

## Bullying-related adaptive psychological functioning scale for Indonesian older primary school students: thematic analysis and initial items validation

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### Abstract

Primary school supports early detection of psychological resources and potential disorders in students, because of the massive incidence and influence for the next life of bullying or peer victimization. It is also important for school to provide early intervention. The aim of the study was to develop a concept of psychological resources to adjust adaptively to bullying experiences, hereinafter referred to as bullying-related adaptive psychological functioning, in upper primary school students in Indonesia. This study carried out a thematic analysis of group interviews toward 60 students and resulted in the concept of bullying-related adaptive psychological functioning which is compiled from the themes of self-awareness, self-management, affiliate action, and positive expectations about oneself in the environment. Despite its limitations, there are 26 items resulting from the development of a psychological self-report using a Likert model. Self-awareness and self-management seem to be more difficult resources for students than the other two aspects.

**Keywords:** Adaptive functioning, bullying, elementary school, screening, student

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## Introduction

Various experiences in primary school as the first institution to get formal education will in turn affect the next stages of life (Chapell et al., 2006). School should be able to provide a conducive environment for facilitation of sensitive period both in the academic (e.g. Friso-van den Bos, van der Ven, Kroesbergen, & van Luit, 2013) and non-academic fields (e.g. Pandey, 2018) where supports from peers, teachers, and educational system (Hong & Espelage, 2012; Ruzek et al., 2016) and a sense of industry during the school age according to Erikson's psychosocial development (Batra, 2013) are very important because of their association with the formation of identity and personality (Demetriou, Kazi, Spanoudis, & Makris, 2019; Syed & Seiffge-Krenke, 2013). Therefore, students are vulnerable because it depends on how the development and learning process are facilitated by the institution where they are educated, in addition to their own family support system. As social being, all aspects of child development are influenced by a child's social world (Lewis, 1992). Children are involved in social activities in and out of school. Here, their relationships and membership in particular groups become more important (Doherty & Hughes, 2013; Feldman, 2018). Around the world, however, their relationships and peer groups engagement in primary school years can be interfered by bullying experiences which are considered a form of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs; Finkelhor, Shattuck, Turner, & Hamby, 2015) or complex traumatic events (Kliethermes et al., 2014).

Bullying has a massive detrimental influence on various aspects of life. It is defined as multifaceted form of mistreatment characterized by the repeated exposure to physical and/or emotional aggression including teasing, name calling, mockery, threats, harassment, taunting, hazing, social exclusion or rumors (Srabstein & Leventhal, 2010). Bullying is included in victimization in addition to exposure to violent and

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property crime, child welfare violations, and warfare/civil disturbances (Kliethermes, Schacht, & Drewry, 2014). It poses some risks for aspects of socio-emotional life (Hussein, 2013), school disengagement (Baiden, LaBrenz, Okine, Thrasher, & Asiedua-Baiden, 2020), academic achievement (Al-Raqquad, Al-Bourini, Al Talahin, & Aranki, 2017), physical condition (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009) and externalizing behavior that can also be a risk to health (Hertz, Jones, Barrios, David-Ferdon, & Holt, 2015). Depression, psychosis, suicide ideation and attempts can even be experienced as risks (Bang & Park, 2017; Kodish et al., 2016), and affect the later period of life (Sigurdson, Wallander, & Sund, 2014; Wolke, Copeland, Angold, & Costello, 2013).

In 2020, the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (*Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia/ KPAI*) recorded 2,473 reports of bullying both in education and social media (for 9 years up to 2019) and the trend continues to increase. Another study stated that bullying has the greatest prevalence of the ACEs among emerging adults in Indonesia (Salma, Kaloeti, Rahmandani, Sakti, & Suparno, 2019). In addition, Borualogo and Gumilang (2019) reported that the incidence of bullying in primary schools in West Java as the most populous province in Indonesia was at least 23% of the 22,616 students experienced one time of each type and at least 12% experienced repeated incidences of more than 3 times each type. The government responded by establishing the Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture concerning the Prevention and Overcoming of Violence in the Education Unit Environment. However, there needs to be an extraordinary effort with the massive exposure to violence (KPAI, 2020).

