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The Narrative Transformation of Eyewitnesses: The Effectiveness of Group Counseling Using Assertive Training Techniques in Reducing Bystander Bullying Behavior

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Abstract

Bullying in schools often persists due to the role of passive bystanders. This study aims to describe students' experiences in participating in group counseling with assertive training techniques to reduce bystander bullying behavior at SMPN 1 Lemahabang. The research employed a qualitative approach with a narrative study method. Data were collected from three participants, initially identified as passive bystanders, through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. Data analysis was conducted using the restorying model. The findings revealed that before the intervention, students experienced a diffusion of responsibility and fear of retaliation, which shaped their "problem-saturated stories" of helplessness. During the counseling sessions, students internalized assertive skills through modeling and role-playing, specifically adopting STAC strategies Stealing the show, Turning it over, Accompanying others, and Coaching compassion. Post-intervention, a significant transformation of identity occurred as participants reconstructed their narratives from passive observers into active "upstanders". They demonstrated increased social courage to confront perpetrators, support victims, and report incidents to teachers. In conclusion, group counseling using assertive training is an effective alternative for school counselors to reduce bystander bullying and foster a safer, more supportive school environment.

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of bullying in Indonesia has reached a critical level. Data from the Indonesian Education Monitoring Network (JPPI) indicates a surge in cases—rising from 285 in 2023 to 573 in 2024—with the figure climbing further to 601 cases recorded by the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) by November 2025. This dynamic involves not only perpetrators and victims but also eyewitnesses or bystanders, who frequently succumb to the "bystander effect" or a diffusion of responsibility. Bullying behavior often inflicts severe harm on victims, particularly regarding psychological well-being. The presence of passive witnesses provides social validation for perpetrators to continue their actions. Preliminary observations at SMPN 1 Lemahabang revealed that students tended to remain silent when witnessing bullying due to a lack of assertive communication skills. Consequently, an intervention involving group counseling—specifically utilizing assertive training techniques—is required to equip students with the ability to firmly assert their rights and express refusal without infringing upon the rights of others. This study employs narrative inquiry to capture the students' journey of identity transformation through a process of "restorying." This research offers several novel elements that distinguish it from previous studies. First, rather than merely measuring the effectiveness of assertive training through changes in assertive behavior scores, it deeply explores the psychological transformation experienced by students using a narrative study approach. Thus, the research focus shifts from the question of "whether the intervention is effective" to "how and why behavioral change occurs." Second, this study integrates Narrative Inquiry, Assertive Training, and the STAC model (Stealing the Show, Turning it Over, Accompanying Others, Coaching Compassion) into a single group counseling intervention model. Such integration is relatively rare in Indonesian guidance and counseling research, which predominantly relies on quantitative experimental designs.

Third, this study introduces the concept of identity transformation—shifting from a passive bystander to an upstander—as a key indicator of the success of group counseling services. This shift is evident not only in increased assertive behavior but also in changes to how students perceive themselves, their social relationships, and their moral responsibilities toward their peers.

Fourth, the study provides evidence that the success of group counseling is influenced by the interplay of social learning processes, group dynamics, the reconstruction of life narratives, and the internalization of school moral values. These findings enrich the literature on behavioral

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change mechanisms in guidance and counseling services, which have historically been explained primarily through a behavioral perspective.

Fifth, from a methodological standpoint, this study demonstrates that a narrative study approach can serve as an alternative research design in guidance and counseling, allowing for a deeper understanding of students' subjective experiences. This approach yields insights that cannot be obtained through quantitative measurement, thereby making a novel contribution to the development of guidance and counseling research methodology in Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a narrative study method. The research was conducted at SMPN 1 Lemahabang during the even semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. The participants consisted of three students (AD, LP, and SN) identified as having low assertive behavior scores and frequently acting as passive witnesses to bullying. Data collection involved in-depth interviews based on a restorying guide, participant observation across four counseling sessions, and documentation. Data analysis utilized the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model, comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation and member checking.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Pre-Intervention Narrative: Diffusion of Responsibility

Prior to counseling, the participants were immersed in a "problem-saturated narrative" dominated by feelings of powerlessness. AD reported a fear of physical confrontation, while LP exhibited "Nice Girl Syndrome," feeling compelled to go along with the group despite it conflicting with her conscience. This aligns with Latané and Darley's theory of the diffusion of responsibility, wherein the presence of other witnesses leads individuals to feel they have no personal obligation to intervene.

