as such they deserve no better treatment. As we shall see, this pattern of being dehumanised, and marked out as different, certainly applies to the participants of this study, and has also been reported in previous bullying research (e.g. Mackay, Carey, and Stevens 2011; Side and Johnson 2014; Thornberg 2018).

Another parallel between the bullying narratives of our study and the testimonial literature is the way in which their narrators often seem to adopt the very same downgrading picture of themselves as the one put forward by their assailants. For instance, when Pelzer (1995) recounts how he felt as an abused child, he describes how he hated himself and viewed himself as a wimp. Thus, in line with Cooley’s ([1902] 1967, 184) well-known thesis of a ‘looking-glass self,’ the images that victims often make of themselves at least partly come to reflect the hostile social environment (see also Goffman 1963). As will be shown, the narratives of our participants confirm this picture, and similar processes of
self-stigmatisation and self-blame have also been described in previous bullying research (e.g. Graham and Juvonen 1998; Silberschmidt Viala 2014; Thornberg et al. 2013).

The testimonial literature and our bullying narratives also resemble one another in the sense that abandonment is often a central theme of the storyline. This abandonment can appear in many forms in testimonials. Whereas Pelzer (1995), as an abused child, becomes a stranger in his own home, rejected and assaulted even by his brothers, Louis’s (2018) abandonment as a rape victim instead occurs when his victimhood story is hijacked and distorted by various parties that normally would be expected to support him. Moreover, the fact that a victim sometimes shares the exposed position with many others is no guarantee against feelings of abandonment. In such cases, systems of discipline and violence may thwart many forms of social action and support among the affected parties (Douglass [1845] 1986; Levi 1959; Menchú 1984). Bullying research also confirms all the above, although the term ‘abandonment’ has seldom been used. For instance, social exclusion anxiety prevents students from defending bullying victims (Søndergaard 2012), teachers and parents transform bullying into less serious business (deLara 2012), and violence is treated as the normal state of affairs (Ringrose and Renold 2010). In our study, the loneliness that is described by the participants is a result of similar types of abandonment.

After this enumeration of similarities between the testimonial literature and our empirical material, it might be tempting to conclude that darkness and misery always prevail in these narrative worlds. However, many testimonials also include streaks of hope. For instance, Levi (1959) recounts how the friendship of Lorenzo, a civilian worker in Auschwitz, helped him uphold faith in humanity, for which it was worth surviving the struggle in the camp. Finding a safe haven at school (Pelzer 1995), participating in fighting oppression (Menchú 1984), or teaching other victims to read (Douglass [1845] 1986) offer other examples of escape routes that provide hope. In a parallel way, bullying research points to strategies that not only offer temporary release from the victim position, but that may also lead to a permanent transformation of the situation. Seeking social support, fighting back, or making a safety plan are commonly reported strategies that may or may not help (Black, Weinles, and Washington 2010). When our participants recount the turning points of their victimisation, similar processes and practices are mentioned.

Method

Sample, selection of narratives, and ethics

As already stated in the introduction, the empirical material used in this study comes from Aftonbladet, the biggest Internet newspaper in Sweden. Two of its reporters invited people with experiences of bullying to share their stories, and a total of 343 narratives were subsequently published on the Internet (Tagesson and Karin 2013). The narratives contained between 17 and 3,265 words, with an average length of 310 words.

The selection of narratives for this article was accomplished through a series of stages. First, we read all the narratives and selected all of those that were written from the perspective of being a school bullying victim. This reduced the material to 282 narratives. Second, we decided to focus on narratives that contained a turning point,
after which the bullying situation improved. However, only narratives with turning points that took place in the original bullying context were included, leaving out those that, for instance, occurred after changing schools. This left us with 47 narratives. Third, from this sample, we picked 17 narratives that were rich in content and could provide the basis for a thorough analysis. Finally, we selected four narratives, which contained different types of victimhood and turning points, hence giving a taste of the heterogeneity of the material. The shortest of these narratives comprised 232 words and the longest one 697. The four narratives all contain four themes that were quite frequent in the material as a whole: (1) self-blaming (present in about 25% of all of the 282 cases that were written by victims), (2) feelings of abandonment (65%), (3) turning points (40%), and (4) continued victimhood as adults (55%).

