

**SCHOOL STAFF RESPONSES TO GENDER-BASED BULLYING AS MORAL  
INTERPRETATION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY**

**In press, *Educational Policy***

**by**

**Dorothea Anagnostopoulos**

**NiCole T. Buchanan**

**Christine Pereira**

**Lauren F. Lichy**

**Michigan State University**

**March 30, 2007**

**Author Note:**

This research was funded by the following: Buchanan, N. T., Anagnostopoulos, D., Broman, C. L., Sellers, W. L., Habra, A., & Boylan, M. "Examining gendered bullying, its psychological and academic outcomes, and anti-harassment policies among rural high school students." Grant awarded by Michigan State University's Families and Communities Together (FACT) Coalition, Program for Innovations in University-Community Collaborations

**ABSTRACT**

Gender-based bullying is the most common form of violence that students encounter in U.S. public schools. While large-scale surveys have revealed its forms and consequences for students, few studies have examined how school staff members make sense of and respond to such violence. The present study begins to address this knowledge gap by presenting analyses of interviews conducted with high school faculty and staff. Drawing on sociological studies of violence and positioning theory, the authors document how school staff responses are situated in webs of relationships and cultural narratives that variously facilitate or impede their intervention into and prevention of gender-based bullying. While school staff members felt compelled to intervene in incidents of sexual harassment in which male students targeted “quiet girls,” they were unsure how and when to intervene in potentially violent heterosexual dating relationships and were largely ambivalent about their responsibilities towards gay and lesbian students who were targets of homophobic bullying. The authors argue for expanding prevention efforts beyond intervening in individual incidents and towards engaging school staff and students in critical examinations of sexist and heterosexist roles, norms and practices.

Key Words:

*Gender, Bullying, Sexual Harassment, Policy Implementation, High Schools, School Violence,*

## **SCHOOL STAFF RESPONSES TO GENDER-BASED BULLYING AS MORAL INTERPRETATION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY**

Gender-based bullying is the most common form of school violence in the US. National surveys indicate that fully 80% of adolescents in the US will experience some type of gender-based bullying before graduating from high school. The vast majority of these acts are perpetrated by other students (AAUW, 1993, 2001; Lee et al 1999). The consequences of gender-based bullying can be devastating. Students who experience gender-based bullying face increased rates of depression, anxiety, academic withdrawal, academic performance, and suicide (Rusby, Forrester, Biglan, & Metzler, 2005; Lacasse, Purdy, & Mendelson, 2003; AAUW, 2001, 1993; Hand & Sanchez, 2000).

While sexual harassment is one of the more discussed and researched forms of such violence, gender-based bullying includes but is not limited to sexual harassment. Gender-based bullying comprises threatening and harassing behaviors based on gender or the enforcement of gender—role expectations. It includes verbal and physical harassment, unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion, and insults, intimidation and assaults based on sexual orientation. The term thus captures the range of behaviors through which traditional gender roles and sexual identities as well as behaviors are policed and reinforced. The importance of acknowledging this fuller range of violence is evidenced by the behaviors students perceive as most damaging. Along with having sexual rumors spread about them by their classmates and being forced to engage in sexual acts, students rate being called gay or lesbian as “very upsetting” (AAUW, 2001). Surveys of violence against lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender (LGBT) youth indicate that these fears are well founded; one-third of students reported frequent harassment

related to their stated or perceived identity as LGBT people (Harris Interactive and GLSEN, 2005).

Efforts by feminist and gay and lesbian educators, researchers and legal advocates brought gender-based bullying to the nation's attention during the 1980s and 1990s. One sign of this increased attention is the mandate, established by the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) of the US Department of Education in 1997, that schools develop explicit sexual harassment policies and procedures that are "accessible, effective and fairly applied." While a majority of students are now aware that their schools have such policies, they remain reluctant to report incidents of sexual harassment and other types of gender-based bullying to school faculty (AAUW, 2003). Students perceive faculty as indifferent and unresponsive, a perception buttressed by student reports that most gender-based bullying occurs in classrooms and hallways under the supervision of school faculty and staff (AAUW, 2001; Pellegrini & Blantchford, 2000; Stein, 1995).

Though school faculty and staff are critical to efforts to curb and prevent gender-based bullying in US schools, few studies have explicitly examined their responses to gender-based bullying. Those that have suggest that many teachers are confused about what constitutes such bullying (Warwick et al 2001) and find it difficult to distinguish between gender-based bullying and playful teasing or flirting (Lahelma 2002). As a result, teachers tend to intervene in situations they perceive as most severe, allowing the subtler and more common incidents of gender-based bullying to go unchecked (Yoon 2004; Hazler et al 2001, Craig et al 2000). Normalizing discourses that explain gender-based bullying as a natural outgrowth of adolescent sexual development further limit teachers' willingness to identify student behaviors as bullying and justify faculty unresponsiveness (Lahelma 2002, Mishna 2004, Chambers et al 2004; Dupper & Meyer-Adams, 2002).

While these studies provide insight into faculty perceptions of gender-based bullying, they leave unexamined the complex interpretive work that responding to such violence requires of school faculty and staff. Gender-based bullying occurs in moment-to-moment interactions between and among students and faculty. These interactions are further situated within webs of relationships, personal histories, school norms and societal ideas about gender, sexuality, and power. Whether and how teachers and school staff intervene in and seek to prevent gender-based bullying in their schools and classrooms will depend upon how they interpret these interactions and their responsibilities for intervening in them.

The present study begins to explore this interpretive work by investigating the accounts of gender-based bullying drawn from interviews with teachers and support staff members (herein referred to as “school staff members”) conducted as part of a study of gender-based bullying in Midwestern High School (pseudonym). Midwestern had taken a relatively progressive stance towards gender-based bullying. It had a formal policy regarding sexual harassment in place and had designated a school sexual harassment officer. Midwestern’s teachers read and discussed the policy with their students at the beginning of each school year and school staff consistently reported that the principal implemented the policy fairly, consistently and firmly. In addition, the school invited speakers to address issues of sexual harassment as well as other types of gender-based bullying and undertook concerted efforts to combat homophobic name-calling. Notably, the teachers and students at Midwestern also collaborated to run a school club related to issues of bullying. Midwestern thus provides a rich context in which to explore faculty perceptions of and responses to gender-based bullying.

An examination of school staff member accounts of gender-based bullying in Midwestern illuminates the multi-dimensionality of staff understandings of and responses to gender-based

bullying. Rather than ignoring gender-based bullying, the study shows how Midwestern's school staff sought to fulfill dual obligations to prosecute and educate the students involved in such incidents. Staff members felt especially compelled to intervene in incidents of sexual harassment in which male students targeted "quiet girls." They experienced considerable uncertainty, however, about their authority to intervene in the bullying that occurred in heterosexual dating relationships and about their obligations to gay and lesbian students who were targets of gender-based bullying. Significantly, school policy provided staff members little assistance in responding to these types of gender-based bullying. The study thus points to the need to expand prevention efforts beyond intervention in individual incidents and towards engaging school staff and students in critical examinations of the sexist and heterosexist norms, role and practices through which gender-based bullying operates.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In this study, we draw on both sociological studies of crime in the US and positioning theory from cultural psychology to examine the content and structure of the narrative accounts of gender-based bullying constructed by school staff in Midwestern High School. Looking at the narrative accounts of gender-based bullying that school staff construct provides insight into how school staff members position themselves and their students as subjects involved in these forms of school violence. These accounts take up and play out cultural stereotypes and/or scripts embedded within both local and broader imagined communities. School staff members as storytellers of gender-based bullying (re)create, maintain, negotiate and/or resist cultural norms and narratives that are collectively understood within and beyond their particular school. By exploring school staff members' accounts, we can examine both the particular local

understandings of gender-based bullying as well as the broader discourses within which they are constructed.

*Symbolic interaction and the study of crime in the US*

Sociological studies of crime, mostly from a symbolic interaction perspective, suggest that Americans tend to view violence ambivalently, evaluating some acts of violence as normal or ambiguous rather than clearly deviant (Best 1995; Sasson 1995; Ferrell, 1999; Spencer 2005). Such evaluations depend, in part, on the social characteristics of perpetrators and victims. For example, social audiences, i.e., juries, observers, media viewers, etc., typically classify violence as deviant when perpetrated by working class, poor and racial minorities (Tittle, Villemex & Smith 1978; Cerulo, 1998; Maxwell, Robinson & Post, 200). Conversely, Americans often evaluate violent acts waged against racial minority and female victims as normal (Levin 1993; Yllo, 1993; Hawkins, 1995; Loeske 1993). Women are seen as the “appropriate victims” of violence, especially sexual violence. This is reinforced by the construction of female victims of sexual violence as sexually promiscuous and aggressive, normalizing the violence against them by implying that the women desired and even initiated it (Meyers, 2004). In contrast, when men are victims of sexual violence, Americans tend to evaluate this violence as deviant. The exception to this is when male victims are gay. In these cases, violence is seen as a risk that such men must be willing to face as a consequence of being gay.

