

# Overcoming bullying in higher education: A narrative analysis of students' coping strategies

Elisa Luukinen, Satu Uusiautti, Outi Kyrö-Ämmälä

## Abstract

*Bullying is a negative phenomenon that occurs everywhere among human beings, even in higher education institutions. People tend to react to bullying differently; therefore, overcoming a bullying situation can take many forms. In this research, we analyze higher education (HE) students' experiences of coping through their narrated stories. The research questions of the study were: (1) How do former victims describe overcoming bullying they experienced as an HE student? and (2) What similarities and differences appear in the outcomes of their narratives? The data was collected between late 2021 and early 2022 and consisted of 14 questionnaire answers and five interviews (15 women, 2 men, 2 did not want to disclose their gender, ages 20-52). All the participants were studying at a university and represented various fields and years of study. The analysis of narratives focused on the students' coping strategies, while the narrative analysis produced meta-narratives depicting the paths taken to overcome bullying. The research provides important viewpoints on how bullying occurs in HE institutions and how important it is to acknowledge the phenomenon and to engage the whole community in tackling it.*

*Keywords: bullying; coping; higher education; narrative research; students*

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## Introduction

Previous studies have shown that there is an abundance of methods to prevent and handle bullying (see e.g., Faucher et al., 2015), but the negative phenomenon still persistently exists even in places where adults work and study (Luukinen et al., 2022). Studies show that bullying remains a significant problem in HE: approximately 20–25% of students report having experienced bullying, and 10–15% have experienced online bullying (Lund & Ross, 2017). In addition, cultural

differences influence the forms and prevalence of bullying, which highlights the need for contextual understanding (Cowie & Myers, 2016; Pörhölä et al., 2020).

Being bullied not only stigmatizes a person (Luukinen, 2026) but also affects the whole community negatively (Edward, 2025; Vveinhardt et al., 2020). Furthermore, the subjectivity of the phenomenon makes the situation even more challenging (Luukinen et al., 2022); not every individual perceives the same actions as bullying. For example, experiences of being bullied during earlier educational stages and differences in communication styles can be contributing factors (Buglass et al., 2021; Pörhölä, 2016).

While the bullying of HE students has gained more attention in the last few decades (Tight, 2023), the only consensus reached so far is that the phenomenon needs to be studied more (Harrison et al., 2022b). More qualitative research is especially needed (Harrison et al., 2022a). Existing qualitative research examines problems, such as individual negative traits of bullies (Antoniadou & Kokkinos, 2025), behaviors perceived as bullying (Tay, 2023), and the negative effects of bullying (Wallace, 2024).

Obviously, it is important to shed light on the problems associated with the bullying of HE students, particularly since it is less known than bullying at earlier educational stages or at the workplace. Raising awareness about the fact that this harmful phenomenon also exists in the context of HE studies can lead to better prevention, more robust protocols, and more effective intervention. Still, if research concentrates exclusively on problems, the possible positive effects gained through negative experiences remain unexplored (Van Heugten, 2013).

Indeed, bullying can also be approached from the perspective of positive psychology, to emphasize individual strengths, hope, and meaning. Positive psychology strives to shift the focus from pathology to promoting well-being and flourishing (see Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Hence, this perspective supports the idea that growth after bullying can be built on optimism, perseverance, and social resources, instead of only on alleviating symptoms. Previous research has already recognized positive outcomes achieved despite bullying (see e.g., Andreou et al., 2021; Ratcliff et al., 2017; Van Heugten, 2013); we are interested in this possibility in the HE context.

Hence, the purpose of this study is to describe the bullying of HE students from the point of view of surviving it, to create ‘a retrospective explanation’ (Polkinghorne, 1995) for overcoming bullying during HE studies. This perspective is important as we are interested in the positive behaviors that may occur when HE students face challenging situations such as bullying. By using the positive psychological viewpoint, we aim to understand and highlight positively oriented strategies in life by analyzing typical paths of overcoming bullying as described by

HE students themselves (Carver & Scheier, 2003).