Despite the policy, many school-aged students may be unidentified and untreated when possessing symptoms of mental health disorders which persist into adulthood and therefore require more intensive treatments (Heflinger, Shaw, Higa-McMillan, Lunn, & Brannan, 2015; Torio, Encinosa, Berdahl, McCormick, & Simpson, 2015). This generally happens because screening relies on office discipline referrals (ODRs) as a primary source for the identification of students needing support with a focus on identifying behavioral and emotional risks, instead of identifying psychological functioning. In addition, there is a dependence on universal mental health screening that involves a complex process of engagement with school stakeholders (e.g. Sicheloff, Bradley, & Flory, 2017; Verlenden, Naser, & Brown, 2020), or the screening is not carried out due to a lack of access to and funding for mental health screeners (Wood & McDaniel, 2020).

Furthermore, early awareness of psychological functioning rather than mental health problems among children and adolescents is important since the awareness is an individual resource and can be a protective factor. Arslan and Allen (2020) concluded that students who functioned well have good mental health and consequently have greater connection to their school, show better academic functioning, show more prosocial behaviors, and report less bullying and victimization than the vulnerable, troubled, and symptomatic-but-content groups.

For those reasons, an accurate yet practical and affordable tool is important for early detection of psychological functioning, whether adaptive or maladaptive, in this case regarding bullying as an important adversity experience particularly related to impaired relationships which have a massive incidence and influence among students. An understanding of the function is expected to be qualitatively based on certain criteria and quantitatively based on measurements so that it becomes a consideration for prevention at the secondary to primary levels, at the individual to classical levels, through policies at the school level.

An understanding of the above matter can be obtained from the perspective of students in primary school with an age range of 7 to 11 years. Children at these ages start to develop their logical thinking to solve problems, assess their own abilities, compare themselves with others, and develop self-esteem (Doherty & Hughes, 2013). Thus the difficulties as may be encountered in data collection on young children can be anticipated and the data would have higher reliability (Lewis, 1992).

The purpose of this study was to develop a concept and measuring instrument of bullying-related adaptive psychological functioning for Indonesian upper primary school students. There would be two stages of study with upper primary school students as participants, i.e. the development of the variable concept through focus group interviews followed by qualitative data processing and the development of the measuring tools followed by quantitative data processing.

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## Method

### Stage 1 Focus Group Interviews and Thematic Analysis

Stage 1 of this research aimed to build the concept of bullying-related adaptive psychological functioning using a qualitative method. Focus group interviews were conducted to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest (Krueger and Casey, 2009) to be carried out on children (Adler, Salantera, & Zumstein-Shaha, 2019; Heary & Hennessy, 2006). Questions were directed to gain understanding on students' experiences at school, particularly their relationships and experiences related to bullying.

A total of 60 students were involved as participants in the first stage of study in 2019. They represented upper level primary school students, i.e. students from grade 4 to 6, and were purposively sampled from three state primary schools in one sub-district, Semarang, Indonesia with similar characteristics of geography and levels of accreditation. Some students were deliberately selected by the teachers considering the conditions of the participants in the school, sex balance, peer relation experiences, and their speaking and language skills.

This stage began with the application for permission letters to the schools mentioned above, the preparation a focus group interview guide and the provision of research assistants. Personal communication was then made with the class teachers to arrange group interviews separately for each class.

Data obtained from focus group interviews were qualitatively analyzed using thematic analysis (Adler et al., 2019). The phases included familiarizing ourselves with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and labelling themes, and writing the report (Clarke, Braun, & Hayfield, 2015).

### Stage 2 Tool Development

Stage 2 of this research aimed to develop a measuring instrument of bullying-related adaptive psychological functioning, specifically based on and for Indonesian upper level primary school students. The Likert scale initially consisted of 48 items which sum up 12 items from each theme (aspect) generated from this first stage of study. The scale instructions were as follows: "Below are some questions for primary school students like you, about what you think, feel, and do regarding school. Read each sentence carefully, then put a cross mark (X) on the one of the answer choices given that suits you best. All answers are correct." There were four options that represented the respondent, namely "very untrue", "untrue", "true", and "very true". Data scoring was conducted by giving a value of 0 for "Very Untrue" response to 3 for "Very True" response consecutively, and conversely for reversed scores.

A total of 44 students in grades 4 to 6 taken using saturated sampling from one of the state primary schools above were involved as participants in the second stage of study in 2020. The actual data were reduced to 38 because six students did not complete the scale.

The Covid-19 pandemic as well as the government and school policies for online school administration made data collection limited to one school that had previously been involved. Teachers as school's intermediaries attended trainings by researchers on instructions for completing scale, visited each student assisted by student's parent/guardian, carried out and monitored the data collection to ensure the accuracy of the data.