In addition to the social characteristics of victims and perpetrators, the context also shapes the evaluation of violent acts, serving as the frame through which social audiences interpret violence (Cerulo, 1998). Dramas, sports and comedies are forms of “play frames” that normalize violence. Hazing incidents in high schools and college fraternities normalize violence as “rites of passage.” Violence that occurs within marriage and heterosexual dating relationships

is also often normalized as evidenced by feminists' struggles to get the legal system to classify marital rape as illegal (Greenblat, 1983; Berns, 2001).

Cerulo (1998) further identifies the salience of narrative sequencing to Americans' moral evaluations of violent acts. Cerulo's work analyzes the point of entry into and the ordering of story elements, i.e., victim, perpetrator, act and context, of violence narratives in newspaper articles, art, photography, and fiction, and audience responses to them. She identifies four prevalent sequences that convey the lens through which the narrator perceives the event – *victim*, *perpetrator*, *context* and *double-casting*. In the first, the victim's perspective dominates the narrative, serving as the entry and central reference point through which social audiences make sense of the violence. Victim sequences contribute to evaluations of violence as morally abhorrent or deviant and the perpetrator as responsible. In contrast, perpetrator sequences normalize violence and thereby attenuate if not relieve the perpetrator's responsibility. By centering the perpetrator's point of view, such sequences rationalize the violence as reasonable or to be expected given the victim's inciting behavior and/or the perpetrator's history of life struggles or prior victimization. Contextual sequences make violence ambiguous by placing setting and circumstances in the foreground. They give priority to details surrounding the violence, thus emphasizing the complexity of the issue. Context sequences support an ambivalent evaluation in which the violence, while being viewed as deplorable, is simultaneously rendered as justified, reasonable, or beyond the control of those involved. Finally, double-casting sequences implicate the victims in the violence, casting them as both victims and perpetrators. While such sequences may place the victim at the center of the story, before sympathy can be built up for the victim, these sequences present details about the victim's own wrongful behavior.

Double-casting sequences de-emphasize both the perpetrator's role in the violence and the victim's suffering.

These sociological studies of crime and violence narratives provide analytic tools to understand how school staff interpret gender-based bullying. Whether and how school staff members respond to and/or intervene in such bullying will depend on how they interpret student behavior. Examining the content and structure of their accounts of gender-based bullying provides insight into these interpretations and helps to illuminate the linkages between faculty interpretations and broader cultural narratives of violence.

At the same time, school staff members are not just social audiences of gender-based bullying. They are also responsible for acting in response to it. Thus, in addition to considering how school staff members situate victims, perpetrators and context in their accounts of gender-based bullying, we draw on positioning theory to examine how school staff members cast themselves as actors in these accounts. Positioning theory helps us to understand how school staff members' accounts reflect a moral stance regarding both their duties and obligations and the rights they assert in relation to gender bullying and to the students involved in such interactions.

### *Positioning Theory*

Positioning theory seeks to illuminate the socio-cultural processes through which people construct and make sense of their social worlds. In particular, it examines how people take up, assign and/or reject rights, duties and obligations for themselves and others within particular settings (Harre, 2004; van Langenhove & Harre, 1999). From this perspective, positions differ from the notion of 'roles,' which reflect an established set of constraints and requirements that people are obligated to take up in their lives. In contrast, positions are understood as the cluster of rights and duties one is enabled to accomplish within a particular interaction (Davies & Harre,

1990). They tend to be situation-specific because they are constructed within a particular lived, local story line. Positions are also contestable; they are open to being disputed and contested on the spot or over time. In short, positioning theory depicts positioning as the on-going construction, assignment and negotiation of fluid 'parts' that make a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts (van Langenhove & Harre 1999).

While positioning theory posits that the fluidity and contingency of social interaction makes it possible for people to take up, assign, and/or reject multiple positions, the range of positions is partially delimited by the moral order in which an interaction is situated (Bullough & Draper, 2004). How people are positioned and how they position others and themselves reflect their sense of the nature and distribution of duties, obligations and rights within a particular context. These duties, obligations and rights are often associated with institutional aspects of social life and reflect differences in the distribution of power and authority associated with institutional roles such as teacher/student, nurse/patient, etc. Acts of positioning thus always entail moral considerations. Shifts in positions that occur within particular interactions thus affect shifts in responsibilities and obligations to others as well as in power relations (Harre & Slocum, 2003).

The emphasis on moral order in positioning theory is highly relevant to the study of school staff responses to gender-based bullying. School staff members occupy institutional positions endowed with particular duties, obligations and rights to act in regards to their students. At the same time, these positions must be negotiated in response to the moment-to-moment interaction through which gender-based bullying takes place. Examining how school staff members position themselves in relation to such interactions and, most importantly, to the students involved, helps us understand their sense of responsibility and obligation to respond to

and intervene in gender-based bullying and to the students involved in these events. In particular, positioning theory helps us to consider how school staff members construct their obligations and duties to both the victims and perpetrators of gender-based bullying.

In sum, drawing on both sociological studies of crime and violence narratives and positioning theory helps us to understand how school staff responses to gender-based bullying are both located within broader cultural understandings of violence, gender and sexuality, and the local meanings that shape how school staff enact their rights and duties in relation to their students. It thus enables us to move beyond depicting school staff members as cultural dupes unconsciously enacting sexist and heterosexist norms, roles and practices or as confused, or unwilling, actors. Bringing both perspectives together to examine school staff members' accounts of gender-based bullying helps to illuminate the interpretive and moral work through which their responses to such violence operate. As such, it has the potential to help us better understand the complexities of these responses.

### **THE STUDY**

The data drawn upon in this paper come from an exploratory study conducted at Midwestern High School during the 2004-2005 school year. At that time, Midwestern High School employed 18 teachers who taught approximately 350 students. Over 94% of the student population was white, non-Hispanic. The Hispanic and Asian student populations reached about 2% each and less than 2% of the students were African American or American Indian. Nineteen percent of the student population was classified as low-income, being eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program.

The school's sexual harassment officer initiated the study by seeking the second author's help in identifying how the school could improve its efforts to address and prevent gender-based

bullying. The central goal of the study was to understand students' experiences of gender-based bullying and their consequences for students' academic engagement. Given the critical role that school staff members play in these experiences, either through intervening or ignoring them, another goal was to understand how Midwestern's faculty and staff defined gender-based bullying, how they responded to it and the ways in which the school's policy entered into and shaped these responses.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

For the larger study, we conducted both a student survey (N= 157) and student interviews. In this article, we draw primarily on our analyses of fifteen interviews with Midwestern's school staff. Participants included ten teachers and five support staff members. This included twelve female and three male school staff members. The interviews, which lasted from thirty to ninety minutes, asked staff to describe the prevalence, severity and features of gender-based bullying, when, how and why they responded to it, and the implementation and effectiveness of the school's sexual harassment policy. The audiotapes of the interviews were independently transcribed prior to analysis.

Two of the authors coded all staff interviews jointly, conferring with a third coder when disputes arose as a means to cross-check the interpretation. In the first phase, we analyzed the interviews using iterative coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Initial runs through the data revealed emergent themes and patterns. Using NVivo2 (QSR 2002) qualitative analysis software we constructed a data matrix that identified the frequency of these themes and their intersections. For this paper, we identified the themes that had the highest number of intersections with statements in which teachers described their responses to gender-based bullying. In total, we coded 350 passages as "response." We then coded these passages according to the type of

gender-based bullying teachers described. The most commonly referred to types were: male/female sexual harassment (49), homophobic bullying (42), and bullying in male/female dating relationships (42).

In the next stage of analysis, we narrowed the passages further, selecting only school staff member accounts of gender-based bullying. We defined an account as an interview passage in which school staff described their own responses to specific incidents of gender-based bullying and to specific students involved in such incidents. Though often short in length, accounts differed from other general responses about gender-based bullying because they contained key story elements, i.e., actors, acts and, contexts. We coded the accounts according to their structure, using Cerulo's categories of victim, perpetrator, context and double-casting sequences. In addition, we found a fifth category that we refer to as a "school staff sequence" which opened with a staff member describing his/her response to a gender-based bullying incident and that maintained a focus on the staff member's actions and perception of the event. Finally, we examined each account to identify how school staff members positioned<sup>1</sup> themselves in relation to the behaviors and students involved. We did this by considering at what point they said they intervened in the situation and how. We also considered which students they described and focused on in their accounts and how they said they attended to these students. This allowed us to identify the ways in which school staff perceived and took up their obligations and responsibilities vis-à-vis their students and incidents of gender-based bullying.

