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Empowering Bystanders

A psychological and institutional model for intervention in academic bullying

Borthakur D, Crockett L, Mihalchan J, Swann J and Saikia MJ (2026).

Front. Psychol. 16:1650438. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1650438

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Dr. Katharina Grauel, NeuroCure – Cluster of Excellence

Project Management | Promotion of Early Career Researchers

Academic Bullying – A Systemic Crisis

Sustained, hostile behavior [from one's academic superior] with the aim to undermine an individual's dignity or career

- Ridiculing, threatening, blaming, public humiliation...
- Invasion of privacy
- Interfering with matriculation and career progress by, e.g., removing funding, writing falsely negative recommendation letters, threatening to cancel visa or fellowships...
- Isolation (ostracism), gaslighting...
- Authorship theft, IP violations....

Academic Bullying – A Systemic Crisis

84%

Experienced bullying

Graduate students & postdocs globally

59%

Witnessed it firsthand

Among the same global survey population

Who are the bullies?

- Primarily those in positions of authority (senior faculty/supervisors) – 56.2% PIs¹
- 63-67% male, but proportionally not more likely than females ¹
- For faculty, also colleagues (63.4%)²
- Can also occur "bottom-up" (subordinates targeting leaders)

¹Moss & Mahmoudi, 2021; ²Keashly & Neuman 2010

Academic Bullying – A Systemic Crisis

Why is bullying so prevalent in academia?

- **Hierarchies:** Strong power differences between senior and junior staff.
- **Dependency:** Students and postdocs dependent on supervisors (funding, mentorship, references, opportunities)
- **"Publish-or-Perish" Culture:** Pressure to publish justifies harsh behavior.
- **Laissez-faire Leadership:** Leaders avoid conflict and do not step in.
- **Territorial Behavior:** People guard resources and stop others from advancing.
- **Limited External Oversight:** Little outside monitoring of supervisor behavior.
- **Institutions lack clear, enforceable policies** to address bullying behavior

Academic Bullying – A Systemic Crisis

What are the consequences?

- Mental Health (anxiety, depression, emotional trauma, PTSD...)
 - Moral distress, cognitive dissonance
 - Reduced engagement, job satisfaction
 - Silence and disengagement
-
- Toxic group dynamics
 - Reduced productivity & performance
 - Loss of talent

>80%

Bystander exposure

Employees who have witnessed
workplace bullying (Pouwelse et al., 2021)

Who Are the Bystanders?

Largest group exposed to bullying.

Outcome trajectories



Silent Bystander

Fear of retaliation; betrayal blindness; learned helplessness from past inaction.



Complicit Participant

Joins the bully to protect status or fit in with the dominant group.



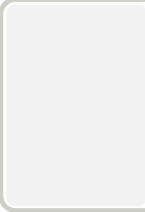
Witness with Separate Agenda

Leverages bullying for personal or factional advantage; may amplify mobbing.



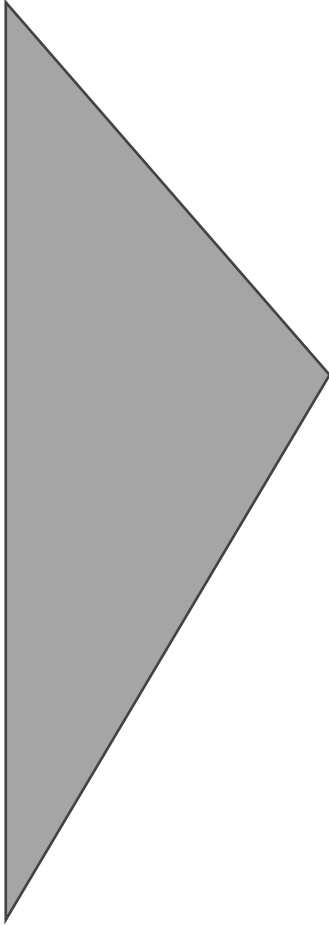
Hesitant Witness

Wants to help but fears retaliation, career damage, or social isolation.

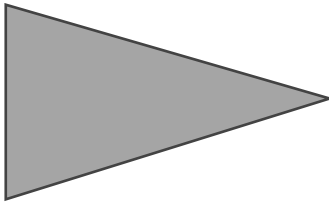


Active Defender

Consciously recognizes bullying and acts — driven by moral courage and justice.



