



Influences of peers, teachers, and climate on students' willingness to intervene when witnessing anti-transgender harassment

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ABSTRACT

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Transgender young people are at increased risk for bullying, harassment, and negative mental health and academic outcomes compared to the general population as well as compared to other members of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and similarly identified (LGBTQQ) communities. To inform interventions to support transgender students, the present study investigates students' willingness to intervene when witnessing anti-transgender harassment, using data collected from a participatory action research project investigating school climate. Multi-step linear regression was used to test the impacts of hearing transphobic language and witnessing teachers and others students intervene, while controlling for demographics and school. Hostile climate negatively predicted intervention intentions while witnessing peer intervention positively predicted likelihood to intervene. Witnessing teacher intervention did not significantly predict the outcome. These findings suggest that youth-led interventions in peer networks might be effective in diminishing transphobic bullying and supporting the healthy development of transgender young people.

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A growing body of research has established that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and similarly identified (LGBTQQ) young people are disproportionately victims of bullying in schools (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002; Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012; Rivers, 2001). LGBTQQ students are also at increased risk for negative mental health outcomes (Robinson & Espelage, 2011), findings partially explained by exposure to various forms of homophobic and transphobic bullying and negative climate (Birkett et al., 2009; Espelage, Hong, Rao, & Low, 2013; Poteat & Espelage, 2007). This harassment can be particularly severe for gender non-conforming students (Baams, Beek, Hille, Zevenbergen, & Bos, 2012; D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006; Skidmore, Linsenmeier, & Bailey, 2006; Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012).

Trans* (i.e., transgender, genderqueer, and other individuals who do not identify with or normatively enact the gender assigned to them at birth) students have been found to experience harassment in schools at higher rates than both straight/cisgender (those who feel their gender matches the one assigned at birth) and LGB students (Grant et al., 2011; Kosciw,

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Greytak, et al., 2012; McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010). However, research and support programs often focus on issues facing LGBQ students, or LGBTQQ students generally, without consideration of the needs, strengths, and contexts that trans* students face (Kosciw, Bartkiewicz, & Greytak, 2012; McGuire & Conover-Williams, 2010). A recent review of research on the health of LGBTQQ young people indicated that less than 10% of studies included transgender respondents (Toomey, 2014). Even when transgender young people are included in research on LGBTQQ people, studies focusing on LGBTQQ students as a whole generally focus on issues related to sexual orientation rather than those related to gender identity/expression (Moradi, Mohr, Worthington, & Fassinger, 2009). Trans* students experience particular forms of violence in school; for instance, gendered facilities (bathrooms, locker rooms) may not be safe for trans* students, especially if students are required to use the bathroom associated with their sex assigned at birth. As well, transphobia and trans-negativity among LGBTQQ communities may discourage trans* students from accessing resources and support through programs and services that focus on issues related to sexual orientation.

Bullying experiences among young people have been linked to outcomes such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, self-injurious behaviors, suicidal ideation, lower academic performance, and school avoidance (D'Augelli et al., 2006; Hay & Meldrum, 2010; Haynie et al., 2001; Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, & Gould, 2007; Menesini, Modena, & Tani, 2009; Walls, Freedenthal, & Wisneski, 2008). Research has shown the association between bullying and negative mental health outcomes, including suicide, remains when examining specific forms of transphobic harassment (Clements-Nolle, Marx, & Katz, 2006; Grant et al., 2011; McGuire et al., 2010; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, & Russell, 2010; Yunger, Carver, & Perry, 2004). For trans* students, these experiences have potential to negatively impact their experiences in schools and are compounded by other manifestations of genderism (i.e., the system that oppresses trans* people and privileges cisgender people) at organizational, institutional, social, and cultural levels. In and of themselves, experiences of bullying and harassment can impede healthy development (Strøm et al., 2013). As well, the resultant mental health issues and other confounding impacts of systemic oppression can further impede positive psychosocial development (Meyer, 2003).

Schools have a responsibility to address homophobic and transphobic bullying (Poteat & Espelage, 2007); however, further research is needed to provide empirically grounded frameworks for understanding and working against genderism (Espelage & Swearer Napolitano, 2008; McGuire & Conover-Williams, 2010). To support the development of programs that decrease transphobic bullying and build safe and inclusive climates for trans* people in high schools and middle schools (Birkett et al., 2009; Poteat, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Robinson & Espelage, 2011, 2012, 2013), the present study examines the influences of exposure to negative climate as well as teacher and peer role models in predicting high school students' willingness to intervene when witnessing anti-trans* harassment.

Trans* students in the school environment

Securing accurate estimates of the number of trans* students in schools is difficult; only recently have some nationally representative studies begun to inquire about sex or gender beyond "male" and "female." Even when more inclusive options are included in surveys, there is not consensus about how to most effectively inquire about transgender identities (Moradi et al., 2009). A few studies have indicated that less than 1% of the adult (0.3%) and adolescent (0.5%) populations in the United States identify as transgender *and* undergo a physical transition (Gates, 2011; Toomey, 2014). A relatively larger group, estimated up to 2% of the general as well as adolescent populations, identify as trans* but do not necessarily undergo a physical transition – for instance, folks who identify as genderfluid, questioning their gender (Toomey, 2014) or who report "strong feelings of being transgender" (Gates, 2011, p. 5).

The term genderism has been used to describe the distinct form of oppression that targets trans*-identified individuals (Hill & Willoughby, 2005). Trans* individuals face widespread violence and discrimination both in and outside of educational institutions (Bryant & Schilt, 2008; GenderPac, 1997; Grant et al., 2011; Lombardi, 2009; Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing, & Malouf, 2002). These systems of violence also interact with sexism, racism, and heterosexism. For example, while all trans* people experience genderism, people who are assigned male at birth and express themselves femininely experience transmisogyny; the sexist devaluation of femininity intersects with transphobia to cause particularly negative reactions to trans* people who were assigned male at birth (Barker-Plumber, 2013; McAvan, 2011; Serrano, 2007). For instance, one study investigating the experiences of young transgender women in Detroit found that acceptance of one's gender identity was contingent on successfully performing highly scrutinized versions of femininity related to one's appearance and dress (Graham, Crissman, Tocco, Hughes, Snow, & Padilla, in press). The high rate of violent hate crimes against this population shows the particular danger that this confluence of forces can cause (Chestnut, Dixon, & Jindasurat, 2013). Trans* people of Color also face particularly high rates of violence and discrimination (Bith-Melander et al., 2010; Chestnut et al., 2013), related to the high level of scrutiny for the gender performances of people of Color in general. Gender norms in the United States are based in part on standards that are racialized as White; and therefore, people of Color may have their gender identities challenged as not sufficiently masculine or feminine enough, as seen through racialized and gendered tropes, such as the effeminate Asian American man or the domineering masculine Black woman (Donovan, 2011; Hill, 2002; Lui, 2002; Morris, 2007). Accordingly, trans* people of Color assigned male at birth face exposure to the highest rates of physical violence and comprise the majority of the victims of deadly hate crimes affecting trans* people in the United States (Chestnut et al., 2013; McAvan, 2011). Within these complex systems of genderism, heterosexism, sexism, and racism, anti-trans* harassment serves as a potent means of policing gender expression and reinforcing binary gender norms (Graham et al., 2014; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Nadal & Griffin, 2011; Nadal, Skolnik, & Wong, 2012; Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010).

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