We acknowledge that the data we draw upon for this paper have significant limitations. First, the interview sample was not fully representative of the teaching staff in terms of subject

---

<sup>1</sup> While much research that uses positioning theory examines moment-to-moment social interaction we examine what van Langenhove and Harre (1999) refer to as "second order" positioning or the positioning that occurs in people's accounts of prior interactions.

matter or gender. Given the size of Midwestern's faculty we do not specify the subject matter or staff position of the people we interviewed in order to protect their anonymity. Second, the sample size is small and as a result limits our ability to make generalizations based on subject matter or gender or to specify fully the relevance of these categories to our analyses. Finally, we acknowledge the limitations of drawing primarily on one data source. We attempted to check our interpretations through the joint coding of all interviews, maintaining broad coding categories and aligning our analyses with the theoretical and empirical literature cited above. In other reports, we draw on student surveys more fully and on student interviews conducted in Midwestern to cross check and deepen our analyses of the school staff interviews.

## **FINDINGS**

As a school, Midwestern addressed issues of gender-based bullying both formally and informally. Formal efforts tended to focus specifically on sexual harassment. As noted, the school had a written policy regarding sexual harassment in the student handbook and had a designated sexual harassment officer. What was written in the handbook allowed for considerable individual interpretation on the part of school staff members. A section entitled, "Disruption of School," referred to ways in which students might disrupt school involving the threat of or engagement in violence. Various behaviors were prohibited here, including: fighting and other violent behavior, threatening to harm others, taunting others in order to evoke a violent response, and the use of "grossly abusive" or offensive language. These behaviors were listed along with others such as insubordination, disrespecting school staff members, and disrupting after school detention. In addition to the broad prohibition against school disruption, the handbook also contained a section entitled, "Sexual Harassment." This section described sexual harassment in a very general sense, alluding to the inclusion of both legal and popular

definitions. Specifically, the policy prohibited students' engagement in "unwanted sexual advances or any unwanted visual, verbal or physical conduct" toward another student. The policy stated the school's intent to use the term sexual harassment "in the broadest meaning...in current popular as well as legal usage." There was very little in the handbook to help guide school staff (or students) to understand and respond specifically to gender-based bullying. This is consistent with research findings that the vast majority of school anti-harassment policies are not in compliance with the OCR and ACE mandates (Author, 2006).

Midwestern's staff also attempted to address gender-based bullying informally. Throughout our interviews with them, faculty members made frequent references to the faculty practice of jointly assigning students to teachers who would then be responsible for establishing personal connections with the students. The teachers believed that, as a result of these pairings all students had a significant relationship with at least one teacher in the school. Teachers viewed the student-teacher pairings as a means by which they could readily learn about, intervene in and prevent instances of gender-based bullying. Several staff members described how they reported potential problems between students to the designated faculty who then diffused the problems. School staff members also reported that some teachers had established long-standing relationships with LGBT students and that this contributed to Midwestern being what staff members described as an "accepting" environment for LGBT students. Finally, staff consistently described the school's health teacher, a female, as someone with whom students felt comfortable talking about incidents of gender-based bullying and who could address issues surrounding such bullying in her classroom curriculum.

Though Midwestern's staff had undertaken significant efforts to respond to and prevent gender-based bullying, it remained a problem for many students. Our survey of 157 of the

school's approximately 300 students indicates that half the student respondents had experienced some form of gender-based bullying at least once during the school year, while over one-third had experienced such bullying twice or more. Sexual comments, staring at students' bodies, and sexual remarks about students' gender were among the most common forms of gender-based bullying the Midwestern's students experienced. These were followed by unwanted touching, put downs related to being male or female, telling sexual stories or jokes, homophobic name calling, and spreading sexual rumors. Significantly, survey results indicate that 24% of respondents reported that they talked with a counselor, teacher, or principal about the harassment. This was the least endorsed response. The most common responses were talking to friends (87%) and ignoring the offender (71%). National survey data suggests that students at Midwestern reported incidents of gender-based bullying to school staff members at a slightly higher rate, 24%, than students nation-wide, 20% (AAUW 2001).

Though somewhat higher than the national average, the percentage of students at Midwestern who sought staff member help regarding gender-based bullying remained low. We turn now to examine how Midwesterns' school staff accounted for their responses to gender-based bullying in an effort to understand more fully when, why, and how school staff members intervened, or not, in such bullying.

### **Accounting for Gender-Based Bullying**

Like school staff in other studies, Midwestern's staff readily intervened in cases of gender-based bullying that they characterized as "severe." These "severe" acts included physical attacks as well as unwanted touching, typically of female students by male students. Staff members viewed their response to such acts as implementing the school's sexual harassment policy. As one school staff member noted, "If it's a grabbing thing they're shot to the office."

School staff members also directly intervened in student-to-student verbal harassment. This harassment typically involved male students making overt and public sexual comments to female students. In contrast to severe physical acts, teachers often responded to verbal harassment with warnings and admonishments. School staff members sent offending students to the principal for punishment only when the sexual comments were repeated and overtly public. In this case, school staff responses depended on whether the students' behavior constituted a pattern of harassment.

Though school staff members readily intervened in severe, chronic and public cases of physical or verbal harassment, they reported that most gender-based bullying in Midwestern was subtle, which aligns with students' perceptions as indicated by the survey. They characterized gender-based bullying as "mental," "under the radar" and "behind the scenes." One school staff member noted, "Sexual harassment is almost invisible." Though school staff members often found it difficult to intervene in gender-based bullying given its subtle nature, they believed that they were responsible for intervening in it before it became severe. In these cases, the school's sexual harassment policy provided the faculty with little guidance. School staff members described their responses to the more pervasive, subtle cases of gender-based bullying as "intuitive":

- 1 ...it's very intuitive when you know what the fine line is between, "Ok, this is just
- 2 somebody saying something idiotic and they don't know it's offended someone," and you
- 3 can talk to them, and then the extreme thing where yeah, someone's doing something
- 4 horrible to somebody, and so, um, we can, everyone can usually, within that parameter,
- 5 know whether to deal with it themselves or they send the kid in for, for um, for discipline.

An essential part of school staff members' interpretive work revolved around determining the frame of the student interaction (lines 2-3). School staff members consistently talked about attempting to distinguish between "jokes" and "teasing" between friends and those statements that were intended to be "offensive" and "malicious." To do so, they reported that they had to read the "subtexts" of comments, touches, and "innuendos."

In the following sections, we delineate the content and structure of this interpretive work by examining school staff member accounts of three types of gender-based bullying: male-on-female sexual harassment, violence situated in heterosexual dating relationships, and homophobic bullying. Midwestern staff members mentioned these types of gender-based bullying most often in interviews with us. Our analyses illuminate the gendered division of labor through which school staff distributed their own and their students' responsibilities and rights in regards to gender-based bullying and reveal the ways in which school staff member responses to such violence was bound up with even as they sought to disrupt sexist and heterosexist narratives, norms and practices that reinforce social hierarchies which privilege heterosexual men above all women and gay men.

*Male-on-Female Sexual Harassment: Victim & Perpetrator Sequences and the Gendered-Division of Faculty Responsibility*

Midwestern's school staff reported that male-on-female sexual harassment was a prevalent form of gender-based bullying. When they described cases of such bullying, they used both perpetrator and victim sequences. Of the fifteen accounts of sexual harassment we coded in the school staff interviews, three accounts were structured according to school staff sequences, six were victim sequences and six were perpetrator sequences. In school staff sequences, school staff members began their accounts by highlighting their own actions and responses to the student

behaviors. Significantly, these sequences centered on cases in which teachers intervened swiftly in highly public and visible behaviors that they witnessed directly and that they readily identified as sexual harassment. In these accounts, school staff members positioned themselves as “prosecutors.” They reported that they “hailed in” and “prosecute(d)” the offending students and grounded their responses in these cases in both school policy and the law. As one school staff member noted,

- 1 ...explain to them what the law is, because most of the time in high school we insulate
- 2 the kids from the law... They get punished by the school, they aren't necessarily
- 3 punished out here in society, and, and so things can happen in the school, get taken care
- 4 of. We try to teach them that, at a certain point, they're, they're turned over to the law,
- 5 and we try to explain to them, if you get this turned over to the law, you're going to be in
- 6 so much more trouble than you are with us and our little suspensions.