Potential psychological harm (e.g. distress, exhaustion, moral disengagement...)



Preserved well-being through constructive action

Classic Bystander Intervention Model - Latané & Darley, 1970

Five-step cognitive process

1. Notice the event
2. Interpret as an emergency
3. Assume personal responsibility
4. Decide how to help
5. Implement helping behavior

The Six-Stage Model of Bystander Response to Academic Bullying

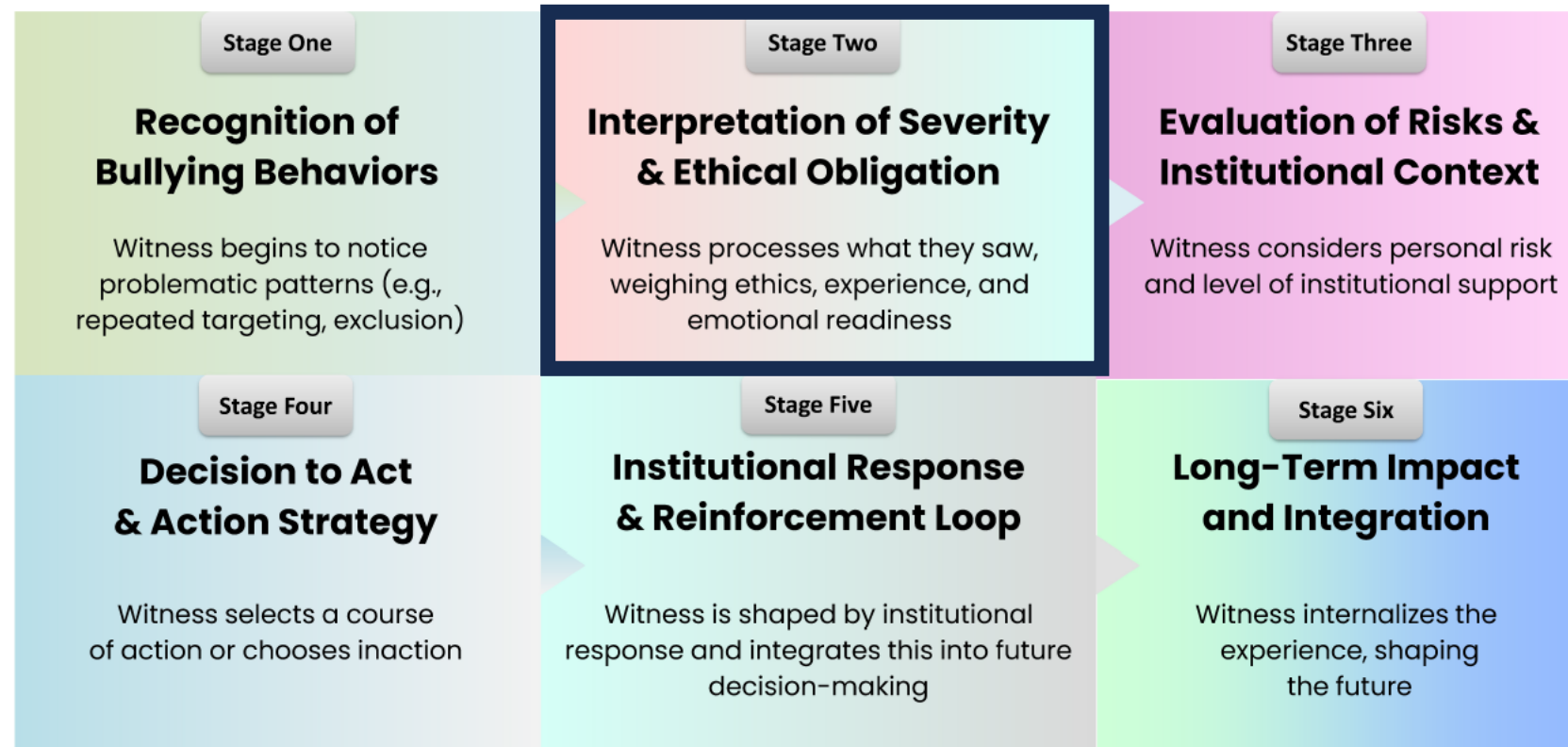


The Six-Stage Model of Bystander Response to Academic Bullying



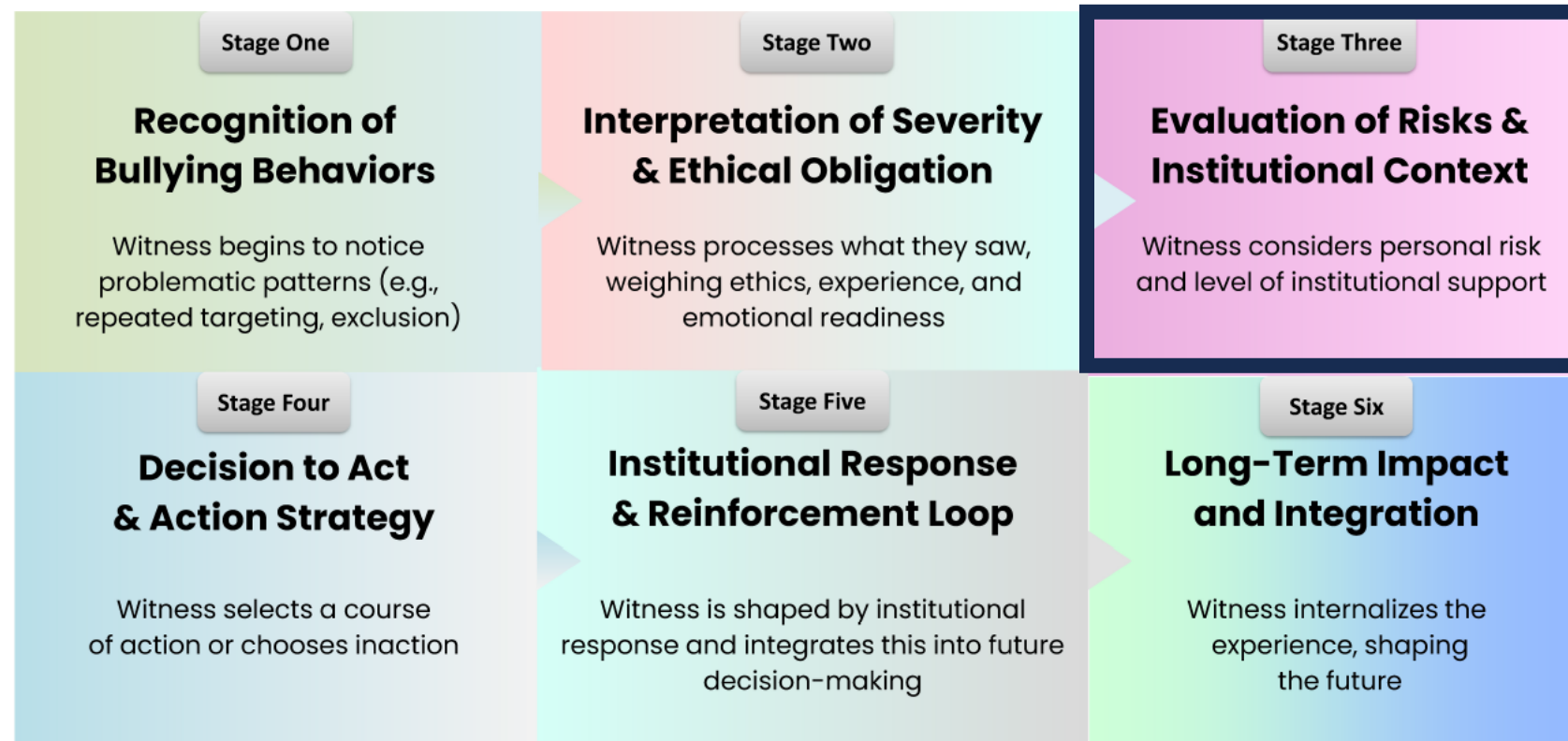
- Isolated moderate incidents hard to label as bullying
→ recognize **pattern**
- Bullying often leaves „no trace“
- Visible distress of target
- Training
- Develop **shared understanding** of bullying