When it comes to ethics, all online research of the present kind is disguised observation in that the participants probably never imagined being studied by a researcher. However, as Gatson (2011) points out, allowing publishing of one’s text online invites a broad audience, including researchers. Thus, although the participants in our study never got the chance to give us their formal ‘informed consent,’ their sharing of the information suggests a willingness to be seen and heard. Moreover, and in line with this, the narratives were not shared on a closed forum, where membership and login are required, but on the most popular site of all. It should also be mentioned that the newspaper examined all contributions before publishing, removing all personally identifiable information. For that or other reasons, none of the selected narratives contained any names. Thus, even for ourselves, as researchers, the four participants were highly anonymous. We have given them the following pseudonyms: Arlo, Bela, Cary and Dani. For stylistic reasons, i.e. avoiding a complicated use of twofold gender terms, we have assumed that all participants are females, although only one of them discloses an explicit female gender identity.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis

The analytical approach chosen, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), examines how individuals interpret and ascribe meaning to their lived experiences (Smith, Flower, and Larkin 2009). The search for the ‘lived experience’ of the participants comes from phenomenology and implies that we can only understand the psychological realms of people if we ask those with direct experience of the phenomenon of interest. The emphasis on ‘interpretation’ is a contribution from hermeneutics and involves a focus on how people come to make sense of their particular experiences. Indeed, there is a double hermeneutic at play, as the analyst attempts to interpret and make sense of people’s own interpretation of their experiences.

As Smith, Flower, and Larkin (2009) point out, IPA is thoroughly ideographic, focusing on the particular rather than the universal. In line with this, it has not been our ambition to produce results that can be generalised to large number of people, but to increase our understanding of how bullying can be experienced from within. However, this stance does not preclude that interpretations based on a detailed examination of a small number of unique narratives may lead to theoretical insights that transcend the studied material. Moreover, as pointed out by Stake (1978), small-sample studies often provide opportunities for ‘naturalistic generalisation,’ i.e. a kind of
generalisation that is left to the reader to perform on the basis of his or her prior experiences and knowledge – or lack thereof. In the same vein, such studies are also an important means of acquiring ‘vicarious experience,’ i.e. knowledge that arrives through the (indirect) study of others.

In our analysis, we have followed the six steps presented by Smith, Flower, and Larkin (2009). First, we carefully read through the first narrative, while only taking brief notes. Second, linguistic and semantic content were analysed, sentence by sentence, with a focus on what seemed important to the participant. Third, by constantly asking ourselves what each note said about the participant’s experiences, the initial codes were transformed into more abstract sub-themes. Fourth, these sub-themes were sorted by different connections, and turned into major themes, increasing the level of abstraction even further. Fifth, this process was repeated throughout the remaining narratives, where codes, sub-themes, and themes were evaluated, modified, and added/removed. Lastly, after singling out extracts that could illustrate our themes, we proceeded with a deeper analysis. In short, we tried to create an ‘added value’ (Smith, Flower, and Larkin 2009, 23) in relation to the extracts, i.e. to say something about them that perhaps was not always instantly apparent. In doing so, we employed a ‘hermeneutics of empathy’ rather than a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (Smith, Flower, and Larkin 2009, 36), i.e. we tried to view the world from the participants’ horizon rather than to question or deconstruct their narratives.

Results

In working through the material, four themes of victimisation were constructed. In the first and second themes, the focus is on the participants’ views of the time before the turning points, whereas the third and fourth themes concentrate on the turning points themselves, and the ensuing life. These four themes correspond to one section each in the presentation below. The first section, ‘Self-blame,’ recounts how the bullying victims, in order to understand their own abject positioning, began to search for something in themselves that could explain the bullying. The second section, ‘Abandonment,’ describes how the individuals felt deserted in their exposed situation. The third section, ‘ Turning points,’ focuses on the participants’ experiences of positive changes in their lives. Finally, the fourth section, ‘Continued victimhood,’ centres on how life after the turning point is portrayed.

Self-blame

All narratives begin with a description of the participants’ experience of their own deviance. It is as if the victims want to explain why their situation was as it was, and to describe the reasons why they became objects of bullying. Arlo describes how her confrontational personality can be seen as an explanation for the bullying:

I know that I was “bullied” in school. But now when I look back I often blame myself. I’m sure that I did the same when I was in the middle of it as well. I consider that my personality, the way I acted, caused it all. You don’t feel that you have the right to complain! I can’t be a victim since I’m sure that I in turn made things happen, said something stupid, caused trouble. Yeah, how convenient if the whole bullying thing was my fault. (Arlo)
As can be observed above, Arlo does not always seem to be willing to admit to herself that she has been the victim of bullying. She oscillates between identifying herself as a victim and distancing herself from the very same role. The way in which Arlo uses quotation marks around ‘bullied’ can be seen as an expression of distancing. Her personality and behaviour stimulated the bullying against her, making it her fault rather than the bullies’ fault. This means, in turn, that she does not have the right to empathy from other people, neither back then nor now. However, Arlo’s final words, ‘Yeah, how convenient if the whole bullying thing was my fault,’ show that she has ambivalent feelings. The will to take the blame for the bullying was, even so, initially forced onto her from outside.