In contrast to these school staff sequences and the position of “prosecutor” that Midwestern’s school staff members took up in response to severe and public sexual harassment, evaluations of and responses to the more prevalent, subtle sexual harassment were more complex. School staff members used both victim and perpetrator sequences to describe this harassment and constructed dual obligations to the students involved.

*Victim Sequences: “Quiet Girls” and “Unaware Investigators”*

In her analyses of violence narratives, Cerulo (1998) argues that victim sequences typically construct violence as morally abhorrent. The emphasis on the victim’s perspective highlights the negative consequences of violence. We found that Midwestern’s school staff often employed victim sequences to structure their accounts of male-on-female sexual harassment. School staff members began these accounts by describing the female victims. These descriptions typically

cast the female students as “shy” or “quiet” girls. The following account typifies such victim sequences:

1 There are some girls that are very, very shy... a lot of time you won't hear some of the  
2 stuff that goes on, but you can start to see that something's not right. Last year, I had one  
3 student that was sexually harassed...I can't even remember all the comments. I finally  
4 figured out all the comments and this poor girl. She was super, super quiet and very shy,  
5 and finally somebody spoke up for her and said that 'Yeah, he's not only doing it to her,  
6 he's doing it to several other people'...just a very sneaky young man, and, uh, that's  
7 when I started pulling other people in outside saying, 'What's going on? Something's  
8 wrong, uh. What can you tell me?' And that one, we went to the office and he, for awhile,  
9 was sitting next to me while we tried to figure out what was going on, and then he left  
10 the school).

In the victim sequence, school staff members took up the female victim's perspective. They began their accounts by describing the victim and emphasizing her weakness or passivity (lines 1-4). As in the account above, they tended to describe “shy,” “quiet” girls who had to be “spoken up for” by other students. Though they characterized the male perpetrators negatively, as “sneaky,” school staff tended to focus on the victim's vulnerability rather than on the perpetrator.

Within the victim sequences, school staff members positioned themselves and their female students in two ways. First, like the account above, school staff members emphasized their obligation to intervene on the behalf of the targeted female students. This required school staff members to attend closely to these students' behaviors and responses to the sexual harassment. They watched for whether female students got angry when male students touched

them in the hallways or if the female students “felt uncomfortable” when the male students made sexual comments. In particular, school staff members consistently reported that they intervened immediately if they saw female students crying. School staff members explained their dependence on the female students to report incidents of sexual harassment to them because they believed that male-on-female sexual harassment so often operated through the “little things” that they could not directly hear or see. While they sought to act on the behalf of their female students, staff members’ almost singular focus on these students’ reactions ultimately extended the female students’ obligations to put an end to sexual harassment. As the account above suggests, female students had to take up the position of distressed and fragile victim in order for staff members to intervene.

Second, while male and female school staff members used victim sequences to structure their accounts of male-on-female sexual harassment, female school staff members positioned themselves differently in regards to the female victims than did male school staff members. When the three male school staff members intervened on behalf of the female victims of sexual harassment, they tended to do so by admonishing or punishing the male perpetrators. The female school staff members, however, not only punished the male perpetrators, positioning themselves as “prosecutors,” but they also positioned themselves as “older, more experienced women” in contrast to their “immature” female students. Female school staff members reported that they talked to female students whom they perceived as targets of male students’ sexually harassing behaviors both about how to identify such behaviors and how the female students’ own behaviors contributed to and could prevent the harassment. Female school staff members exhorted their female students to view sexual touching and comments as harassment rather than flirting and to resist being positioned by male students as sexual objects. They talked to the

female students about modifying their clothing and sexual behaviors, admonishing them to change clothes that showed “too much skin” and not to allow male students to touch them without their consent. One female school staff member reported that she had advised a female student to limit her sexual activity because she would be harassed at school because of it. The female school staff members characterized such efforts as “heightening the girls’ awareness.” As another female school staff member noted,

- 1 Interviewer: Okay So if people see that (grabbing in the hallway) happen how is it
- 2 handled, especially if the girls are not angry about it?
- 3 School staff member: Usually I confront the girls. Um...my line is pretty much ‘If
- 4 somebody’s gonna’ do that to me they better look me in the eyes.’ You know type of
- 5 thing, to get and they’re always like “Oh Ms. \_\_\_\_\_.” Well I’m like well that’s the thing,
- 6 you know. ‘What do you think you’re doing? I wouldn’t allow that to happen.’ Um so I
- 7 guess just try to make them aware of what the intentions are...I just try to heighten their
- 8 awareness.

The female school staff members positioned themselves not only as “school staff members” but also as women who potentially faced the same type of harassment by males that their female students faced. As they gendered their institutional role, the female school staff members extended their authority and obligations vis-à-vis their female students to include exhorting the students to behave in ways that the staff members believed would curtail the harassment. The female school staff members viewed this positioning as one that empowered their female students. At the same time, however, it also constructed the female students as complicit in the sexual harassment. The female teacher cited above described how she questioned female students, “What do you think you’re doing? I wouldn’t let that happen to me,” holding the latter

responsible for their own harassment by contrasting the students' silence to her own imagined resistance.

*Perpetrator Sequences: Immature Boys and Male Faculty Responsibilities*

In addition to victim sequences, we also found that school staff employed perpetrator sequences to describe incidents of male-on-female sexual harassment. These sequences were employed by male school staff members and emphasized their attempts to educate "immature" and "inexperienced" male students. The following comment from one of Midwestern's male school staff members typifies this type of sequence and illustrates the ways in which male school staff members took responsibility for the male students with whom they had some personal connections:

- 1 Me and a kid last year. He got suspended several times because he's never figured out
- 2 this was sexual harassment. He was trying to compliment girls by pointing out what nice
- 3 breasts they had....as near as I can tell he meant no harm...these were girls that he was
- 4 attracted to...I had to explain to him over and over again that is sexual harassment... it
- 5 was like three offenses over the course of the year.

The male school staff members we interviewed at Midwestern saw it as their responsibility to educate male students regarding gender-based bullying by explaining how the students' actions constituted sexual harassment (line 4). They further situated this response within their relationships with the offending male students. In the account above, the male school staff member framed his description of the incident by first placing himself in relation to and alongside the offending student (line 1). He then went on to report that he talked frequently with this student and that, through this, he came to interpret the student's behavior as immaturity rather than maliciousness (lines 2-3). In this way, the school staff member's account

simultaneously normalized the sexual harassment as a product of adolescent sexual development at the same time the school staff member positioned himself as responsible for teaching the student that the behavior was offensive. Thus, while the positioning of the student as an “immature boy” mitigated the students’ responsibility for the harassment, the school staff member maintained his own duty to educate and punish the student.

*Heterosexual Dating Violence<sup>2</sup> and Homophobic Bullying: Ambiguity and Attenuated Responsibility*

While Midwestern’s school staff felt strongly about their dual obligations both to prosecute and educate their students regarding male-on-female sexual harassment, they expressed considerable ambivalence about their responsibilities to address the gender-based bullying that occurred in heterosexual dating relationships and the homophobic bullying targeted at students perceived or self-identified as gay or lesbian. This ambivalence was reflected in the context sequences that dominated the school staff member’s accounts of these types of gender-based bullying and in the positioning of targeted gay and lesbian students as both victims and perpetrators. The positions the faculty took up within these accounts were much more ambiguous than those they took up in relation to male-on-female sexual harassment.

Context Sequences – Heterosexual Dating Violence

As we noted above, a key feature of school staff member interpretations of gender-based bullying was the “frame” in which the behaviors were situated. Heterosexual dating relationships constituted an important frame. School staff member’s knowledge of these relationships was especially critical to how they interpreted physical interactions between male

---

<sup>2</sup> We use the term heterosexual here to refer to relationships between female and male students, but acknowledge that the students involved in these relationships may or may not identify as heterosexuals.

and female students. The following comment illustrates the salience of these relationships to school staff member responses to gender-based bullying:

- 1 You see a lot of touching and you're not sure if it's welcome or not until you know who's
- 2 boyfriend and girlfriend and all that. And even that's actually against the rule also public
- 3 displays of affection are technically not allowed. Um and you know obvious ones we do
- 4 prosecute, I guess that's the word. Punish them or tell them to knock it off

School staff members consistently associated the school's sexual harassment policy with what they referred to as a "no touching policy." They frequently mentioned incidents of heterosexual couples kissing or "making out" in school hallways when we asked about how boys bully girls. While they did not consider such behavior as gender-based bullying, the school staff viewed controlling this type of sexual contact, or "public displays of attention," as part of the school's efforts to curb sexual harassment. Several school staff members told the story of one couple that got "out of hand" and were eventually suspended for their sexual behavior as representative of how the school was addressing gender-based bullying. Knowing students' dating relationships reduced the demands of both interpretation and intervention. School staff members could readily enforce the "no touching policy" for flagrant and public sexual behavior, but ignore more constrained behavior if they knew the students involved were dating.