Internalization Process: Developing Assertive Skills

Over the course of four counseling sessions, the students underwent a process of externalizing the problem—separating the "fear" from their own identities. The use of "Roleplay Cards" enabled students to practice real-life intervention scenarios. A crucial outcome was the adoption of the STAC strategy (Stealing the show, Turning it over, Accompanying others, Coaching compassion). This strategy provided adolescents with safe intervention options, such as using

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humor to distract the perpetrator or offering emotional support to the victim.

Constructing a New Narrative: The "Upstander" Identity

Following the intervention, a significant shift in identity occurred. Assertive behavior scores rose from an average of 55 (low) to 97 (high). Qualitatively, the students no longer defined themselves as mere "bystanders," but rather as "defenders" or "upstanders." They reported taking concrete action in real-world situations, such as having the courage to confront a perpetrator with statements like: "Stop making fun of them; that's not funny."

DISCUSSION

Research findings indicate that group counseling utilizing assertive training techniques not only boosts students' courage to intervene when witnessing bullying but also transforms how they perceive their own identities as bystanders. Prior to the counseling sessions, the three participants viewed themselves as lacking the capacity or authority to halt bullying. This narrative was shaped by a fear of retaliation, peer pressure, and the belief that the responsibility for stopping bullying lay with others. This situation reflects the "diffusion of responsibility" described by Latané and Darley (1970)—the tendency for individuals to diminish their personal responsibility when in a situation involving multiple witnesses.

Through a narrative approach, group counseling provides a space for reflection, enabling students to evaluate their life experiences more critically. Initially, participants identified the experiences that had fostered the belief that remaining silent was the safest option. Subsequently, through the process of externalization, fear was positioned as a problem external to their identities, meaning it no longer defined who they truly were. This process laid a crucial foundation for the formation of a new, more adaptive narrative. Thus, the resulting behavioral change was not merely the outcome of communication training but the result of reconstructing the meaning of the students' social experiences (Kadafi, 2020).

These findings reinforce the perspective of Creswell and Poth (2021) that narrative research can explain behavioral change through "life story transformation," rather than solely through shifts in quantitative scores. In the context of this study, the success of the group counseling was demonstrated not only by increased assertive behavior but also by a shift in how the participants described themselves. They moved away from terms like "spectator" or "someone lacking courage," instead identifying as individuals capable of helping peers and brave enough to take action in the face of injustice.

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The application of the STAC strategy (Stealing the Show, Turning it Over, Accompanying Others, and Coaching Compassion) was also a crucial factor explaining the changes in participant behavior. Prior to counseling, students believed that stopping bullying required direct confrontation with the perpetrator, leading them to avoid the risk involved. After receiving STAC training, participants understood that there were safer intervention alternatives—such as distracting the perpetrator, accompanying the victim, reporting the incident to a teacher, or providing emotional support to the victimized peer. This variety of strategies enhanced their perceived control over the situation, making students more confident in acting within their capabilities.

These findings align with research by Midgett, Doumas, and Johnston (2017), which demonstrated that STAC training significantly increased students' readiness to intervene as upstanders. Similarly, a study by Doumas and Midgett (2025) found that implementing STAC—whether through in-person training or digital media—effectively boosted students' courage to stop bullying behavior. These consistent results indicate that empowering bystanders is a highly effective preventive strategy for fostering a safe school climate.

On the other hand, the results of this study differ in character from most previous research. Most earlier studies evaluated the effectiveness of assertive training using quantitative approaches, measuring outcomes such as increased assertive behavior scores or a reduced tendency to remain a passive bystander. In contrast, this study reveals the psychological processes underlying these changes through a narrative inquiry approach. Consequently, it provides insight into how social courage is gradually built through self-reflection, group interaction, the formation of new meanings, and the reconstruction of identity as an upstander. This aspect represents a theoretical contribution that has rarely been addressed in guidance and counseling research in Indonesia.

From the perspective of group counseling, group dynamics contribute significantly to the success of the intervention. Throughout the process, participants realize they are not facing their problems alone. Shared experiences among group members foster a sense of acceptance (universality), mutual support (group cohesion), and the courage to disclose personal experiences. These conditions facilitate interpersonal learning, which accelerates behavioral change. This explanation aligns with Corey's (2021) theory, which identifies group cohesion as a key therapeutic factor in group counseling.