The need to explain why one has been subject to bullying is a frequently met phenomenon, and can be seen in various ways. Above, Arlo directly places the blame for the bullying on herself, but Bela initially experiences it as difficult to explain the bullying:

In the second year at the school, a boy, let’s call him X, started to bully me... I didn’t really understand why. I wasn’t a person who caused a fuss or made trouble in class. I didn’t even put my hand up to ask things. (Bela)

Instead of placing the focus on the fact that the bullies are acting badly, Bela tries to find out what she herself is doing wrong. She seems to say that it is easy to understand why confrontational students can be subjected to bullying, but she cannot find any such properties in herself. Thus, her narrative demonstrates her initial confusion about the cause, as she does not do anything to draw attention to herself. Eventually, as she chooses to stand up for herself and respond to the bullying, it does, however, become clear that she sees her own passivity as the explanation. For herself, she can thus be just as much to blame for the bullying as Arlo. According to this logic, anyone who allows the bullies to carry on, and who accepts the role of scapegoat, is equally to blame for, possibly even responsible for, the bullying.

Cary does not in any way display the same initial failure to understand the bullying that Bela did. She describes a sequence of events in which the bullying started in the first grade, but which increased severely in intensity during the sixth grade, when the bullying took both psychological and physical forms:

Everything started as early as the first grade, but then I could just shake it off. But when I started in the sixth grade it became much worse, I was called “disgusting,” “retarded,” and “stupid.” They threw various objects at me, and spat. I have always been a tomboy, loved cars and everything to do with them. A misfit girl, and because of this an easy target, apparently. (Cary)

The adoption of self-blame is clear in this case as well. When the bullying becomes more intense, and Cary is subjected to both name-calling and physical abuse, she turns her gaze inwards and looks for an explanation. Finally, she arrives at the conclusion that being a tomboy, or a ‘misfit girl,’ is the cause of the bullying. However, just like Arlo, Cary demonstrates that the self-blame is not fully accepted. The expression ‘an easy target, apparently’ shows that she understands why the bullying is happening, but does not accept that this is a valid reason for it.
At the beginning of her narrative, Dani also describes the properties she possesses that can explain the bullying. In her case, however, it is not a matter of being confrontational, passive or crossing sexual role boundaries, but of possessing clear physical injuries that cause her to become a victim. Dani describes graphically how this influenced her:

I was in first grade when they started to bully me. I had been in a car accident, and my face had been affected... I was ashamed of my appearance, I still am. I feel sick when I see myself, not to mention the strong feeling of being a freak that no one can love... Every day I thought about ending it all. (Dani)

Dani’s words are very different from those of the other three. The car accident that she had been in caused visible injuries in the form of a missing front tooth and a tendency of one half of her face to sag. She describes how the bullying arose as a consequence of these injuries, and that she takes onboard all of the harsh words that are thrown at her. These words become a part of her identity, and she places all the blame for the bullying onto herself. Through her own words, ‘a freak that no one can love,’ she dehumanises herself both in the past and in the present, making suicidal thoughts highly understandable.

**Abandonment**

In addition to self-blame, all victims experience striking feelings of abandonment during the bullying. They feel that no one stands up for them; they are alone and lack the support of others. Dani describes how the bullying started as early as first grade, and how she was singled out because she had a different physical appearance. A feeling of being the only victim is expressed, and being gradually more and more deserted:

Even now, nearly 11 years later, I can still get nightmares about the bullies. They shouted abuse at me during recess, and they laughed at me. But probably the worst thing was that my friends retreated and deserted me when I really needed them. (Dani)

Eleven years after the bullying, Dani still claims to be affected by the events. The feeling of abandonment is strongest when her friends let her down, leaving her with the idea that she is not worth fighting for. Dani describes this as the worst aspect of her victimisation, worse than actually being called nasty things and being mocked by the bullies for her appearance. Being deserted by her friends was harder to bear than the bullying itself.