## **Theory**

Overcoming bullying can be viewed from a variety of viewpoints that depend on the time frame and perspective taken regarding the phenomenon. It can be seen as the strategy one selects either consciously or unconsciously to cope with bullying. Coping refers to various thoughts and behaviors used to navigate the internal and external challenges of situations perceived as stressful (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). These thoughts and behaviors can approach coping from different angles. For example, Carver et al. (1989) sought to operationalize coping by using 13 different scales that represent the different aspects of coping. These scales include actions such as attempts to directly interfere with the cause of stress, trying to control the feelings caused by the stressor, and distracting oneself into disassociating (Carver et al., 1989). While *coping* consists of short-term stress management strategies, *overcoming* refers to longer-term adaptive processes that take place by constructive coping (e.g., Shelestova, 2020). In sum, both coping and overcoming are important concepts while examining bullying and surviving it, and their relationship can be explained as overcoming happens through various coping strategies.

Another influential factor concerning overcoming bullying is receiving support from others, for example from the community or from the institution. Yet the support needed and the support offered do not always match, leaving a person to deal with the issue alone (Luukinen, 2026). Examining how to overcome bullying through the lens of positive psychology can help shed light on what good approaches already exist, how they could be better used, and how they could be built upon.

To find a proper framework for analyzing positive behavioral strategies in the case of bullying, we lean on the categorization by Carver & Scheier (2003) about how overcoming and succeeding can be seen as human strengths. According to their definition, strength is about inner changes, a process of psychological growth, and about the balance between letting go and holding on (Carver & Scheier, 2003).

First, overcoming bullying can be seen as a form of perseverance in a challenging situation (Carver & Scheier, 2003). From this viewpoint, the focus is on the resources that a person has in order to successfully deal with the situation, resilience being a frequently used resource (Hu et al., 2015). Resilience is about bouncing back after adversities and depicts a dynamic process of even becoming stronger (Rutter, 2012). Therefore, resilience is also a protective strength in

bullying situations (Hinduja & Patchin, 2017). Inner resources such as good self-esteem, hope, optimism (Yubero et al., 2023), and even spiritual fortitude (Lesmana et al., 2025) build resilience alongside outer resources such as reciprocal, loving relationships with other people and support from the study environment (Masten & Wright, 2010). Resilience and perseverance are neighboring concepts to some extent, and they both describe the person's ability to be hopeful and stay strong. Perseverance has also a goal-oriented approach to coping: people who are confident about eventually overcoming adversity are more persistent and continue to resist external pressures.

However, sometimes the best coping strategy can be giving up. Carver and Scheier (2003) distinguish reducing effort while remaining committed to a goal from abandoning commitment and disengaging from the goal. The difference between these two is that they lead to different outcomes. The first can lead to distress and helplessness. The latter can materialize as choosing alternate paths and strategies or finding totally new or refined goals, which can lead to potentially positive outcomes. Giving up commitment can also turn into not adopting any new goals, leading to aimlessness and emptiness. Choosing wisely between perseverance and giving up becomes the key to positive outcomes (Carver & Scheier, 2003).

The third viewpoint to overcoming bullying is one focusing on the person's development: what happens during and after the bullying situation as a long-term consequence. One concept that can be used to describe this kind of perspective is post-traumatic growth, in which bullying is defined as a traumatic event (Hodgins et al., 2024; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Post-traumatic growth (PTG) refers to a process of positive meaning making that happens after a negative experience severe enough to initiate the development, but not too overwhelming for the person to manage (Andreou et al., 2021).

For our analysis, the categorization of perseverance, giving up, and growth provides means to hear HE students' narratives and form a picture of how they narrate their overcoming of bullying. Our interest lies in what kinds of self-regulatory processes can be found from their narratives and how students describe their aims to maintain or create desired conditions in their lives in the event of bullying trauma through various coping strategies (Carver & Scheier, 2022). Thus, we are interested in their different paths to overcoming bullying, in which they have used various coping strategies.