Knowing students' dating patterns did not, however, mitigate the difficulties school staff members encountered responding to the violence that occurred in heterosexual relationships. In contrast to the "no touching" policy, there were no school policies to help teachers deal with this situation. A male school staff member described his attempts to deal with an incident of gender-based bullying that was situated in a heterosexual dating relationship as follows:

- 1 The other major thing that I've had happen in class, a lot of times, are (sic) boyfriend

2 girlfriend things... I have a real volatile pair in my class, and they um, they're really hard  
3 to catch. I can't always hear what they're saying, but you can tell that he's mad at her and  
4 he's, you know, telling her, you know, that she's, she's stupid, that she shouldn't be  
5 doing this, that, or the other thing, and she's definitely more subservient. If I had to bet I  
6 would think that he's also very physical with her, because she's very tiny, uh, she's also  
7 Spanish which is stereotypical, but I mean, when I think about some of her behaviors  
8 as, as serving him...but he's very aggressive, both verbally and I'm sure physically....I  
9 had to get right down next to them, because they were right next to each other at that  
10 point...I said, 'You have to describe things differently,' because he was using foul  
11 language, um, 'You are not allowed to do that, if you can't, you may not sit here,' and  
12 then they pretty much got a lot quieter, you know, as to what was going on, but you could  
13 tell that they were butting heads, and they've been going together, it's probably their third  
14 year.

In contrast to both victim and perpetrator sequences in which school staff clearly positioned themselves along side either the victim or the perpetrator, when school staff members described the gender-based bullying that occurred within heterosexual dating relationships their accounts began with references to the students' relationship. Though the school staff members did negatively describe the female or male students who they perceived as the aggressors in heterosexual dating relationships, their accounts of gender-based bullying in these relationships positioned the students as a dyad in which the aggression of one partner was matched by the meekness of the other (lines 5-6). The school staff members thus tended to characterize the two students as mutually constructing the violence. The account cited above illustrates this assignment of guilt. Though the school staff member emphasized the male students' aggression

and the female students' timidity and fragility, he referred to them as "butting heads," (line13) noting that, "*they're* (emphasis added) really hard to catch" (line 1). This positioned both students, the victim as well as the perpetrator, as responsible for the bullying.

What school staff members were responsible for doing in relation to the violence that occurred within heterosexual dating relationships was highly uncertain. School staff members coped with this uncertainty by positioning themselves in a highly circumscribed institutional role of "the school staff member" whose authority and obligations were bounded by classroom walls. For example, though the school staff member cited above believed that the male student was physically hurting the female student outside of his classroom, he only addressed the bullying that occurred inside the classroom. As was expected among Midwestern's school staff members, he defused the situation before it became what would be considered extreme or severe. The male student's comments remained largely confined to his interactions with his girlfriend; the teacher's intervention prevented them from spilling over into the full public space of the classroom. At the same time, the teacher did not attempt to address the broader violence that he believed the male student committed in the relationship.

Though other school staff members in Midwestern described trying to intervene in gender-based bullying situated in dating relationships they did so reluctantly. Another male school staff member described talking to each student involved in a dating relationship in which he believed the girl dominated the boy. In this case, the school staff member described how he had to negotiate his role by being "sneaky," noting, "Sometimes if you got both of them together you can, you can kinda have an open discussion about it and, and a kinda bein' sneaky in a way, but the discussion's there." The repeated qualifiers reflected the considerable uncertainty that marked school staff members' accounts of their responses to gender-based bullying that occurred

in dating relationships. Similarly, some female school staff members reported that they talked with female students who they believed were being abused or sexually exploited in their dating relationships by counseling them to consider the negative consequences of such relationships. The staff members stressed the limitations of their position. One female staff member asserted, “You’re not going to convince them to stop seeing whoever...” Another noted that she was careful to distinguish her position as “a school staff member” from that of “a counselor:”

- 1 Well legally, yeah, you know, I’m not a counselor, and so I can’t just, you know, “Oh,
- 2 this is the word according to Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_.” You have to be. You have to keep in mind
- 3 they’re minors... So I’m always lecturing.

Though the school staff members embraced a dual set of obligations in regards to addressing male-on-female sexual harassment, in the case of dealing with bullying located within heterosexual dating relationships, they constructed the position of “school staff member” in ways that narrowed their responsibility and obligations to intervene. School staff members largely limited their responses to “lecturing” in these cases. These boundaries were reinforced by the lack of any type of concerted, school-level effort to address violence in heterosexual dating even though the faculty did view it as a form of gender-based bullying.

#### Double-Casting Gay & Lesbian Students

Staff accounts of gender-based bullying involving students that self-identified or were perceived to be gay or lesbian<sup>3</sup> also reflected considerable ambivalence among Midwestern’s staff members. School staff members consistently reported that anti-gay slurs and harassment were the most common form of gender-based bullying in the school, describing such bullying as

---

<sup>3</sup> We recognize that referring only to gay and lesbian students can be exclusionary of and/or render invisible students who may identify as bisexual or transgender. We use the terms gay and lesbian because the school staff members of Midwestern referred to their students as such and the incidents they reported only included lesbian and gay students.

“the biggest one” or “one of the top ten forms of bullying here.” One school staff member defined gender-based bullying as “the homosexual issue.” Similar to dating relationships, student friendships were important frames to staff interpretations of homophobic bullying; school staff members admonished but did not punish students for targeting homophobic insults at their friends. Yet, the school had made concerted efforts to address homophobic bullying. Several school staff members said that they repeatedly told their students they would not tolerate students calling other students “gay” or using homophobic slurs such as “fag.” Some school staff members also admonished students who used the phrase “that’s so gay.” Summing up what the school staff members perceived to be strong efforts to remedy homophobic bullying, one school staff member noted that the school staff really “stomped on” the students for calling other students gay because it was so persistent. This school staff member felt that the incidents of homophobic name-calling had decreased because of such efforts.

In their accounts of homophobic bullying, however, school staff members at Midwestern double-casted the targeted students as both victim and perpetrator. While school staff members believed that gay and lesbian students were frequent targets of bullying at Midwestern, when they described incidents of homophobic gender-based bullying they consistently positioned these students, particularly the gay male students, as aggressors. The following account exemplifies this double-casting:

- 1 We had this exceptionally feminine boy...the freshmen teachers I think had to intervene
- 2 several times because he had to- he ended up, you know, putting himself in situations
- 3 where he’d get in trouble because he had to defend himself. He ended up calling other
- 4 people “assholes” and things like that um because he was being picked on...I couldn’t
- 5 really give you specifics. I know of a teacher who did deal with him a lot. But I don’t

6 know necessarily how she went about helping him deal with it

As with victim sequences, double-casting sequences begin with the victim, emphasizing his apparent weakness, here the male student's "effeminate" characteristics (line 1). In the next three lines (2-4), however, the school staff member describes the student simultaneously as the victim and the aggressor. The school staff member describes the male student "putting himself" in situations which made him vulnerable to being bullied. Then, as a result of his own acts, the student lashed out at his initial victimizers.

The following account further illustrates the double-casting of gay and lesbian students. It reveals how this double-casting entered into school staff members' responses to homophobic bullying:

1 We have some gay kids, and they get it too. They get the, 'You're gay...' We have a lot  
 2 of discussions with kids that say, 'Well I don't want to sit next to him 'cause he's  
 3 gay.'...and you're like... 'He's not hitting on you. If he starts hitting on you, you  
 4 don't want him hitting on that's sexual harassmentWe can take care of that.'...Why is  
 5 this an issue?' I said, 'We don't we don't even need to talk about sexuality, you know.  
 6 That's not. It doesn't need to be discussed...'

