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Heteronormativity, school climates, and perceived safety for gender nonconforming peers

Russell B. Toomey^{a,*}, Jenifer K. McGuire^{b,1}, Stephen T. Russell^{a,2}

^aJohn & Doris Norton School of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Arizona, 650 North Park Avenue, P.O. Box 210078, Tucson AZ 85721-0078, USA

^bWashington State University, Human Development, 512 Johnson Tower, P.O. Box 644852, Pullman, WA 99164-4852, USA

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Students' perceptions of their school climates are associated with psychosocial and academic adjustment. The present study examined the role of school strategies to promote safety in predicting students' perceptions of safety for gender nonconforming peers among 1415 students in 28 high schools. Using multilevel modeling techniques, we examined student- and school-level effects on students' perceptions of safety for gender nonconforming peers. We found that older students, bisexual youth, Latino youth, and youth who experienced school violence perceived their gender nonconforming male peers to be less safe. Similarly, we found that older students and students who experienced school violence and harassment due to gender nonconformity perceived their gender nonconforming female peers to be less safe. At the school-level, we found that when schools included lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) issues in the curriculum and had a Gay-Straight Alliance, students perceived their schools as safer for gender nonconforming male peers.

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Norms and expectations for gender and sexuality are central in shaping the overall climate of contemporary schools (Pascoe, 2007). School climates reflect broader pressures of heteronormativity (Chesir-Teran, 2003), or the everyday expectations and experiences of what is "normal" based on gender and sexuality (Jackson, 2006). Pressures of heteronormativity emerge as particularly salient in adolescence: prior studies have shown that middle and high school students are at risk for victimization at school when they do not conform to norms regarding gender (Aspenlieder, Buchanan, McDougall, & Sipplola, 2009; Wyss, 2004) or sexuality (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006). Harassment based on actual or perceived sexual orientation, which is often based on a student's nonconformity to gender norms (Human Rights Watch, 2001; Pascoe, 2007), is well documented (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009; O'Shaughnessy, Russell, Heck, Calhoun, & Laub, 2004). Recent events in the United States – including the murder of Larry King in 2008 and the suicides of several boys who were perceived to be gay or bisexual in 2010 – have brought public attention to real-life instances of nonconformity to gender norms, perceived same-sex sexual orientation, and school victimization (e.g., Hoffman, 2009; Katz, 2010). In response, researchers have begun to identify strategies to promote positive school climates with the goal of increasing perceptions and experiences of safety at school (Griffin & Ouellett, 2003).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 (520) 429 6496; fax: +1 (520) 621 9445.

E-mail addresses: toomey@email.arizona.edu (R.B. Toomey), jkmcguire@wsu.edu (J.K. McGuire), strussel@email.arizona.edu (S.T. Russell).

¹ Tel.: +1 (509) 335 2130; fax: +1 (509) 335 2456.

² Tel.: +1 (520) 621 1231; fax: +1 (520) 621 9445.

In this study we examine the role of school strategies to promote safety for gender nonconforming students. To date most of the public and research attention has focused on sexual orientation and identity, or school climates for lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (LGBQ) students (Horn, Kosciw, & Russell, 2009); less attention has been given to gender nonconformity, even though norms of gender conformity underpin heteronormativity. Further, most research attention has focused at the individual level, or understanding student characteristics and experiences in predicting their perceptions of school climate. Yet heteronormativity and school climates are fundamentally social and contextual concepts; indeed, empirical research has documented that heteronormativity varies from school to school (Russell & McGuire, 2008). In the sections that follow we present a framework for understanding heteronormativity in contemporary schools. We then review research on school climate with a focus on school strategies that have been used to promote safe and supportive school climates. Data from the *Preventing School Harassment Survey* from California are used to examine the ways that both person-level and school-level indicators of heteronormative school climates predict students' perceptions of safety for gender nonconforming peers.

Heteronormativity in schools

Heteronormativity is a societal hierarchical system that privileges and sanctions individuals based on presumed binaries of gender and sexuality; as a system it defines and enforces beliefs and practices about what is "normal" in everyday life (Jackson, 2006; Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005). Gender and sexuality norms are intertwined in the everyday experiences of contemporary adolescents. Further, the notion of heteronormativity (Jackson, 2006; Oswald et al., 2005) suggests that norms and attitudes about gender and sexuality are deeply linked theoretically as well. The heteronormativity framework is a basis from which to explain how and why the violence toward gender nonconforming students is perpetuated. We argue that gender regulation is a critical component of heteronormativity that structures norms and student interactions, placing students at risk for victimization who violate gender norms.

"Queering" frameworks extend understandings of heteronormativity by allowing for identities that do not fit into the strict definitions required by heteronormativity (Oswald et al., 2005). A queering approach allows for the presence of "complex" identities (e.g., queer gender, queer sexuality) in environments that traditionally have only accepted and provided space to individuals with "normal" identities (Oswald et al., 2005). Queering of the educational system requires that the curriculum, policies, and practices of schools are inclusive of all individuals and their experiences (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004; Rofes, 1995). Thus, when queering practices and policies are implemented and visible to students, students may perceive their environments as safer for peers that deviate from gender and sexuality norms (Greytak et al., 2009; Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008; Russell & McGuire, 2008). For example, by acknowledging the presence of gender nonconforming and LGBQ students and enacting and enforcing policies and practices designed to provide a safe place for them, schools may provide education in a queering environment instead of the typical heteronormative one (Rofes, 1995). In such schools, students that challenge gender and sexuality norms may experience less harassment at school.

Thus, schools are important sites for understanding heteronormativity and its enactments and implications in the lives of young people. In the earliest years of formal education, elementary students understand and engage in the practices of gender regulation and heteronormativity (Renold, 2002; Thorne, 1993). While heteronormativity in schools is expressed through the daily interactions among students and teachers, it is also expressed through institutional practices and policies (Chesir-Teran, 2003). The culture of heteronormativity varies between schools because of different societal influences in different locations (e.g., school boards, local laws and regulations; see Szalacha, 2003); however, there are few between-school investigations of school cultures. Because of variability across schools, there should be evidence of heteronormativity not only among students, but also as a characteristic of the school climate (Chesir-Teran, 2003). Investigating heteronormativity across multiple schools should allow for more complete explanation of how school climates are associated with students' perceptions of safety for gender nonconforming peers in school.

School climate and student safety

Nearly 24% of students experience school victimization at least once and nearly 9% experience weekly victimization (Nansel et al., 2001). Additionally, witnessing victimization at school places youth at risk for negative adjustment (Rivers, Poteat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009). Negative consequences associated with school victimization based on gender nonconformity and sexual orientation include poor psychological health (depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidality; see D'Augelli et al., 2006; Rivers, 2001; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005) and risky behavior (substance use, risky sexual behavior, self-harm; see Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Garofalo, Wolf, Kessel, Palfrey, & DuRant, 1998). In addition, bias-related school victimization is associated with lower grade-point average, fewer perceptions of school safety, less school connectedness, and higher absenteeism (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004; Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Rivers, 2000).

In the past two decades, researchers, practitioners, school personnel, and students have created and implemented strategies aimed at improving school climates in order to promote safety and prevent the victimization of gender nonconforming and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students (Griffin & Ouellett, 2003). Studies have identified a number of educational strategies that are associated with student safety (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004; Perrotti & Westheimer, 2001; Szalacha, 2003), and prior research has shown notable differences between schools in the degree to which they enact programs and policies, as well as school differences in climates that respect diversity (Russell & McGuire, 2008; Szalacha, 2003). Included in these strategies are clearly enumerated anti-harassment policies, teacher intervention in

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