In all the narratives there is also an apparent lack of support from teachers and other professionals at school. Thus, during the period in which the participants were bullied, they experienced a feeling of abandonment even with respect to the people with responsibility for their well-being. Dani describes this below:

Ever since first grade I’ve been in a bad place, been depressed. I’ve been to psychologist after psychologist, and to so many counsellors that I’ve lost count. But the teachers NEVER stood up for me. In the end I just gave up caring, played truant pretty much all the time, argued with the teachers, and eventually closed up like a clam, as my friends would describe it today. (Dani)

Despite Dani faring badly throughout her school years, psychologists and counsellors have not been able to help her. She describes these people as passing on a conveyor belt,
and thus failing to develop meaningful relationships with her. At the same time, she uses capital letters to say that the teachers ‘NEVER’ stood up for her, a statement that shows that she experienced the teachers as an even worse case, since they did not even try to help. Moreover, with her statement Dani also implies that the teachers were actually on the side of the bullies. This led to her viewing both the teachers and the school as enemies, playing truant and causing trouble.

Bela and Arlo also argue that they received no help from the school, since the teachers did not know how to solve the problem. So even though adults have in some cases tried to help, this has not had any effect. Bela describes how teachers and anti-bullying groups at the school actually exacerbated the situation by using ‘incredibly bad techniques to eliminate bullying,’ such as essentially forcing the bullies and the victim to meet. In a similar manner, Arlo says that her ‘experiences of adults trying to sort things out have not been positive.’ She claims to have been identified as a victim of bullying in front of the whole class, when her teacher showed the results of a questionnaire on the overhead projector. As a result, Arlo has been compelled to deal with the bullying completely on her own, without any effective help from adults.

Arlo, Bela, and Dani express bitterness against the adults who have possessed neither the understanding nor the tools required to be able to help them, which contributed to their feelings of abandonment. Dani’s narrative also contains something that may be seen as a cry for help from this abandonment. When she failed to gain support from the adults, she changed her behaviour and deviated from their ideals of how a talented student should behave. She says that she ‘just gave up caring’ and eventually became very closed and withdrawn, ‘like a clam.’ Cary also says the same: ‘I became increasingly introverted... went to any lengths to avoid my tormentors.’ Yet, she still hardly ever managed to avoid the bullies: ‘It was as if they had me on their radar.’ Thus, the role of victim led both of these victims to shun contact with people, and to actively search for a solitude that at first was not desirable.

One thing that all four victims also have in common is the effect the bullying had on their trust in the people around them. All harbour a perception that many other people, beside the bullies, were negatively disposed towards them, which exacerbated the feeling of rejection and abandonment. Arlo even blames her mother for acting in a way that strengthened this feeling:

Please, all parents, calm down, even if it sucks to see your kids being exposed to bullying. To elicit the anger of one’s parents by seeking their help is not a nice feeling. To me, as a child, it felt as if mummy was angry at ME, not the things I told her about. (Arlo)

When Arlo recounts her mother’s reactions to the bullying, she does it from the child’s perspective. She put her trust in the mother and told her about the bullying, but the effect was that the mother ‘hit the roof’ in an emotional outburst that Arlo experienced as being directed at her. Thus, the help she was hoping for only resulted in more turbulence, and probably also taught her to keep things to herself. In a similar way, Dani was also very disappointed with her mother: ‘Despite everything that happened, very visible to all, adults never interfered – not even my mother.’


**Turning points**

All of the analysed narratives contain some form of turning point for the bullying. These turning points, however, appear differently in the four narratives, and may occur in several steps. For example, Cary experiences three types of turning point: When she is chosen as someone’s friend, discovers an interest, and finally physically opposes the bullies. These have a pronounced positive effect on Cary’s life, but it is also possible to see how the traces of her earlier experiences make their presence felt at the turning points. Below, Cary describes the first meeting with someone who will become her friend:

One day in seventh grade one of my classmates came up to me and sat down beside me in the canteen so that everyone saw it. And I thought “What the hell do you want?” But he said: “I know what they’re doing. I’m your Friend, you don’t have to stand alone.” And then he was always with me, went with me to lessons and to the bus. (Cary)

The expression ’so that everyone saw it’ demonstrates Cary’s experience of always being under surveillance, and being the centre of everyone’s attention. Moreover, we can see how surprised Cary is when a person sits down beside her. Someone coming to sit beside her is obviously not something that normally happens, and she feels an immediate scepticism about the person, based on the feeling that everyone means her harm. She cannot understand why anyone would reach out to her. The friend-to-be shows, however, that there really is someone who understands, someone who sees that she is suffering and wants to help her. This is a turning point, and after this Cary no longer stands alone. Almost like a life guard, the friend accompanies her to lessons and the school bus.