## **Method**

This study was based on the idea of a person as ‘the expert of their own experiences’ (Adler & Schwaba, 2024), which are constructed and re-constructed over time (Stark et al., 2022). The research questions of the study were:

1. How do former victims describe overcoming bullying they experienced as an HE student?
2. What similarities and differences appear in the outcomes of their overcoming narratives?

To answer these questions, we used a narrative research approach that focuses on lived experiences and how the narratives of these experiences simultaneously depict and shape reality (Bruner, 1991). In the context of this study, we defined a narrative as a story about perceived bullying, told by the victim, including descriptions of the various phases of the events and different resulting reactions.

Two sets of data were collected for this study. The first data set was collected using an Internet-based questionnaire designed to encourage the participants to write about their experiences in their own words. As support, we provided prompts asking, for example, about the type of bullying, its duration, and what helped the participant cope. There was no explicit question about whether the bullying had any positive consequences, since we were interested in whether the participants would describe the consequences from such a perspective without being asked specifically about it. We sent a link to the questionnaire to all the student unions of Finnish HE institutions (N=37) in the fall semester of 2021. The questionnaire was available in Finnish, Swedish, and English, and received a total of 19 responses.

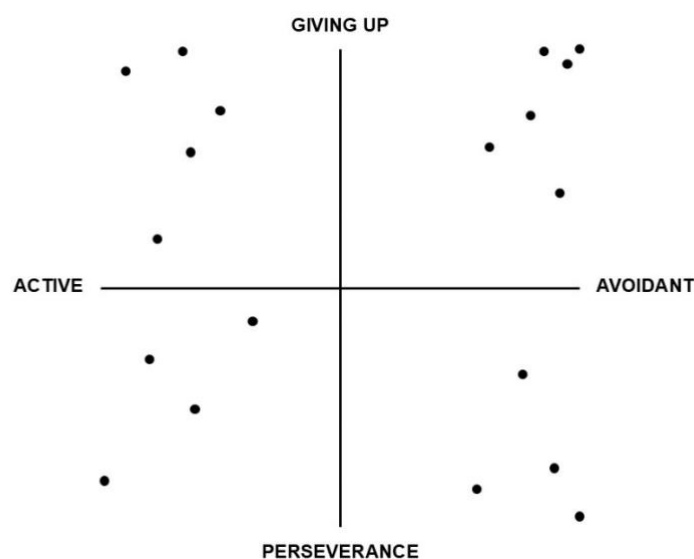
The second data set was collected via unstructured interviews by the first author over a five-month period from the end of 2021 to early 2022. If needed, the same prompts were used as in the questionnaire. The difference was that the interviewees were asked explicitly whether bullying had positive consequences unless they described them on their own initiative. The interviewees were recruited from the questionnaire participants: after they finished the questionnaire, they had the opportunity to leave their email on a separate form. From these interviewees, the answers to the questionnaire were combined with their interviews. Additionally, two interviewees contacted the first author directly via email.

In this phase, we excluded the answers of two participants since they had no personal experience of being a victim of bullying during their HE studies. Hence, the data used consisted of 14 questionnaire answers and five interviews (15 women,

two men, two did not want to disclose their gender, ages 20-52). All the participants were studying at a university and represented various fields and years of study. In the report we will refer to the participants using numbers (1-19) and use gender-neutral pronouns to further protect their anonymity.

The analysis consisted of two stages. First, we implemented an analysis of the narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995) and divided the participants by whether they described situation-oriented (N=4) or self-oriented coping (N=8), or a mixture of both (N=7). In addition, we examined how many participants described positive effects resulting from bullying.