The account reflects both school staff members' perceptions that "gay kids" were targets of gender-based bullying in Midwestern and their own efforts to intervene in such bullying. The school staff member begins the account by sympathizing with gay victims and goes on to describe how she tries to counter homophobia in her classroom (lines 1-3). She then moves, however, to cast the gay student as a potential harasser. In line 3 she asserts that if the gay student were to "hit on" the ostensibly heterosexual male students that would constitute "sexual harassment" and she would "take care of" those actions (line 4). Notably, the teacher

automatically cast these behaviors from a same-sex student as sexual harassment. In their interviews, however, school staff members did not appear to make the same automatic assumption about such behaviors between males and females. Further, in the account above, the school staff member's ambivalence is further reinforced by her statements that the class did not "need" to discuss sexuality, positioning the mention of sexuality and by extension, homosexuality as beyond the bounds of classroom talk (lines 5-6).

Significantly, the school staff members' accounts of homophobic bullying rarely identified specific perpetrators, typically referring to generalized "students" or, in several cases not mentioning the perpetrators of homophobic bullying at all. Instead, the school staff accounts emphasized the gay and lesbian students' responsibility for their own victimization. In addition, school staff members positioned the gay and lesbian students as outside of positive relationships with either teachers or other students. As we noted above, school staff members used their knowledge of students' relationships to determine if and when to intervene in gender-based bullying that involved ostensibly heterosexual students. When the school staff members described incidents of homophobic bullying, however, they did not locate gay or lesbian students in friendships with other students. In fact, teachers often spoke of lesbian and gay students without reference to any other people as if they were isolated, perhaps reflecting the students' actual marginalization. They also constructed significant distance between themselves and gay and lesbian students. In their accounts of homophobic bullying, school staff members noted that other, unspecified teachers dealt with the gay or lesbian students targeted. Further, while they consistently embraced their duties to address homophobic statements, they did so by emphasizing their duties to educate the students that made such comments; they did not describe interacting with the gay and lesbian students. Thus, while school staff members enforced rules

regarding homophobic language in their classrooms, their accounts suggest considerable ambivalence about their duties to their gay and lesbian students.

### **DISCUSSION**

School staff members play a critical role in addressing and preventing gender-based bullying. To date, research suggests that they have largely not fulfilled these obligations. Students perceive school staff members as unresponsive and interpret their inaction as condoning the violence. Few students seek school staff member assistance. The few studies of school staff responses to gender-based bullying substantiate these findings, highlighting both staff confusion about how to identify and intervene in such violence and their normalizing of gender-based bullying as a natural part of adolescent male sexual development.

The findings we present here both substantiate and extend this research. Like staff members in other studies, when staff members at Midwestern described their responses to male-on-female sexual harassment, they employed a developmental discourse that emphasized their students' immaturity, framing this type of gender-based bullying as the product of youthful ignorance rather than acts of domination, coercion or violence. At the same time, Midwestern's staff also considered it their responsibility to raise their students' awareness of sexual harassment in efforts both to remedy and prevent it. Midwestern's staff did not simply ignore this form of gender-based bullying. They sought, in many cases, to hold offending students responsible and to educate both the perpetrator and the victim. The study thus presents a more nuanced understanding of school staff responses to gender-based bullying, particularly sexual harassment, than that found in much of the current research.

Our findings also illuminate the challenges school staff face in identifying and intervening in gender-based bullying. First, Midwestern's staff found it difficult to "see"

incidents of such bullying. While they consistently punished severe and public acts, they also acknowledged that they often remained unaware of the gender-based bullying that occurred under their supervision. This stemmed, in part, from the ways in which much gender-based bullying operated through small movements and comments just outside of staff members' sight or hearing. These challenges were further compounded by the situated nature of gender-based bullying. Whether a touch or a comment constituted bullying depended on the nature of the relationships among the students, school staff members' knowledge of these relationships and the potentially negative consequences that school staff members faced in disrupting or misreading the relationships.

Paradoxically, school staff members' efforts to "see" gender-based bullying by reading the victim's responses, sometimes ran counter to their efforts to prevent such violence. This was particularly true in regards to male-on-female sexual harassment. In this type of gender-based bullying, Midwestern's staff members watched to see if targeted female students registered signs of distress, discomfort or anger. While staff members readily intervened when they observed these signs, their emphasis on "seeing" male-on-female sexual harassment through the victim's reactions ultimately made the victims responsible for initiating faculty action while the male perpetrators largely escaped surveillance. In addition, staff members' emphasis on "quiet" and "crying" girls positioned female students in traditional feminine roles as appropriate victims of gender-based bullying.

Our findings regarding how female staff members' positioned themselves in relation to female targets of sexual harassment further reveal the complexities of staff responses to gender-based bullying. Female school staff members at Midwestern constructed their responsibilities towards male-on-female sexual harassment as both admonishing male students when they

engaged in harassing behaviors and raising female students' awareness of such harassment. In their accounts of gender-based bullying, female staff members repeatedly described how they were more likely to interpret male students' actions as sexual harassment than were their female students. Such reports echo findings from studies of responses to workplace sexual harassment that indicate that women tend to view offensive behavior as sexual harassment more often than men do and that older women are more likely to see actions as sexual harassment than are younger women, particularly when the situation is ambiguous or less severe (Weiner & Hurt, 2000; O'Connor, Gutek, Stockdale, Geer & Melancon, 2004; Russell & U Trigg, 2004). These tendencies reflect, in part, the processes of self-referencing through which women, particularly older women place themselves in targeted women's positions.

While self-referencing appears to be critical to efforts to prevent and prosecute sexual harassment in the workplace, our study suggests that such self-referencing on the part of female school staff may engender double-edged staff responses. Midwestern's female staff members advised their female students on ways that the students could control their own behaviors to reduce their chances of being harassed by their male peers. The female staff members intended such advice to empower their female students by encouraging them to take action and to speak against the harassment their male peers directed towards them. Such advice, however, also positioned female students as complicit in their own harassment, mitigating, to some degree male students' responsibility for the harassment. The nature of our data limits our ability to examine questions of why the female staff members reacted in this way. The finding does, however, suggest the need for further research that considers the complexities of self-referencing, particularly as it relates to efforts to prevent gender-based bullying in educational settings. Educators, and female educators, in particular, given their obligation to educate as well as

discipline, may face heightened challenges in establishing and enacting their own and their students' responsibilities for intervening in and preventing gender-based bullying than do employers.

The present study further contributes new insight into school staff responses to both the violence that occurs in heterosexual dating relationships and homophobic bullying. It is estimated that nearly one in ten youth in the US are victims of physical dating violence (Choose Respect Annual Report 2005-2006). Midwestern's school staff considered the acts of domination and the threatened and actual violence that occurred in some of their students' heterosexual dating relationships as a form of gender-based bullying. They were, however, highly uncertain about how they could or should respond to such acts. While school staff members sought to assist students they perceived as being abused or taken advantage of in dating relationships, their actions were highly circumscribed and covert. They had little hope that they could actually improve the situation or that they had any authority to do so. In the end, the school staff members limited their responsibility to "sneaky" attempts at persuasion and enforcing classroom rules.

Staff member responses to homophobic bullying were also marked by considerable ambivalence. Research consistently confirms the prevalence of homophobic bullying in US schools nationwide. One third of students report frequent harassment as a result of their identity, or perceived identity, as LGBT. This includes name-calling, threats and physical assault (Harris Interactive and GLSEN, 2005). Midwestern's staff all believed that such bullying was among the most prevalent form of gender-based bullying in the school. They reported that the school had made several efforts to address homophobic bullying, focusing specifically on addressing issues of language and name-calling. However, staff accounts of such efforts suggest that the efforts

often worked to reinforce the marginalization of gay and lesbian students in the school. While staff members admonished students who used homophobic language, they did so in ways that silenced discussion of sexuality and that often positioned gay and lesbian students as either sexual harassers or as causing the violence directed against them. Further, school staff members constructed their obligations to address homophobic bullying as one-dimensional; they punished the name-calling but did not, as they did in male-on-female sexual harassment, take on responsibilities to engage with their gay and lesbian students as parallel targets of gender-based bullying. The school staff members we interviewed never located themselves in relationships with their gay and lesbian students. Thus, while school staff members believed that their efforts to “stomp on” or address homophobic bullying had reduced the incidents of homophobic bullying, these efforts operated within and reinforced a broader heterosexism that both silenced discussions of sexuality and reinforced the social exclusion of gay and lesbian students.

In short, the study moves beyond the negative, one-dimensional portrayal of school staff responses to gender-base bullying that tends to dominate existing research. School staff members in Midwestern made considerable efforts to intervene in and prevent gender-based bullying. The willingness of the majority of the school staff to address gender-based bullying points to their awareness of the severity and potential negative impact such bullying can have on their students and their students’ schooling opportunities. School staff members at Midwestern worked hard to build and maintain positive relationships with their students to reduce this impact, as evidenced by their pairing of students with faculty. Midwestern’s school staff was also not satisfied with their own efforts to combat gender-based bullying. It was the staff that initiated this research as a means towards further educating themselves and their students on these issues.