Beyond psychological factors, this study demonstrates that the school's cultural context also influences the success of behavioral change. SMPN 1 Lemahabang integrates values of character,

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faith, and piety into daily school life. These moral values reinforce the meaning of assertive behavior—viewing it not merely as a communication skill, but as an expression of social responsibility and concern for others. Consequently, students' motivation to stand up for victims is driven not only by technical competence but also by the moral awareness that allowing bullying to persist contradicts humanitarian values and the school's character ethos.

The practical implications of this study suggest that guidance and counseling teachers need to develop preventive services focused on empowering bystanders. Historically, bullying interventions have largely concentrated on perpetrators and victims, while bystanders have received insufficient attention. However, this study reveals that when bystanders possess assertive skills and social courage, they can act as effective agents of change, halting bullying behavior at an early stage. Therefore, STAC-based assertive training can be integrated into classroom guidance, group guidance, and group counseling programs as part of the school's bullying prevention strategy.

Overall, this study confirms that the effectiveness of group counseling utilizing assertive training lies not only in enhancing assertive communication skills but also in fostering a new identity as an "upstander." This transformation occurs through a process of reflection, social learning, behavioral practice, group support, and the reconstruction of life narratives. Thus, the narrative approach makes a significant contribution to explaining the mechanisms of behavioral change more deeply than quantitative measurement alone.

The findings of this study also reveal an increase in students' social courage following group counseling that utilized assertive training techniques. This change was demonstrated by their willingness to confront the perpetrator, offer support to the victim, and report bullying incidents to teachers. These findings align with research by Doumas and Midgett (2025), which showed that STAC training enhances students' readiness to act as upstanders, whether delivered via face-to-face training or digital applications. That study explained that providing simple alternative intervention strategies gives students a sense of control over the situation, thereby making them more prepared to engage in prosocial actions.

The results also reinforce the findings of Widyatmoko (2025), who discovered that assertive behavior training significantly contributes to students' courage in expressing opinions and resisting peer pressure, while also reducing the tendency to remain passive observers during social conflicts at school. The commonalities between these studies indicate that assertive communication skills are a key predictor of upstander behavior.

Furthermore, research by Syarqawi et al. (2024) reported that group guidance services

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employing assertive training techniques effectively improved students' assertive behavior across various social situations. However, that study focused primarily on increasing assertive behavior scores through a quantitative approach. In contrast, the present study elucidates the psychological mechanisms underlying behavioral change by utilizing a narrative study approach. Thus, this study not only demonstrates that behavior changed but also explains the process of identity transformation that occurs during group counseling.

The findings of this study also support the research of Evans, Fraser, and Cotter (2022), who concluded that the success of bullying prevention programs depends not only on behavioral changes in perpetrators or victims but also on the active involvement of bystanders as agents of social change. According to them, schools that successfully reduce bullying rates are those capable of establishing new social norms, leading the majority of students to feel a responsibility to intervene when witnessing acts of bullying.

Furthermore, these results are consistent with the research of Salmivalli (2021; 2023), which emphasizes that bullying dynamics are heavily influenced by peer group responses. Bullying persists if the majority of bystanders remain silent or even reinforce the perpetrator's actions. Conversely, when bystanders begin to exhibit "defending behavior," the perpetrator's social legitimacy diminishes, and the intensity of bullying tends to decrease. These findings reinforce the argument that changes in bystander behavior have a far broader impact than changes in individual behavior alone.

From an educational psychology perspective, the changes experienced by the study participants can also be explained through Bandura’s concept of self-efficacy. During the group counseling process, participants had the opportunity to observe peers, simulate behaviors, receive feedback, and experience success while practicing assertive communication. These experiences boosted their confidence in their ability to intervene safely when encountering bullying. The findings demonstrate that increased courage is driven not merely by knowledge about bullying, but primarily by a heightened belief in one's own capabilities.

Overall, a synthesis of previous studies indicates that the success of group counseling utilizing assertive training techniques stems from the interplay of improved communication skills, the development of self-efficacy, group support, shifts in social identity, and the emergence of a moral awareness regarding the protection of peers. Consequently, this study extends prior findings by demonstrating that the transformation from a passive bystander to an upstander occurs through a process of self-narrative reconstruction that unfolds gradually during group counseling.