The formal validation processes (McCoach, Gable, & Madura, 2013) were conducted through an expert judgment by academics or researchers and a formal readability analysis by primary school teachers and representatives of upper level primary school students assisted by their parents. The instrument was tried out after being improved based on the first validation process. Considering the limited number of the data, factor analysis as recommended in the development of the measuring instrument was not feasible. Initial data analysis was then carried out by considering the item total correlations for initial items validation and items reduction considerations, and calculating the Cronbach's alpha coefficient to examine the internal reliability.

As an ethical consideration, this research applied ethical procedures both in stage 1 and 2 that conformed to the declaration of Helsinki by applying informed consent of participants and their parents as guardians after providing research explanations.

## Results and Discussion

Thematic analysis resulted in four themes and each of them consisted of four sub-themes as listed in Table 1. The themes included self-awareness, self-management, affiliate action, and positive expectations about oneself in the environment. These themes were then extracted as bullying-related adaptive psychological functioning, especially for upper-level primary school students in grade 4 to 6. It is defined as the ability of students to perform their functions that conform to the need to adjust properly and healthily to situations and stressors, particularly in schools, through the improvement of self-awareness, self-management, relationship-building, and feelings of security in the school environment.

Table 1 <Four Themes and Indicators of Bullying-Related Adaptive Psychological Functioning for Older Primary School Students>

No	Theme	Sub-Theme
1	Self-awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Being able to recognize and distinguish whether an action is self-defeating</li> <li>– Being able to recognize and distinguish whether an action is detrimental to others</li> <li>– Feeling negative emotions for their unfavorable actions</li> <li>– Identifying activities that stimulate passion or interest</li> </ul>
2	Self-management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Showing courage to take actions that terminate negative actions of others adaptively</li> <li>– Being able to express negative emotions</li> <li>– Experiencing an escalation of interest in self-development and positive activities</li> <li>– Feeling positive emotions from positive activities that do not cause harm to others</li> </ul>
3	Affiliate action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Having the intention to fix relationships with others</li> <li>– Showing positive humor that facilitates good relationships</li> <li>– Being able to refrain from harming others</li> <li>– Being empathetic due to uncomfortable situations experienced by others</li> </ul>
4	Positive expectations about oneself in the environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Feeling calm about the situation in the school environment</li> <li>– Feeling free from negative emotions around the school environment</li> <li>– Feeling facilitated when doing activities/experiencing difficulties at school</li> <li>– Feeling appreciated by the social environment at school</li> </ul>

The initial development of the measuring instrument was then tested on limited respondents. The internal reliability coefficient of Cronbach's Alpha was .862 with 26 items and the item inter-correlations ( $r_{ix}$ ) ranged from .276 to .590 with a mean of .415. There were omission of 22 items with the cut-off of item inter-correlations of .275. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient is considered satisfactory because the level of reliability on affective measures that is reasonable for the purpose of research estimates at or above .700 – a much more acceptable level of reliability for affective instruments compared to cognitive instruments especially for research purposes (McCoach et al., 2013). A 26-item scale was obtained–5 represent self-awareness, 4 represent self-management, 8 represent affiliate action, and 9 represent positive expectations about oneself in the environment.

Even though it is in the specific context of bullying, self-awareness resulted in this study is in line with the definition of self-awareness according to Hart and Fegley (1997) that the facet of self-identification with and engagement in the stimulus related the self, needed to follow the facet of self-focus which referred to the direction of a person's attention to a group of stimuli corresponding to that person. Based on the sub-themes, the stimulus (or a group of stimuli) relates to the impaired–but meaningful–peer relationship built by the students, as well as the identifying their own interests. Once they can self-focus and relate to that stimulus, self-awareness might increase depending on how they self-identify with the stimulus and engage in it. Understanding of students' own interests seems in line with the development of self-concept, that they categorize and describe themselves with some references including competencies and interests (Gross, 2020). Meanwhile, self-awareness related to bullying seems to be in line with moral education. Moral education that will create better understanding of good and bad behavior can be given to lower level primary school students (e.g. Saparahayuningsih & Badeni, 2017). The transfer process and understanding will be more complex as students move to higher level of primary school, entering an age with more adequate cognitive capacity (Doherty & Hughes, 2013). Stallworth-Clark (2017) stated that such education (e.g. service-learning programs to the public good) could increase the awareness in students, namely self-

awareness and awareness of others, social issues, and even become agents of change. However, the assessment resulted in the omission of items indicates that those items are not easily understood by most students (Boateng, Neilands, Frongillo, Melgar-Quinonez, & Young, 2018). This is understandable since the development of self-awareness in children and adolescents will increase with age (Hart & Fegley, 1997), which indicates immaturity in the development of self-awareness at a relatively young age and unbalanced development of self-focus and self-identification. In addition, self-awareness is also related to meta-cognitive ability, the capacity to reflect on one's own thoughts and behaviors, that is still limited in late childhood, increasing significantly with age during adolescence, and reaching the highest in late adolescence and plateaued when going into adulthood (Weil et al., 2013).