Just like Cary, Dani describes a turning point that comes when another person stands up for her. She had been without support, and a victim of bullying who found it difficult to allow others to get close, when a change suddenly occurs:

And then a person appeared in my life. I found it difficult to trust him, but it became clear that he heard me. He heard me when I cried for help and he backed me up. Lifted me at the end of every day at school, so that I wouldn’t give up. (Dani)

Just like Cary, Dani at first found it difficult to trust the friend-to-be, which is understandable, since her friends had betrayed her when they needed them most. Her issues with trust meant that he had to struggle to gain her faith, but when she saw that he was serious, she allowed him in. Now she had someone who understood what she was going through and who listened to her. The way in which Dani describes his actions – he ‘backed me up,’ ‘lifted me at the end of every day’ – suggests that she was still victimised after their first encounter. But at least there was now someone who would support her.

What Dani and Cary have in common is that they both give credit to a person who represents what is good in their lives, someone who was strong enough to resist their initial doubts. However, Cary also describes a further turning point. She was talked into joining a martial arts training session, and this experience changed her view of herself and what she is capable of:

Finally, this trainer asked if I dared to give it a try. I jumped up from the little sofa I was sitting on and stood in front of the trainer and he said: “Kick the pad as high and as hard as you can.” No sooner said than done, I kicked it so high that I nearly kicked his head. I was bitten, I had found something I was good at. (Cary)
Cary describes here how she feels when she is, for once, seen and confirmed. She described earlier how she ‘sat there quietly in the corner,’ merely observing the training. Then Cary is noticed by the trainer, who offers her the chance to show what she is capable of. The use of the expression ‘I jumped up from the little sofa’ shows that she had been waiting for this kind of opportunity, and that she was now prepared to seize it. Moreover, there is pride in the way Cary describes what then happened, that she kicked ‘so high that I nearly kicked his head.’ This is also the first time that Cary describes a sequence in detail, which suggests that it is an important event in her life. The negative experiences, such as being bullied, are not described with anything like the same amount of detail as the positive sequences, such as when she finds a friend or an interest.

Bela is also very detailed when describing positive changes. In her case, however, the first turning point does not arrive when she meets a friend or finds a hobby. Instead, she describes in detail what happened when she heard, for the first time, the powerful message in a song by Eminem:

I didn’t understand English very well, but I understood enough to make it mean something to me. When I heard the song, everything made more sense, I can’t describe it any other way. “I am as I am and you are as you are.” (Bela)

Bela describes how the song brings her to understand her own situation. Even though the words of the song were difficult for her to understand, they brought insight. They confirm that everyone is different and that this is perfectly okay. Thus, for Bela it was the message in the song that led her to realise her value. She describes how everything started to make ‘more sense,’ for example that she started to question whether she really was the cause of the bullying. Bela had previously emphasised negative and deviant properties in herself, but the song enabled her to realise that it was not her fault that she was the victim of bullying. The expression, ‘I am as I am and you are as you are,’ reflects the understanding she has gained that we are all different, and that this is the way it is meant to be.

Arlo also describes her turning point in detail, but hers was an extended process, and not a single, specific event. In her case, it was not a friend who suddenly appeared, a newly discovered interest, or a message in a song that caused her to realise that she is good enough as she is. Instead, she argues that the turning point was the result of her own hard work:

How did it end? Not through anything an adult did. I got “tough,” started smoking in secret, taking snuff… went out and tried drinking. Well, I didn’t turn into a juvenile delinquent, but I showed my schoolmates that surely I was just like them. And, yes, in some way I won their acceptance. (Arlo)

Arlo first expresses bitterness against the adult world over the fact that she was compelled to deal with the situation all by herself, but then describes how she stopped the bullying by getting ‘tough.’ She recounts how she started to act as if in a play, in order to follow accepted norms. The persona she projected changed, and she behaved in a manner that would ‘fit in.’ This suggests that she did not change her opinion of herself, but chose to put on a false show in a desperate attempt to stop the bullying. If she could only become ‘just like them,’ the bullying would end. And this is indeed what happened, in her particular case.
Arlo’s turning point, during which she worked hard to change herself, also marked the end of the bullying. However, the initial turning points for Bela and Cary, in which they find a friend, an interest, or inspiring song lyrics, did not mean that the bullying automatically stopped. Instead, they found themselves compelled to resort to physical violence to get the bullying to stop. Both declare that they are not particularly proud of the way in which they solved the problem, but that it actually did cause the bullies to stop. Both also present themselves as heroes, who fight back against a superior enemy. In Cary’s case, she is compelled to deal with at least two people at the same time:

I grabbed hold of one, broke this one’s nose, and while this was going on another one approached me. I turned round and got hold of this one’s arm, threw the person onto the floor in a grip where he couldn’t move, and nearly broke the poor sod’s arm. After this, all the bullying just stopped short. (Cary)

The way in which Cary describes the situation shows how her view of herself has changed. On this occasion, she comes to realise that she is physically stronger than the bullies, and that she can use the skills she has acquired in the martial arts training. Writing ‘the poor sod’ about the second person shows that she no longer considers herself to be inferior. In fact, the roles are reversed. She is now in control, and can bask in the luxury of feeling sorry for the others.

In a similar manner, Bela describes dramatic events in which she single-handedly attacks six bullies who have just punctured her bike tire. She describes how this caused her to ‘go totally berserk’:

Picked the bike up and threw it at them. It hit two of the six that were there. I then went after the remaining four boys. I don’t actually remember what happened next, but… I made the bullies stop, and anyone who has tried to bully me since then just hasn’t managed it. (Bela)

Once again, we see how the inferior victim retaliates with a violent physical showdown. Bela even describes how she loses control of events, that she has no detailed memory of what happened, which demonstrates the strength of the outburst that took place. Unlike Cary, she does not describe martial arts skills, but even so manages to prevail over six people. This marks the end of the bullying she has been exposed to from a particular group of bullies, and suggests that she stopped subsequent attempts to bully her using precisely the same means.

Continued victimhood

At the end of the narratives it is possible to see how Arlo and Bela in particular, despite having experienced a turning point, retain the feeling of being vulnerable and alone, long after the bullying has stopped. Arlo caused the bullying to end by changing her behaviour and, as she describes it, showing everyone that she is just like them. She does, however, admit that she still has thoughts and feelings that she developed while the bullying was going on:

If I’m out walking and meet a group of young people, or even a group of people in general, and they are having fun and laugh as I pass them – well, of course it must be me that they’re laughing at. I rarely look at people I meet… [because] I expect them to say something spiteful, about the way I am or the way I look… If people whisper when I’m
close by – well, it’s obvious that they’re whispering about me. And it doesn’t matter that they are a teenage pair who have just discovered love and who are certainly whispering sweet nothings to each other, which no one else is allowed to hear. Oh no, they are whispering about me, of course they are! (Arlo)

This quotation shows that the victimization process consists of layers of experience that merge together across time and space. Even if you manage to escape the bullying, it continues to affect you in new situations. Indeed, Arlo’s unease around other people sometimes seems to resemble paranoia. She feels that her faults are so apparent that people cannot help reacting to her, and the fear that someone will laugh at her, or ‘say something spiteful,’ is coupled with ever-present doubts about herself. It is as if she believes that her very existence is sufficient to provoke others to attack her, and she will therefore ‘rarely look at people.’ Even ‘the teenage pair who have just discovered love,’ a metaphor for people who truly do not have any awareness of anyone other than themselves, would, of course, notice Arlo’s faults. At the same time, however, she does appear to be aware of how irrational her way of thinking is. She understands that the teenage pair are certainly ‘whispering sweet nothings to each other,’ but, even so, she cannot avoid the idea that it is all about her.

Bela also retains the feeling of standing alone against everyone else, ever after the turning points. Her narrative allows a general feeling of hatred, of anger towards the bullies and the world, to be seen:

To be honest, I don’t think that the problem of bullying has a solution. Not until the bullies themselves can understand the anguish that they inflict upon the victim… [and] stop when someone says “Stop.” But it feels as if I am the only one in this revolting world who understands what this means. (Bela)

Bela’s words reflect a bitterness long after the bullying has ended. When she uses the words ‘in this revolting world,’ an extremely bleak picture appears. She does not believe that the problem of bullying has a solution, since neither the bullies nor anyone else understand ‘the anguish that they inflict upon the victim.’ She has learnt this valuable lesson herself, through her own experiences, but the people who truly need this insight will never achieve it. Bullying in this world will never end, and both she and others will therefore continue to suffer.