Second, we integrated the participants' stories into a coherent narrative by applying a narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995). The purpose was to determine which elements were similar or different between the participants' narratives, also applying the findings from the analysis of narratives regarding coping with bullying. What differentiated the stories was whether the participants described themselves as an active contributor in the situation or in a more passive way. However, this alone did not encompass the depth of the experience. Another aspect that emerged was whether the participants persisted in the situation or somehow, either quickly or eventually, gave up. In fact, overcoming bullying presented itself as a negotiation between perseverance and giving up (Carver & Scheier, 2003). Hence, we formed typologies based on these two dimensions (Figure 1). All the narratives could be located in the typology, which is also visually presented by the dots illustrating each narrative. The narratives were marked 'Ac-G' (active, giving up, N=5), 'Ac-P' (active, perseverance, N=4), 'Av-G' (avoidant, giving up, N=6), and 'Av-P' (avoidant, perseverance, N=4).



**Figure 1.** *The typology of overcoming bullying among HE students*

## **Coping with bullying**

### *Situation-oriented coping*

The participants whose stories were placed in this category described coping with bullying they experienced by trying to change the situation in some way. Applying this strategy could mean, for example, reporting bullying to staff, exiting the context where the bullying took place, or just ignoring the negative actions but trying to influence the situation so that such behavior would not happen in the future. In the words of one student, 'I reported [the bullying] to the University staff' (Student 7). In contrast, another student said, 'I did not turn to anybody. After the course ended, I suggested to the teacher in my written feedback how it would be better to organize the division of groups in future courses' (Student 8).

These participants described how the experience of being bullied did not affect their self-esteem, or that they were able to go on because they could rely on resilience gained from past hardships. They did experience negative effects of the bullying, but their responses were directed at the context in which the bullying took place, not at themselves as individuals. They attributed coping to characteristics they already possessed, such as a strong personality.

### *Self-oriented coping*

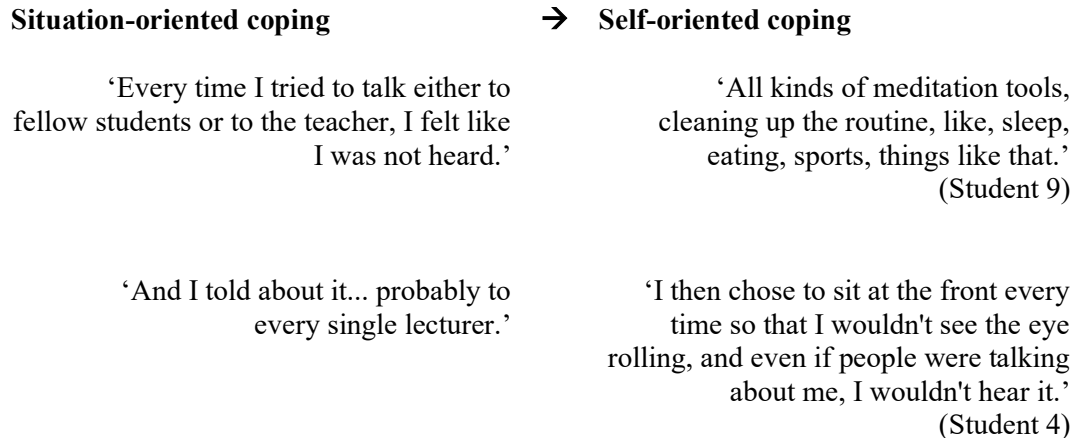
The participants whose stories were placed in this category described coping with bullying they experienced by turning inwards. They did not disclose whether they would have tried to get help from the staff or some other way to change the situation. Instead, they described that they coped by avoiding people who directed negative behavior toward them, or by searching for support from somewhere else. For example one student remembered receiving support from their family: 'I turned to my family during the bullying' (Student 16). Another student said: 'True friends who supported me helped me get through it' (Student 13).

These participants attributed the merit for coping not to their own attributes, but to social support. This social support was received from a network outside the HE community. They described the negative effects bullying had on themselves and their self-esteem.

### *Mixed coping*

Mixed coping, i.e. using both situation- and self-oriented coping, appeared in the participants' stories in two variations. The participants who presented the first variation described how they initially tried to use situation-oriented methods. For example, they tried to clear the situation directly with the person, reported bullying

to someone, or stand up for themselves. However, the situation-oriented approaches were not successful, which resulted in a shift to self-oriented approaches. These included methods such as turning to a social network elsewhere, shielding oneself so that one did not see or hear the negative behavior, or working on oneself. The quotations in the figure below illustrate these types of coping mechanisms.