It would be inaccurate, then, to presume that staffs' responses to gender-based bullying were attempts to avoid responsibility or simply their falling prey to societal norms and standards. Yet, these responses and staff members' accounts of them did often reinforce sexist and heterosexist roles, norms, and practices. This was, at least in part, enabled by the extreme vagueness of the school's policies on bullying and sexual harassment. Given this vagueness, school staff members had to make their own intuitive judgments of and responses to incidents of gender-based bullying. They did so in a context marked by considerably complexity. School staff had to quickly make sense of and respond to subtle, moment-to-moment interactions that were located within complex relationships and they often had to do so as they engaged with the uncertainties of teaching itself. In particular, our findings suggest that without the aid of more fully developed and institutionalized practices supported by school policy, staff members drew on cultural narratives of violence and gender that positioned female and gay and lesbian students as responsible for their own victimization.

Staff member responses also reflected a broader, underlying tension between their obligation to monitor what they perceived to be public versus private spaces within classrooms and schools. This tension was most apparent in staff members' responses to the gender-based bullying that occurred in heterosexual dating relationships. Staff members clearly located this bullying within a private sphere over which they had little authority. While staff members sought to intervene in and halt overt bullying behaviors between students in dating relationships their central goal was often to prevent such violence from spilling over into the larger public spaces of the classroom or the school.

The division of public and private spheres of action was also evident in staff members' responses to homophobic bullying. As our findings suggest, staff members addressed overt

name-calling but silenced broader discussions of sexuality and sexual orientation in their classrooms, positioning such discussions as matters beyond the boundaries of the subject matter curriculum. More broadly, though Midwestern's staff had mounted several efforts to address gender-based bullying, these efforts remained distinct from rather than integrated into the school curriculum. This effectively positioned most gender-based bullying that occurred in the school within a private sphere. While staff members readily employed the school's sexual harassment policy to address gender-based bullying that was severe and highly visible, they tended to treat subtler incidents of gender-based bullying as behaviors and interactions between individual students that could and should be attended to on an individual basis.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

Though the exploratory nature of the present study limits the extent to which we can draw definitive conclusions, our findings raise several possibilities for research and school practice. First, additional research is needed on factors that promote or inhibit teachers' effective responses to gender-based and general forms of bullying and harassment. For example, little is known regarding the moment to moment decision-making strategies teachers use in determining when and how to respond and what other concerns they consider when deciding on an appropriate response (e.g., student's academic standing, perpetrator and target's behavior outside of the current bullying event, whether they perceive the anti-harassment policy and its administration to be fair or biased, etc). Greater insight into the exact factors teachers weigh before responding will inform intervention strategies and future training for teachers.

Further, while interview data provides insight into the interpretive work through which school staff members make sense of and respond to gender-based bullying, our study points to the need for more in-depth research. Gender-based bullying occurs through moment-to-moment,

micro-processes of interaction and interpretation. Such processes may be better captured and understood with observational research. However, observational research on this topic is not without challenges. Perhaps first and foremost, the micro-nature of these processes and the salience of the relational context in which they occur make it difficult for an “objective” observer to capture these interactions. Observational research may also miss some common forms of bullying, such as spreading rumors about classmates outside of school that permeate the school environment, or sending harassing emails and text messages. One possibility for addressing these challenges is to engage students as researchers. Pellegrini and Bartini (2000), for example, provided students with diaries in which they were to provide accounts of their harassment experiences. These were a powerful way of detecting behaviors that are difficult to detect via observation. Future research could extend this work by training student observers to document experiences they witness. Actively engaging students in such efforts could also be essential to a comprehensive approach to developing school-based interventions to end gender-based bullying in high schools.

Research demonstrates that harassment proliferates in schools where staff do not actively monitor peer social interactions and provide guidance on ways to interact effectively (Pellegrini & Blantchford, 2000; Stein, 1995). Therefore, the most proactive and immediate strategy is to equip teachers with the skills they need to feel confident in determining what acts constitute bullying and in responding when they occur (AAUW, 2004). This may require that schools have ongoing training on the contents of the anti-harassment policy, current legal statutes, and national trends, such as the upsurge in cyber-bullying. Equally important, schools must foster regular communication among school staff on the types of incidents that are occurring in their building, those students involved, how teachers responded, the adequacy of this response, and

coordination of a consistent and unified response to bullying and harassment. As staff members establish clear rules regarding behaviors, promote and reward pro-social behavior, and present clear and consistently applied consequences for violations, harassment and bullying decrease (Sandler & Stonehill, 2005; Flannery et al., 2003; Metzler, Biglan, Rusby, & Sprague, 2001; King, Tribble, & Price, 1999).

Clear, comprehensive and accessible school policies are necessary in such efforts. According to the OCR (1997) schools must publish and disseminate: 1) a policy opposing sex discrimination (of which sexual harassment is one form), 2) a grievance procedure for complainants, and 3) procedures for the "prompt and equitable resolution of complaints." Additionally, the American Council on Education (ACE) advises that policies include: 1) a definition of sexual harassment, 2) a clear statement that sexual harassment will not be tolerated, 3) a grievance procedure that is easily accessible to students, 4) and a strategy for disseminating policy contents to everyone in the school community (Holub, 1996; Wagner, 1990). The OCR/ACE guidelines also recommend incorporating specific plans for investigating and responding to instances of sexual harassment, including a timeframe for the investigation, where reports can be filed, the designation of at least one person to handle complaints, and a plan for disciplinary action against harassers.

The OCR and ACE emphasizes the need for policies to pointedly address sexual harassment in order to promote student and staff understanding that sexual harassment is strictly prohibited. In order to signal intolerance of gender-based bullying more broadly and to meet their legal obligations, school policies should also pointedly address the range of behaviors that comprise gender-based bullying, including intimidation and assaults based on sexual orientation (Author, 2005). *Oncale v. Sundowner Offshore Services, Inc.* (1998) has set precedence for

employer liability for same-sex sexual harassment and although not all legal issues regarding LGBT students have been resolved, some courts have held that Title IX, which the OCR/ACE guidelines refer to, offers protections to LGBT students. Further, some states and communities have enacted statutes, regulations and professional standards prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (GLSEN, 2007). Including intimidation and assaults based on sexual orientation in formal anti-bullying policies is a powerful signal that such violence is not tolerated and that LGBT students have a right to a safe school environment in which they can learn.

Finally, the OCR also recognizes the importance of policy accessibility. Given the pervasiveness and frequent subtleties of gender-based bullying, it is paramount that students have access to these policies and know how to utilize them on their own behalf. Policy accessibility can be increased in numerous ways, such as having handbooks available in the office, resource center, and school library; giving copies to each student every year; and making the policy available on the school website (Lichty, Torres, Valenti, & Buchanan, 2007). If followed, the OCR/ACE guidelines can assist schools in reducing gender-based bullying and sexual harassment, as well as reducing the school's legal liability when harassment does occur.

Schools must also examine their social and physical environment. In previous studies, students and teachers both report that general and gender-based bullying and harassment rarely occur in classrooms where teachers are perceived as being actively involved and engaged with students academically and personally (Aster, et al., 1999). These teachers are characterized as proactively dealing with social interactions and having a clear, immediate, and consistent response to inappropriate behaviors—further demonstrating the essential and powerful role teachers can have in the reduction of school bullying and violence. It is also essential that schools evaluate their physical structure and gather information on where bullying events occur;

then increase adult presence in those places. Although many acts are committed within sight of teachers, the most violent acts (rape and assault) are often committed in spaces that are not staffed regularly, or in common areas during times when staff are rarely present (Sandler & Stonehill, 2005; Astor, et al., 1999). Once again, faculty and staff can play a critical role in minimizing these occurrences.