While Cary does not talk about any long-lasting effects of the bullying, Dani reveals how sometimes she still feels ashamed of herself. They both, however, at the end of their narratives, say that they were never again left alone and vulnerable after the turning point. They both describe how their saviour friends are still part of their lives:

My friend and I are still best friends with each other, now that I’m 27. (Cary)

Grateful forever that this person turned up, and stayed with me! (Dani)

Obviously, this type of continuous friendship has meant a lot to them both. Indeed, before meeting her friend, Dani suffered from severe effects of her victimisation: ‘I started cutting myself, thought about ending it all every day.’ The support of the other person is thus portrayed as crucial both for her recovery and for her present well-being. Similarly, Cary ends her narrative not only by praising her friend, but also by characterising herself as ‘a
self-confident girl.’ Through her friend, portrayed as a ‘remarkable person,’ she has been able to dispel the perception that she is not worth being with.

However, for Arlo and Bela the turning point was something that they managed themselves, without the support of any other person. At the end of their narratives, they express to a greater degree than Cary and Dani that they still experience feelings of aloneness and vulnerability. They express discomfort and a negative attitude to the world around them, on a completely different plane than Cary and Dani. What is common for Arlo and Bela is that they are continuing to live in victimhood, even though they are no longer victims of bullying.

Discussion

In this article, we have adopted a testimonial approach to bullying victimisation. The aim has been to create a deeper understanding of the experiences and effects of being bullied, to analyse the inside perspective of outsiders, and to let ourselves and the readers be exposed to narratives of despair and hope. Although it might appear too pretentious to argue that we in this way acquire ‘vicarious experience’ (Stake 1978) of being a bullying victim, it hopefully gives us the chance to face ‘difficult knowledge’ and to be moved by ‘histories that are not our own’ (Britzman 2000, 201). Moreover, if we already have the original experience of being bullied, we have the chance to compare our own difficult knowledge with that of others.

So, why do we need this difficult knowledge? In answering this question, Britzman (2000) argues that it can be used as a means for ‘self-making’ and ‘world making,’ i.e. as a kind of knowledge that we do not just learn or apply mechanically, but which transforms us and the world in the process. Indeed, scholars who examine the testimonial practice from the insider’s perspective point to the same argument (Blackmer Reyes and Rodríguez 2012). Thus, for those who offer testimonials, such an endeavour is not only a source of personal healing, empowerment, and self-transformation, but also a way to openly document injustices, to speak for those who succumbed to the pressure, and to bring about social awareness and societal correction. In short, when testimonials are delivered, the difficult knowledge concerns both sides of the podium, the narrator as well as the audience.

In the present study, the difficult knowledge appears in many forms. One striking, but also tragic, finding is the way in which the participants, through a self-stigmatising process, blame themselves for being victimised – external assault results in internal reproach (Graham and Juvonen 1998; Silberschmidt Viala 2014; Thornberg et al. 2013). Thus, targets of bullying do not seem to differ from bystanders in assigning responsibility for the bullying more to the victims (themselves) than to the perpetrators (Salmivalli 2010). This, in turn, may not only explain why victims of bullying often do not call out for help (Athanasiades and Deliyanni-Kouimtzis 2010; deLara 2012; Frisén, Holmqvist, and Oscarsson 2008), but also why victimisation in childhood and adolescence risks leading to lasting and serious negative ramifications later in life (McDougall and Vaillancourt 2015).

Among our participants, four types of self-blame can be noted. Arlo views her confrontational style as the cause of the bullying, whereas Bela argues that her passivity made her an easy target. Thus, in Olweus’s (1993) terminology, they point to themselves
as ‘provocative’ and ‘submissive’ victims, respectively. However, Cary and Dani do not fit into this model. The former points to her deviant social identity, her tomboyish style, as the cause of the bullying, whereas the latter views her physical appearance as the main explanation. In Goffman’s (1963) terminology, they are thus affected by ‘character’ and ‘physical’ stigma, respectively. Despite being very dissimilar, these examples illustrate the narrow margins of normality in school, which research has repeatedly pointed to (e.g. Hamarus and Kaikkonen 2008; Side and Johnson 2014; Sweeting and West 2001). In essence, this truncated normality confines the participants to an abject position, where potential changes appear more or less futile. From such a position, there is but a short step to come to view oneself as ‘not quite human’ (Goffman 1963, 5), ‘a freak that no one can love,’ hence deserving of inhumane treatment. Only retrospectively can the participants begin to challenge this view, but even then their alternative selves appear fragile and angst-ridden.