**Figure 2.** *The shift from situation-oriented coping to self-oriented coping*

The second variation of mixed coping was that the participants described using situation-oriented coping by directly addressing bullying, while receiving social support from elsewhere. They used both approaches simultaneously, without a clear shift from one to another.

All the participants in this category described the negative effects that bullying had. However, in two cases these effects were directed inwards, whereas in four cases the effects were directed to the context of the bullying. The stories were also divided by whether the participants attributed their overcoming to their own characteristics or to social support.

Moreover, this category included all the descriptions of positive consequences of bullying. Only two participants, both interviewees, described such outcomes without prompting. They recounted for example that bullying taught them a lot about the HE system and the group dynamics in the student community and gave them the ability to help others in a similar situation. Through bullying they also learned what they wished for from their future workplace and how they should act should they encounter bullying there. Furthermore, they felt that because of bullying, they had made choices in their study path they would not have made otherwise, i.e. experiencing bullying was not only a negative experience but also fuel to help them move forward.

The other three interviewees were asked at the end of their interviews to consider the possible positive consequences. They reflected on, for example, how bullying clarified what values they have, gave them the opportunity to work on themselves, and taught them the importance of staying true to themselves even in situations where it is not easy.

### **Journeys to overcoming bullying**

#### *Journey 1: Lingered vigilance (Ac-G)*

This journey starts with the victims trying to persevere in the situation. They seek to discuss their experiences with different people who play a role in what is happening to them. They are left with the feeling of being unheard, which makes them confused. Since perseverance does not bring results, the victims actively choose to leave the context of the bullying. Afterwards they experience ambivalent emotions towards what they have been through. On the one hand, they think they should be over it, on the other hand it still affects them somehow. The prevailing feeling is a feeling of unfairness. How could something like this happen? The former victims remain wary and alert, actively scanning their present surroundings for similar negative behaviors they experienced when they were bullied.

#### *Journey 2: Becoming a defender through grit (Ac-P)*

The victims of bullying take action to make the bullying stop. This can mean, for example, trying to clear things with one or multiple people involved in the situation. They seek support through both official channels, such as from lecturers or other staff, and through unofficial channels, such as fellow students. When they do not find support within the context where the bullying takes place, they rely on their social networks elsewhere. They need to strengthen themselves so they have energy to defend themselves. Overcoming bullying is a merit to their tenacity. Afterwards they look back and wonder how they had the strength to remain persistent. A certain resentment lingers because of the bullying, but at this point former victims recognize that bitterness does not serve them, and they express a willingness to move forward and leave bullying to the past. They also try to help others so that nobody else would have to go through what they had to.

*Journey 3: Resignation without resistance (Av-G)*

The victims see a conflict between bullying and the values of HE. They perceive bullying as a complicated issue which is hard to fathom or clearly define, even while being the one who is experiencing it. The only way to overcome bullying is to remove oneself either mentally or physically from the context where it happens. The victims have no agency but are passive recipients of the negative behaviors directed at them. Trying to influence what is happening, for example by reporting bullying to someone, feels pointless. The outcome of this journey is unresolved, which makes the victims frustrated. They are left feeling detached from the HE community because of their bullying experiences.