The Six-Stage Model of Bystander Response to Academic Bullying



- Feeling of **moral responsibility** to intervene
- **Clear institutional definitions** reduce ambiguity
- **Empathy** strengthens ethical obligations
- **Moral disengagement** – rationalize bully's actions
- **Individualistic, competitive cultures** suppress intervention
- **Pluralistic ignorance**: misinterpretation of collective inaction as silent approval
- Deference of authority & group conformity
- Status quo bias
- **Single bystander can break the cycle!**

The Six-Stage Model of Bystander Response to Academic Bullying



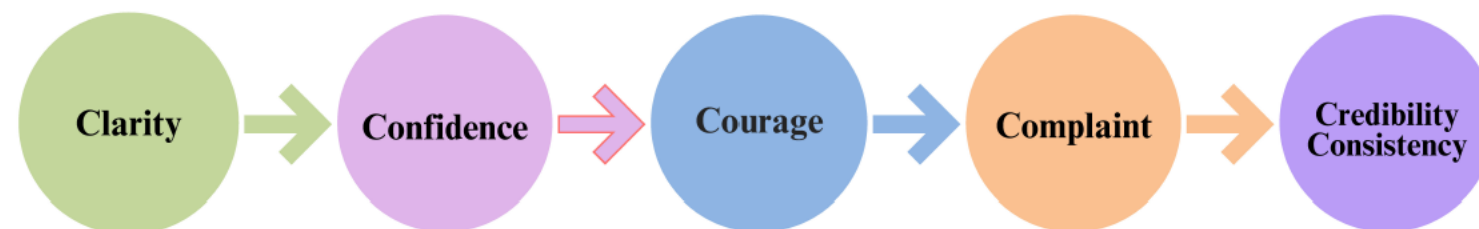
- Cost-benefit analysis: ethical obligation vs. personal risk
- Fear of **personal repercussions** (retaliation, job loss, funding)
- **Power dynamics and status** influence risk assessment
- Junior staff face greater risk than tenured faculty
- **Institutional history and climate** shape expectations
- Past institutional betrayal reduces future reporting
- **Knowing available pathways**

The Six-Stage Model of Bystander Response to Academic Bullying



- Choose intervention strategy based on safety and feasibility
- **Direct intervention:** Addressing bully during/after incident
- **Indirect intervention:** Reporting to authority (chair, ombudsperson, diversity officer,...)
- Anonymous reporting offers lower personal risk
- Safety in numbers: multiple witnesses strengthen credibility
- **Support the target:** Private check-ins, validation, resources
- **Document and gather evidence:** Dates, details, patterns (Crockett's 5Cs framework, unpublished)

Documentation as a Mental Health Strategy



The Six-Stage Model of Bystander Response to Academic Bullying



- **Positive response:** Trauma-informed investigation, protection, accountability
- Validates bystander's choice to intervene
- **Negative response:** Retaliation, cover-ups, inaction
- Creates **institutional betrayal**
- Shapes future bystander behavior (reinforcement loop)

The Six-Stage Model of Bystander Response to Academic Bullying



- Effective interventions break the cycle of bullying
- Ineffective responses perpetuate silence and inaction
- Institutional responses shape **future recognition and reporting**
- Bystanders learn from outcomes (positive or negative)
- Collective responsibility replaces individual burden
- Transitions from passive bystanding to active safeguarding

Summary & Conclusion

- Academic bullying is a systemic issue that requires institutional responses
- Bystanders are the largest group exposed to bullying
- Fear of retaliation is the primary barrier preventing bystanders from acting.
- Propose a six-stage model of bystander responses
- Potential interventions:
 - Training to recognize patterns and understand impact (Stage 1)
 - Clear institutional definitions of bullying (Stage 2)
 - Clear reporting processes, no-tolerance policies, public support of active bystanders (Stage 3-4)
 - Training/rehearsal of intervention strategies, incl. direct and indirect interventions, and documentation as a tool for mental health management (Stage 4)
 - Positive institutional action (investigation, appropriate consequences) (stage 5, 6)
- Shared responsibility must replace the burden placed on individual victims or lone heroes.
- The ultimate goal is a transition from passive bystanding to active, collective safeguarding.