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Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the advancement of guidance and counseling scholarship, specifically regarding the study of bullying bystander behavior, group counseling, and narrative approaches. The findings indicate that behavioral change is driven not only by improved assertive communication skills but also by the process of identity reconstruction that occurs during group counseling sessions. Consequently, this study broadens the understanding of assertive training effectiveness; it shifts the perspective from viewing it merely as a behavior modification technique to recognizing it as a process of forming a new social identity.

From the perspective of Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, participants' behavioral changes can be explained through the reciprocal interaction of personal, environmental, and behavioral factors (reciprocal determinism). Through processes such as observation, modeling, behavioral rehearsal, feedback, and reinforcement, participants gain mastery experiences that boost their self-efficacy to engage in prosocial actions when confronted with bullying situations. Thus, the courage to intervene does not emerge spontaneously but develops through a gradual social learning process.

This study also supports Narrative Identity theory, which posits that individuals construct their identities through stories based on life experiences. Initially, participants viewed themselves as weak, fearful, and incapable of stopping bullying. Following the group counseling process, these narratives were reconstructed; participants began to see themselves as individuals capable of protecting peers, speaking their minds, and upholding moral responsibility toward their social environment. This identity shift demonstrates that the narrative approach offers a more comprehensive explanation of the mechanisms behind behavioral change than behavioral measurement alone.

Furthermore, the results reinforce Bystander Intervention Theory, which holds that a person's decision to assist a victim is influenced by their interpretation of the situation, sense of personal responsibility, belief in their own capabilities, and perception of potential risks. Through assertive training and STAC strategies, these psychological barriers can be minimized, better preparing students to take action as "upstanders." Therefore, this study provides empirical evidence that enhancing assertive behavior is a crucial mechanism for mitigating the bystander effect within the school environment.

Practical Implications

The research findings hold significant implications for the delivery of guidance and

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counseling services in schools. To date, bullying interventions have tended to focus on perpetrators and victims, while bystanders have received relatively little attention. Yet, this study demonstrates that changing bystander behavior can be a strategic factor in breaking the cycle of bullying.

Guidance and counseling teachers can integrate assertive training techniques into both preventive and curative service programs through group guidance, group counseling, and classroom guidance sessions. The use of role-playing, case simulations, assertive communication exercises, and STAC strategies enables students to gain firsthand experience in dealing with various forms of bullying that may occur in the school environment.

Schools also need to foster an "upstander" culture through policies that encourage students to report bullying without fear of retaliation. Support from school principals, subject teachers, homeroom teachers, and peers is crucial for creating a safe and inclusive school climate. Training programs for peer counselors and anti-bullying ambassadors can also serve as a sustainable strategy to extend the impact of group counseling services.

For guidance and counseling curriculum developers, these findings can serve as a basis for creating STAC-based assertive behavior training modules tailored to the characteristics of students in Indonesia. Such modules can be incorporated into character-building initiatives, social-emotional learning programs, and school-based violence prevention programs.

CONCLUSSION

This study concludes that group counseling utilizing assertive training techniques facilitates a transformation in students' identities—shifting from passive bystanders to upstanders—through the processes of self-narrative reconstruction (restorying), social learning, and the reinforcement of assertive behavior. This transformation is reflected not only in students' increased courage to intervene in bullying incidents but also in their developing sense of social responsibility and their ability to make assertive decisions in potentially conflict-laden situations.

Theoretically, this study expands the literature on bystander behavior by demonstrating that behavioral change is influenced by the interplay between self-efficacy development, group counseling dynamics, and identity reconstruction via a narrative approach. These findings complement prior research—which has largely focused on the quantitative measurement of intervention effectiveness—by providing deeper insight into the psychological processes underlying students' behavioral changes.

Practically, the study recommends that guidance and counseling teachers develop

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preventive services based on assertive training as part of school-based bullying prevention programs. Furthermore, future research should involve more diverse participants, employ mixed-methods or experimental designs, and examine the long-term sustainability of behavioral changes to yield more comprehensive empirical evidence regarding the intervention's effectiveness in fostering an "upstander" culture within the school environment.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study concludes that group counseling utilizing assertive training techniques facilitates a transformation in students' identities—shifting from passive bystanders to upstanders—through the processes of self-narrative reconstruction (restorying), social learning, and the reinforcement of assertive behavior. This transformation is reflected not only in students' increased courage to intervene in bullying incidents but also in their developing sense of social responsibility and their ability to make assertive decisions in potentially conflict-laden situations.

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