*Journey 4: Persistency with the help of temporality (Av-P)*

The victims feel singled out because of prejudice. They do not somehow fit the context where the bullying happens, but it is necessary for their studies to be there. The victims put up with the situation, without actively trying to change it. They do not confront the people responsible for negative behavior or report bullying to anyone. Rather, they seek to change something in themselves so that they would not be as easy as a target anymore. This process can take a lot of energy and cause various negative feelings. The victims get solace from the fact that at some point they can exit the context of bullying organically. This thought helps them to stay persistent and eventually overcome these negative experiences.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study indicate that bullying in higher education is not merely an individual problem but a structural challenge. Responsibility for coping with and overcoming bullying often falls on the victim, making it largely dependent on personal resources. Students' coping strategies were categorized into three main types: situational, self-focused, and mixed approaches. A narrative analysis further revealed four distinct paths to overcoming bullying, underscoring the diversity of experiences and emphasizing that overcoming is not a linear process but shaped by individual resources, coping strategies, and environmental support (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

On a practical level, HE institutions should implement clear protocols, mentoring programs, and staff training to address bullying effectively (Keashly & Neuman, 2013). Based on the coping strategies identified, situational coping appeared most effective: participants using these strategies reported that negative effects remained confined to the bullying context. This finding aligns with Carver

et al. (1989), who found that some coping strategies are more adaptive than others. Pheko (2018) advocates for a pragmatic approach—such as reading research on bullying to find peer support, seeking achievements in other communities, and journaling to process experiences—as a way to facilitate coping. Similarly, Van Heugten (2013) recommends maintaining a detailed log of incidents, including dates, times, and witnesses.

However, situation-oriented coping was not always successful, often leading victims to adopt self-focused strategies. The students' coping strategies were further examined through a narrative analysis that provided a deeper understanding of their solutions in the coping situation. The typologies demonstrated that even when victims reported bullying to staff, the outcomes were frequently unsatisfactory, reflecting the complexity and unpredictability of reporting processes. Previous research highlights the importance of clear codes of conduct (Pheko, 2018), educating students and staff on these procedures (Harrison et al., 2020; Vaill et al., 2023), training bystanders to intervene effectively (Ng et al., 2020), and providing psychosocial support (Gómez-Galán et al., 2021). Tight (2023) notes that while numerous remedial measures exist, addressing bullying also requires examining how institutional cultures may inadvertently enable such behaviors, and it is necessary to reaffirm principles of intellectual freedom, fairness, and scholarly integrity.

Two typologies involving avoidance revealed experiences of detachment and non-conformity within the HE community. Given that a sense of belonging is a key dimension of student engagement (Korhonen et al., 2019), its absence can undermine motivation and academic success (Wilson et al., 2015). Social exclusion fosters feelings of indignity, misunderstanding, and insignificance (Søndergaard, 2012). Our findings highlight the buffering role of external social networks, as victims often lacked reliable support within their institutions. Esquivel et al. (2023) observed that bullied students may feel helpless, become socially withdrawn, and develop distorted self-perceptions, creating a self-reinforcing downward spiral (Wójcik et al., 2022). Strengthening community ties could mitigate bullying (Luukinen et al., 2022), but this approach requires collective responsibility across the institution in generating positive change (Procentese et al., 2019).

Interestingly, most participants did not spontaneously identify any positive outcomes of bullying; when prompted, some acknowledged benefits such as clarified values or resilience. This finding could indicate that the possibility of positive consequences might not have been noticed or considered unless specifically asked about. Furthermore, it suggests that positive reframing may not occur without explicit reflection, possibly due to sociocultural norms that place guilt and shame on victims (Harrison et al., 2022b; Stark et al., 2022; Wallace,

2024). Future research should explore this dimension further. Overall, the results corroborate prior evidence that social support and active coping strategies reduce harm (Berglund et al., 2025; Schäfer et al., 2005) and reinforce Salmivalli's (2010) and Einarsen et al.'s (2020) argument that structural change, not just individual action, is essential for prevention.

When examining the results, some limitations must be recognized. First, the data sets were relatively small. However, narrative research focuses on rich description instead of the size of the data (Salmela & Uusiautti, 2017); in the context of this study, the aim was a thorough analysis of the experience of overcoming bullying. Second, since the majority of the participants (N=15) identified themselves as women, it is noteworthy that previous studies have suggested that women are more likely to report emotional effects and seek social support (Faucher et al., 2014). Hence, it is possible that the gender dynamic of the data has influenced how coping and overcoming bullying is narrated in the findings. Moreover, all the participants were from a scientific university. Future research should pursue recruiting participants more broadly representing different genders and students from diverse HE institutions, as well as examining cultural differences, as the significance of community varies from culture to culture. Third, when using retrospective narratives, the malleability of memory must not be overlooked (Stark et al., 2022). Not only time but also how a person is asked about their experiences can influence memories of past events (Young-Jones et al., 2015). Although the questions used to collect the data of this study were open-ended, it is still possible that they shaped the narratives in some way.