Table 2 &lt;Descriptive Statistics of Each Item and Item-Total Statistics&gt;

No	Item	M	SD	$r_{ix}$
Aspect 1: Self-awareness				
2.	<i>Temanku bisa merasa sedih jika aku berbuat curang.</i>	2.16	.638	.562
3.	<i>Aku merasa bersalah jika berbuat buruk pada teman.</i>	2.13	.777	.522
17.	<i>Aku bisa dihukum jika berperilaku buruk.</i>	2.03	.753	.289
25.	<i>Guru tidak menegurku ketika aku berbuat usil pada temanku.<sup>a</sup></i>	2.24	.634	.532
26.	<i>Senakal apapun aku, temanku tetap baik-baik saja.<sup>a</sup></i>	1.55	.795	.303
Aspect 2: Self-management				
6.	<i>Bila di sekolah, aku akan diam saja saat merasa takut.<sup>a</sup></i>	1.92	.673	.276
20.	<i>Aku malas mengikuti teman-teman berkumpul dan bermain.<sup>a</sup></i>	1.97	.753	.412
31.	<i>Jika guru memulai pelajaran, aku bisa tenang mendengarkan.</i>	2.32	.574	.319
32.	<i>Bermain di sekolah membuatku bersemangat.</i>	2.24	.431	.369
Aspect 3: Affiliate action				
9.	<i>Aku senang berkawan.</i>	2.37	.489	.435
11.	<i>Aku membalas teman yang menyakiti hatiku.<sup>a</sup></i>	2.08	.818	.426
21.	<i>Aku menyapa temanku terlebih dahulu.</i>	2.11	.606	.569
33.	<i>Aku bermain sendiri saat istirahat sekolah.<sup>a</sup></i>	2.00	.569	.399
34.	<i>Aku menggoda teman hingga kesal.<sup>a</sup></i>	2.26	.644	.590
35.	<i>Aku bisa berkata baik pada teman-teman walau sedang merasa marah.</i>	1.66	.582	.395
45.	<i>Teman-teman cemberut saat melihat candaanku.<sup>a</sup></i>	1.71	.694	.372
46.	<i>Aku senang sekali menggoda temanku.<sup>a</sup></i>	2.08	.749	.460
Aspect 4: Positive expectations about oneself in the environment				
13.	<i>Di sekolah, aku merasa baik-baik saja.</i>	2.13	.529	.376
15.	<i>Saat bel istirahat berbunyi, teman-teman lupa mengajakku bermain.<sup>a</sup></i>	2.03	.592	.530
24.	<i>Saat aku mendapat masalah, guru membantuku.</i>	2.13	.741	.297
37.	<i>Aku ingin cepat pulang jika ada di sekolah.<sup>a</sup></i>	1.92	.632	.508
38.	<i>Aku takut tidak ada teman yang mau berkawan denganku.<sup>a</sup></i>	1.79	.664	.344
39.	<i>Teman-teman mengajakku berdiskusi saat belajar bersama.</i>	2.32	.574	.355
40.	<i>Orang-orang di sekolah peduli padaku.</i>	2.16	.594	.331
47.	<i>Aku khawatir kalau sekelas dengan temanku yang nakal/usil padaku.<sup>a</sup></i>	1.61	.755	.326
48.	<i>Teman-teman di sekolah berkata buruk tentangku.<sup>a</sup></i>	2.05	.613	.489

Note. The term "aspect" represents the theme, while the term "indicator" represents the sub-theme.

<sup>a</sup>The item has reversed score; N=38; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation;  $r_{ix}$ =Corrected Item-Total Correlation.

