Kids Doing the Dirty Work of Society: Bullying of LGBT youth
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Introduction

It seems that in our day and age it is difficult to open a newspaper or watch the news without hearing some sort of reference to the "bullying epidemic." Despite declining rates of bullying since 1992, national coverage of the phenomenon has increased disproportionately. The term bullying itself represents interactions between an aggressor and a victim (groups or individuals) in which feelings are hurt. This definition can describe any interaction one may be opposed to or suffer hurt feelings from being categorized as bullying. CJ Pascoe and many other sociologists as well as initiatives like the Beyond Bullying Project are seeking to redefine the current understanding of bullying by focusing on how existing issues of social inequality and power play into the current bullying "epidemic" (Pascoe, 2014). In her article titled " Bullying as Social Inequality" Pascoe (2014) writes:

> I call here for bullying to be understood as not necessarily about one pathological individual or group targeting another, less powerful individual or group, but rather as an interactional reproduction of structural inequalities that socializes young people into accepting social inequality. That is, the interactional process of bullying both builds on existing embodied, classed, raced, gendered and sexualized social inequalities and simultaneously prepares young people to accept such inequalities as a "normal" part of living in the world. (p. 1)

Social inequality as related to bullying is not touched on in most analyses, which typically focus on individual-level variables. Research about young people tells up that most are bullied for being "different", with one of the most common bases being sexuality and gender-variance. Being deemed different to these youth is no mere accident, as homophobic bullying reflects the dominant legal and cultural standings of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT)

people. The reflection of the adult world through adolescents homophobic bullying becomes all too clear as gender-variant individuals are not protected in 44 states and same-sex rights are still nearly non-existent (Pascoe, 2014). By consistently placing blame on the child for being mean or cruel, we are systematically ignoring that the behavior and ideas themselves resemble and perpetuate society-wide problems of prejudice and inequality. The issue of bullying affects marginalized youth disproportionately and reflects the problems they are due to encounter throughout their whole lives. This paper specifically focuses on the issue of transgender and gay youth being bullied in addition to the implications and changes necessary in schools.

Discussion

Schools are supposed to be a safe and respectful environments that foster learning for everyone. A large amount of research from recent years has addressed the educational experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth, finding that the climates of US middle and high schools are typically unsafe and unsupportive for a majority of these youth (Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009). LGBT youth have stated that they frequently experience discrimination, harassment, and many other negative events while in school, which they feel is stemming directly from their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender presentation. The negative impact of these experiences on LGBT youth can be readily seen in regards to their access to education and increased health risk behaviors. Kosciw et al. (2009) noted that the victimization of these youth in schools has been linked to: increased absenteeism due to feeling unsafe/uncomfortable, increased disciplinary problems, lower levels of school engagement and academic achievement, substance abuse, suicide, in addition to psychological effects like depression and low self-esteem.

An adolescent's experience in the school environment is influenced by larger contexts like geographic area, but also individual demographic differences. By taking a sociological perspective and applying the intersectionality theory we can explore how race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender portrayal all relate to a youth's experience of school safety and victimization.

Transgender youth are rendered nearly invisible in our country because of the strictly dichotomous nature of classifying gender. The assumption of congruence between the sex assigned at birth upon genital inspection and gender including the set of expectations and roles is dominant in most Western cultures (Lucal, 2008). Transgender individuals transcend this typical gender paradigm as most regard their biological sex to be an inaccurate reflection of the gender with which they deeply identify.

Arnold Grossman and Anthony D'Augelli (2006) explain the broad categories of transgendered individuals that include transsexuals (i.e., those who have made the transition to living in the gender other than the one assigned to them), cross-dressers (e.g., transvestites, drag queens, drag kings), and gender benders/blenders (i.e., those who purposefully present an ambiguous gender expression). Exhibiting gender-nonconforming identities and behaviors violates conventional expectations, making transgender individuals targets for blatant discrimination and victimization (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006).

The vulnerability gender-atypical youth face as a marginalized group has resulted in more experiences with psychosocial and health problems than any other social group. A recent national study of LGBT youth's school-related safety and victimization experiences found that transgender youth experience higher levels of victimization than LGB youth who were not transgender (Kosciw et al., 2009). A more in depth analysis on trans-youth by Grossman and

D'Augelli (2006) revealed that in addition gender-atypical behavior is much less accepted in boys than girls, biological males identifying as trans being the target of most verbal and physical abuse. One youth (male to female) during an interview disclosed, "At school there was a lot of harassment. I could walk around minding my business, and someone would throw something at me, would call me a faggot, spit at me, do this do that" (p. 122).