Finally, the study's reliability was assessed using Heikkinen et al.'s (2012) validation principles—reflexivity, dialectics, historical continuity, evocativeness, workability, and ethics. For example, we sought to describe the research process as coherently and exhaustively as possible, to address the principles of reflexivity and historical continuity. To uphold the principle of dialectics, we maintained an ongoing discourse not only among the researchers of this study, but also with existing research. Furthermore, relating to dialectics, the results presented different aspects of the phenomenon studied; the categories demonstrated coping with bullying from various viewpoints, whereas the four typologies displayed the multiformity of the experiences related to overcoming bullying. When considering evocativeness, the metanarratives created with narrative analysis can be viewed as evocative descriptions. However, the final evaluation of how well the report evokes emotions, for example, is left to the reader. From the ethics point of view, securing the anonymity of the participants was paramount. Since the research group was large and the number of participants was small, this made the task significantly

easier. The anonymity of participants was ensured, for example, by excluding the participants' HE institution affiliations, majors, and gendered pronouns.

Considering the workability of the study, the results provide HE institutions with information on how strengthening community spirit and psychosocial support can prevent bullying and its consequences. Supporting students' mental health is also a strategic priority for HE institutions (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021); preventing bullying is an essential part of this work. However, individual coping strategies alone are not enough to prevent bullying. HE institutions can strengthen student well-being by creating mentoring programs in which new students receive support from more experienced peers. In addition, training staff to recognize and intervene in bullying is essential (Keashly & Neuman, 2013). Clear procedures and reporting channels reduce the helplessness experienced by victims (Einarsen et al., 2020).

## **Conclusion**

The long-term effects of bullying can be both negative and positive. The narrative approach to the students' experiences provided a way to emphasize not only their coping strategies but also their narratives from the start of bullying to the end phase of it. This method highlighted the different paths through the lenses of overcoming and letting go as a human strength (Carver & Scheier, 2003) and how experiences of bullying can possibly even shape identity and career choices (McAdams, 2006).

The contribution of the study is to reveal the many faces of survival and growth in challenging situations, and to show that self-regulation can have many forms in the narratives of students being bullied (see also Williams et al., 2024). We found that coping strategies are related to student resilience and social capital; student passivity increases the risk of becoming more alienated from the community, while social support and active coping strategies reduce the negative effects (Berglund et al., 2025; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Schäfer et al., 2005).

Interestingly, active coping emerged in the narratives not only as persistent and positive behaviors but also as forms of active avoidance. Usually, active coping is associated with a person's movement toward a solution than escaping a bullying situation (McAllister & Perrewé, 2018), but this analysis also showed the personal interpretation of the situation and possible solutions based on the students' perception. Indeed, Tight (2023) also calls for the recognition of perception in the attempt to overcome bullying—not only the perception of the victim and the bully, but also that of committees, departments, and the HE institution. To successfully

tackle bullying, instead of looking for culprits and pointing fingers, we suggest adopting ‘a culture of developing together’ (Uusiautti et al., 2025).

Many students felt that official support was insufficient, which accentuates the need to develop clear operating models and support systems (Einarsen et al., 2020; Salmivalli, 2010). Individual coping strategies are not enough if the norms of the HE community allow bullying. Cultural change and psychosocial support are also needed (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021). It seems that a respectful, open-minded, and friendly culture in HE might provide the best grounds for overcoming bullying—and even preventing it from happening. Just as positive psychology is about supporting well-being, instead of just fixing what is broken (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), the antidote to bullying is not just fighting evil but also building on what is good.

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