Self-management refers to bullying-related active coping and emotion-related self-regulation. Thematic analysis generates sub-themes of bullying-related active coping, which is in line with the research of Yin et al. (2017) that explained the promotive effect of active coping in overcoming bullying victimization, including problem-solving coping and seeking social support coping. However, the tryout has eliminated all items for this indicator. This may be confused by differences in coping tendencies based on sex (Yin et al., 2017), or positions as victim, perpetrator, or bystander (Pozzoli & Gini, 2012). Thematic analysis also results in emotion-related self-regulation sub-themes on the self-management aspect, which is in line with Daniel, Abdel-Baki, and Hall (2020) who stated that there were good evidences regarding the benefits of emotion regulation in a variety of contexts, functioning as both promotive and protective factors for psychological and behavioral outcomes in children and adolescents, reducing problems in internalizing and externalizing, and improving mental health. This emotion regulation implies positive adjustment (Eisenberg & Sulik, 2011). The results of the tryout passes a few items of emotion-related self-regulation indicators, due to students' difficulty in understanding this construct (Boateng et al., 2018) since they have little capacity for this ability (Eisenberg & Sulik, 2011).

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Affiliate action is also represented by more items passing the tryout, presumably it is familiar for children and early adolescent since they use peer relationships as references for learning a range of critical social emotional skills. The importance of emotional development is emphasized, which is significant to be derived from social supports (Martínez, Aricak, Graves, Peters-Myszak, & Nellis, 2011). Particularly, they spend more time with their peers, increasingly value peer opinions and expectations, and develop more complex peer relationships than younger children (Brown & Larson, 2009), thus helping the identity development (Jones et al., 2013). Since it is needed and there is variability in their capacity to successfully engage, the detrimental ones may be maintained (Choukas-Bradley & Prinstein, 2014).

Positive expectations about oneself in the environment emerge as an important theme for bullying experiences, having the highest item passing rate. Kumara (2017) stated that the experience at school could cause emotional and behavioral problems. However, the school environment is desired to be conducive and active in helping students overcome the impact of bullying experiences (Aulia, 2016). Students' perceptions of school environment have been proven to moderate individual characteristics and bullying. Gendron, Williams, and Guerra (2011) explained that when perceptions of school climate were poor, high self-esteem predicted higher levels of bullying incidence. In contrast, when perceptions of school climate were supportive, high self-esteem predicted lower levels of bullying incidence.

Finally, the instrument is important to observe a student's responses to difficulties in functioning adaptively which might lead to mental health problems and the student's ability to adapt to the environment, especially suppressing, and to overcome this situation. This instrument can also describe a child's level of security to the environment so as to support adjustment, which implies the need for the development of school-based programs. This study has initiated the development of the concept and measuring instrument of the psychological construct being studied, and the scale can be implemented in populations with similar characteristics.

However, the development of the measuring instrument was being tried out on a very limited sample, thus limiting more complex data analysis. Future study needs to increase the number of samples –when the situation is conducive– and use more advanced validity tests. For the use of factor analysis, it is recommended that 300 cases would be a suitable sample size (Tabachnick & Fidell 1996) or five to ten subjects per variable to ensure stable test parameters (Kass & Tinsley 1979). A large sample size is expected to save items because it can ensure the factor stability, increase the credibility of the results and thus obtain a more exact outcome in the psychometric analysis (Morgado, Meireles, Neves, Amaral, & Ferreira, 2017). In addition, thorough attention to sex by considering differences in coping tendencies (Yin et al., 2017), or relative positions as victim, perpetrator, or bystander (Pozzoli & Gini, 2012) can also be taken into account in further research.

## Conclusion

The instrument developed in this study is a tool to identify students' bullying-related adaptive psychological functioning, especially for Indonesian older students in the primary school environment. A total of 16 subthemes were obtained through thematic analysis that formed four themes, namely self-awareness, self-management, affiliate action, and positive expectations about oneself in the environment. The self-report scale using the Likert model which consists of 26 items was generated based on a limited sample as an impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic. Self-awareness and self-management seemed to be difficult resources for students than the other two aspects. The rationale for these results is that self-awareness were still immature and would increase significantly with age, while self-management might be confused by differences in coping based on sex and relative positions as victim, perpetrator, or bystander. Affiliate action was presumably familiar since children use peer relationships as references for learning, while positive expectations about oneself in the environment could become an indicator of self-esteem and a predictor of bullying incidence. The implication of this study is an understanding of psychological functioning related to bullying qualitatively and quantitatively through an accurate yet practical and affordable screening for prevention at the secondary to primary levels, at the individual to classical levels, particularly through policies at the school level.

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