    With regards to victimization Kosciw, Greytalk, and Diaz (2009) found that females were more likely than males to report being victimized because of their gender expressions. Researchers did not uncover any significant racial/ethnic group differences regarding bullying because of gender expression. Kosciw et al. (2009) find that transgender youth were more likely than male youth to be victimized because of both their gender expression and sexual orientation. When discussing gender-atypical behavior many people confuse gender and sexual orientation, despite sexual orientation being based on the gender of one's erotic object of choice. Western cultures view sexual orientation and sexuality very similarly as they do transgender. In a society that always "thinks straight" the seeds of heteronormativity are sown at a very early age. By creating a set of identity categories to make it seem as if sexuality is fixed and unchanging – institutionalized, we are able to position ourselves within a hierarchically patterned value system. To these categories we attach levels of acceptability and claim social status and legitimacy based upon the level we occupy.

    Chrys Ingraham (2003) in her essay describes that, "in this heteronormative system where heterosexuality becomes institutionalized and is held up as the standard for legitimate and expected social and sexual relations, bisexuality is less valued and homosexuality the least valued" (p. 2). The primacy of sexual behaviors in many aspects of life, whether it is marriage, religion, or education devalues all other factors in human relations. The inequality created by the

institutionalization of heterosexuality leaves everyone who does not fit in marginalized and highly susceptible to disenfranchisement.

LGBT youth are negatively impacted by heteronormativity in the educational environment as they experience high levels of verbal and physical harassment and assault, sexual harassment, social exclusion and isolation, and other interpersonal problems with peers (Kosciw et al., 2009). When adolescents engage in homophobic bullying it not only displays their bad decision-making but also the reproduction of larger structural inequalities. The refocus of adolescent bullying as social reproduction, brings forth the image of youth socializing each other into accepting and embracing inequality. Formal schooling is one of the most prominent cultural institutions where youth are socialized and taught how to fit into the community.

Many middle and high schools across the nation are hostile environments for sexual minorities (lesbian, gay, bisexual/ LGB) due to the high rates of marginalization and physical violence they experience in the educational setting. Estimating the size of the LGB population in the U.S. is a very dubious feat as most national estimates rely only on those who self-identify as homosexual. Despite these shortcomings, it is estimated that there are more than eight million LGB adults in the U.S., and at least 3.8% of middle school students and 5% of high school students self-identify as LGB (McCarty-Caplan, 2013). The magnitude of those estimates (and the likelihood that they are vast underestimates of the true LGB population size) reflects how crucial it is that the hostility faced in the school setting is recognized as a problem impacting students and parents nationwide.

The depth of discrimination is difficult to measure exactly but recent studies suggest as much of 82% of LGB students report encounters with verbal abuse, and 38% encountered physical abuse while at school (McCarty-Caplan, 2009). Existing research by Kosciw et al.

(2009) indicates that gay and bisexual males are more likely than their lesbian and bisexual female peers to experience victimization based upon their sexual orientation, but are less likely to report the incident to school administrators or parents. The use of homophobic remarks and behaviors, both serious and joking, is central to the concept of masculinity in school settings. Teenage boys frequently label other boys as "fags" or "gay" to police one each other. Although the use of the word "fag" and "gay" in this context is not intended to be a homophobic slur it still represents a problem.

CJ Pascoe (2005) in her essay "Dude, You're A Fag" exams how the label of "fag" to most adolescent males has "as much to do with failing at the masculine task of competence, sexual prowess and strength, or an anyway revealing weakness or femininity, as it does with a sexual identity" (p. 3). This sort of joking runs rampant through schools with over 50% of youth admitting they hear homophobic slurs as many as 10 or more times per day at school. Kosciw et al. (2009) denotes the racialized nature of this homophobic discourse with African American/Black and Asian/Pacific Islander students being less likely to hear these type of expressions than white youth. There were also racial/ethnic group differences regarding victimization due to sexual orientation with African American/Black students reporting fewer incidents (Kosciw et al., 2009). The frequency of homophobic remarks and victimization appears to operate differently across cultural contexts. Understanding the cultural and community contexts is of importance when addressing school environments for LGBT youth and is often overlooked.

Concluding Remarks

As one of the most prominent cultural institutions, schools are designed to socialize youth to 'fit' into society. Through this role, school personnel take the position of gatekeeper by perpetuating

the status quo, often viewed as heterosexuality and gender 'appropriate' expression (Grossman,

Haney, Edwards, Ardon & Howell, 2007). As a whole it has been widely documented that LGBT

youth face hostile school environments where they feel overwhelmingly unsafe and unwelcome.

It is worth noting that LGBT youth are not a monolithic group and experiences are different

depending upon individual characteristics, location, and the characteristics of the community

(Kosciw et al., 2009). In order to foster schools where the inherent worth of a student is valued

education policies are required. Efforts to improve school climates for LGBT youth often start

with district-level changes and policy implementation but these often seem to have little effect.

Addressing factors beyond the school walls and how the community environment contributes to

the schools safety is required to comprehensively address the problem of victimization. Through

support of family, peers, and school administration LGBT youth can gain strength and self-

advocacy. It is possible for this marginalized group to develop positive and productive coping

strategies, but also take an active part in making schools safe and affirming places in which they

can develop and learn in ways parallel to their heterosexual peers (Grossman et al., 2007).

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