The participants also portray themselves as abandoned by all – not only by school staff in general, but also by peers, former friends, and even parents. While teachers, other school professionals, and parents are blamed for inept handling of the bullying, a common theme in previous research (Athanasiades and Deliyanni-Kouimtzis 2010; Bjereld 2016; Frisén, Holmqvist, and Oscarsson 2008), peers and friends are portrayed as either contributing to the bullying or as simply vanishing in connection with it. This latter finding might be explained by reference to a ‘social exclusion anxiety’ (Søndergaard 2012, 359) among students. By dissociating oneself from bullying victims, peers not only protect themselves from contagious stigma processes and potential social death, but also exhibit a way of fitting in (Forsberg, Thorberg, and Samuelsson 2014; Salmivalli 2010; Schott 2014). Thus, an essential feature of what ‘makes trauma traumatic’ to victims, the ‘sense that no other person or group will intervene’ (Britzman 2000, 202), is partly, and paradoxically, exacerbated by other people’s desire for belonging.

The sense of abandonment is also intensified through the victims’ own strategies of trying to escape or hide from their tormentors. In Goffman’s (1963, 12) terminology, the participants actively avoided ‘mixed contacts,’ i.e. moments where they, as abject individuals, had to meet the most threatening normals. However, this type of ‘self-isolation’ strategy (Thornberg et al. 2013, 316) is very difficult to enact in a compulsory school, where everyone is forced to abide under the same roof (Duncan 2013). Making oneself small or closing up ‘like a clam’ are ways to solve this dilemma, but they also contribute to increased feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Although the presence of turning points saves the stories from appearing as thoroughly regressive narratives (Gergen and Gergen 1986), difficult knowledge also appears here. Fighting back is perhaps experienced as effective in restoring the power balance between the bully and the victim, but Black, Weinles, and Washington (2010) also show that victims who resort to this strategy are more likely to report polyvictimisation, chronic victimisation, and fear than victims who do not strike back. Moreover, our participants emphasise that they are not proud of what they did, which suggests that they view this as a strategy of last resort. It is also dispiriting to note that this aggression-oriented turning point, together with the strategy of adopting another persona, are the only ones that are portrayed as being planned and intentional. In contrast, the other turning points – finding a friend, gaining strength through a song, and excelling at a new
activity – are described as occurring by a fortunate stroke of luck. Thus, whether or not one escapes from bullying, or the effects of bullying, is perhaps not so much a result of agency, one’s own or others’, as it is of serendipity.

The narratives of the participants make it evident that experiences of being bullied not only bring about immediate pain, but also leave scars for life. However, we noted a difference between the participants who had found lasting friendships (Cary and Dani) and those who had not (Arlo and Bela). Finding a friend not only worked as protection against further bullying, it also relieved the detrimental, self-blaming effects of being victimised. The narratives thus support the thesis that a best friend can help prevent an escalating cycle of peer abuse, assist in coping, and improve one’s self-esteem (Hodges et al. 1999; Kendrick, Jutengren, and Stattin 2012; Sainio et al. 2010). Everyone needs to find his or her Lorenzo (Levi 1959), someone who stands by their side, who watches over them, who rehumanises them if necessary.

In sum, we believe that the narratives of the participants contain valuable difficult knowledge, which victims of bullying share with other types of victims. This point is important, because bullying victims need to be recognised in exactly the same way as other victimised individuals and groups. As Rigby (1995) points out, bullying has often been reduced to something that young people have to endure, and ‘as part and parcel of “going to school”... with little or no harm done.’ Although this ‘social tolerance of bullying’ (Ma, Stewin, and Mah 2001, 257) seems less pronounced today, the analysed narratives nevertheless point to the need to work with the problem on various levels: Schools need to deal with the widespread intolerance of difference (Ellwood and Davies 2010; Thornberg 2018; Walton 2011), create more supporting school climates (Thapa et al. 2013), and change the discursive environment, so that bullying episodes, through stock phrases, can no longer be constructed as nothing more than ‘individual deviance’ (Hepburn 1997). However, the testimonials of this study should also remind us of the important insight that it is not only the future, and the elimination of potential new victims, that count. The well-being of those who have already been subjected to bullying sometimes also hinges on them finally being allowed to speak up about their experiences, and to be heard by a well-intentioned audience. The ‘imperative to tell’ (Laub 1992a, 78) and to be able to encounter ‘imminently present’ listeners (Laub 1992b, 71) certainly go hand in hand. Indeed, even though you relive your experiences each time you speak about them, as 2018 Nobel Peace Prize winner Murad (2017) emphasises, the hope of justice, rehabilitation from self-blame, and of being the last abandoned victim, makes it worth it.

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