Finally, schools are microcosms of the larger society in which there is a gendered hierarchy that places heterosexual men above all women and gay men. As a result, schools can train children in a social order based on gendered oppression and exploitation. The larger sociocultural framework regarding gender and aggression norms, particularly as they pertain to adolescents must be examined in order to truly eradicate gender-based bullying in schools (Grube & Lens 2003; Lugg, 2003; Rodkin & Fischer, 2003; Welsh, 1999). Workshops on gender-based bullying and anti-bullying clubs like those that staff and students engaged in at Midwestern can provide spaces in schools to undertake such examinations with students. At the same time, such efforts tend to be positioned as in addition to and outside of the “real” school curriculum. In order to engage students in sustained, critical examination of the sexist and heterosexist narratives, norms and practices through which gender-based bullying operates, schools and teachers need to integrate such examinations into the core curriculum. This can be done in several ways. At the level of classroom rules, teachers can engage students in explicit examination of gender-based bullying and elicit their cooperation in identifying teachers and students’ responsibilities for identifying and punishing such bullying in classrooms. At the level of curriculum, teachers can include units explicitly focused on gendered violence that help students to distinguish between menacing and violent behaviors and flirting, and that extend the focus to include male targets of sexual harassment as well as homophobic bullying and dating

violence (Stein, 1999; Beck, 1998; AAUW, 2004). In addition, teachers can integrate examinations of sexism and heterosexism, and efforts to combat them, into the broader curriculum through such approaches as history units on civil rights or literature units on gender roles. Co-teaching by males and females can also send students a powerful message about the relevance and the responsibilities of teachers and students of both sexes to intervene in and prevent gender-based bullying (Stein & Sjostrom, 1994). Placing critical examinations of sexist and heterosexist systems of thinking, norms, and practices within the broader curriculum can locate gender-based bullying within the public sphere of the classroom and school and can both obligate and empower teachers and students to take action against it.

Undertaking this kind of curricular integration and sustained critical examination, among students requires that we also acknowledge that school faculty and staff are susceptible to the same cultural norms as the rest of society. Current research on gender-based bullying suggests that sexist beliefs that normalize sexual harassment as part of adolescent sexual development or that hold female victims responsible for their own sexual harassment are pervasive among school staff. Other studies find that high percentages of school staff harbor negative views of gay and lesbian persons and that few consider themselves “highly competent” in serving gay and lesbian students (Sears, 1992). National surveys further indicate that school staff members are often the perpetrators of homophobic bullying (Dupper & Meyer-Adams, 2002). The present study substantiates such findings, to some degree, as it illuminates how school staff take up cultural narratives of violence that position targeted females and gay and lesbian students as complicit in or responsible for the gender-based bullying they encounter. Efforts to prevent gender-based bullying must therefore include support and training for staff and teachers that require them to confront their own sexist and heterosexist beliefs. Our study further suggests that such efforts

must also include trainings in which school staff examine how their own responses to gender-based bullying not only may reflect broader sexist and heterosexist beliefs but can also reinforce such beliefs and practices in ways that ultimately run counter to their goal of preventing gender-based bullying. This is highly challenging work as it ultimately requires school staff to re-conceptualize their beliefs regarding gender norms and practices and to cultivate new responses that can effectively decrease the occurrence of bullying and harassment.

### **CONCLUSION**

The present study points to the importance of a comprehensive approach to gender-based bullying that includes, but goes beyond, formal policies. A comprehensive approach must incorporate a critical examination of violence, gender and sexuality into both the school curriculum and in sustained professional development efforts for teachers and support staff. Most importantly, the entire school community must examine how the school culture and their individual behaviors reinforce the sexist and heterosexist narratives, norms and practices that support rather than counter gender-based bullying.

**References**

- American Association of University Women (1993). *Hostile hallways: AAUW survey on sexual harassment in American schools*. Washington DC: American Association of University Women Educational Foundation.
- American Association of University Women (2001). *Hostile Hallways: Bullying, teasing, and sexual harassment in school*. Washington DC: American Association of University Women Educational Foundation.
- American Association of University Women (2004). *Harrassment-Free Hallways: How to stop Sexual Harassment in School*. Washington DC: American Association of University Women Educational Foundation.
- Aster, R. A., Meyer, H. A., & Behre, W. J., (1999). Unowned places and times: Maps and interviews about violence in high schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, 36, 3-42.
- Author (2005)
- Author (2006)
- Author (2007)
- Beck, I. (1998). *Expect respect: A sexual harassment prevention module*. Washington, DC: American Association of University Women.
- Berns, N. (2001). Degendering the problem and gendering the blame: Political discourse and women and violence. *Gender and Society*, 15 (2): 262-281.
- Best, J. (1999). *Random violence: How we talk about new crimes and new victims*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

- Bullough, R. and Draper, J. (2004). Making sense of a failed triad: Mentors, university supervisors, and positioning theory. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 55: 407-420.
- Cerulo, K. (1998). *Deciphering violence: The cognitive structure of right and wrong*. New York: Routledge.
- Davies, B. & Harre, R. (1990). Positioning: The discursive production of selves. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 20: 43-63.
- Dupper, D. R. & Meyer-Adams, N. (2002). Low-level violence: A neglected aspect of school culture. *Urban Education*, 37 (3): 350-364.
- Ferrell, J. (1999). Cultural criminology. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 25: 395-418.
- Flannery, D. J., Vazsonyi, A. T., Liau, A. K., Guo, S., Powell, K. E., Atha, H., et al. (2003). Initial behavior outcomes for the PeaceBuilders universal school-based violence prevention program. *Developmental Psychology*, 39, 292-308.
- GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Educators' Network). (2007). *Dealing with legal matters surrounding students' sexual orientation and gender identity*. Retrieved from [http://www.glsen.org/binary-data/GLSEN\\_ATTACHMENTS/file/424-2.pdf](http://www.glsen.org/binary-data/GLSEN_ATTACHMENTS/file/424-2.pdf), September 18, 2007.
- Grube, B. & Lens, V. (2003). Student to student harassment: The impact of Davis v. Monroe. *Children & Schools*, 25, 173-185.
- Greenblat, C. (1983). A hit is a hit is a hit...or is it? Approval and tolerance of the use of physical force by spouses. In D. Finkelhor, R. Gelles, G. Hotaling, and M. Straus (eds.) *The dark side of families* (pp. 235-260). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

- Hand, J. Z., & Sanchez, L. (2000). Badgering or bantering? Gender differences in experience of, reactions to, sexual harassment among US high school students. *Gender & Society, 14*(6), 718-746.
- Harre, R. (2004). Discursive psychology and the boundaries of sense. *Organization Studies, 25*: 1435-1453.
- Harre, R. and Slocum, N. (1999). Disputes as complex social events: On the uses of positioning theory. *Common Knowledge, 9*: 100 – 118.
- Hawkins, D. (1995). *Ethnicity, race, and crime: Perspectives across time and place*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Holub, J. (1996). *Addressing sexual harassment on campus* . (Report No. EDO-JC-96-09). Los Angeles, CA: ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges.(ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. JC960598).
- King, K. A., Tribble, J. L., & Price, J. H. (1999). School counselors' perceptions of nonconsensual sexual activity among high school students. *Professional School Counseling, 2*, 286-290.
- Lacasse, A., Purdy, K. T., & Mendelson, M. J. (2003). The mixed company they keep: Potentially offensive sexual behaviors among adolescents. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 27*(6), 532-540.
- Lee, V., Croninger, R., Linn, E. and Chen, X. (1996). The culture of sexual harassment in secondary schools. *American Educational Research Journal, 33*: 383-417.
- Levin, J. (1993). *Sociological studies: Seeing social structure and change in everyday life*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge.

Loeske, D. (1993). *The battered woman and shelters: The social construction of wife abuse.*

Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Lugg, C. A. (2003). Sissies, Faggots, Lezzies, and Dykes: Gender, sexual orientation, and a new politics of education? *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 39 94-134.

Maxwell, C.D., Robinson, A.L. & Post, L.A. (2003). The impact of race on the adjudication of sexual assault and other violent crimes. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 31(6), 523-538.

Metzler, C.W., Biglan, A., Rusby, J. C., & Sprague, J. R. (2001). Evaluation of a comprehensive behavior management program to improve school-wide positive behavior support.

*Education and Treatment of Children*, 24, 448-479.

Meyers, M. (2004). African American women and violence: Gender, race and class in the news.

*Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 21 (2): 95-118.

O'Connor, M., Gutek, B. A. , Stockdale, M., Greer, T.M. & Melancon, R. (2004). Explaining sexual harassment judgments: Looking beyond gender of the rater. *Law and Human Behavior*, 28 (1): 69-95.

*Oncale v. Sundowner Offshore Services, Inc.* (1998). 523 U.S. 75.

Pellegrini, A. D., Bartini, M. (2000). A Longitudinal Study of Bullying, Victimization, and Peer Affiliation during the Transition from Primary School to Middle School. *American Educational Research Journal*, 37, 699-725.

Pellegrini, A. D., & Blatchford, P. (2000). *The child at school: Interactions with peers and teachers.* New York: Arnold.

QSR International. (2002). *NVivo 2.* Doncaster, Victoria, Australia.

- Rusby, J. C., Forrester, K. K., Biglan, A., & Metzler, C. W. (2005). Relationships Between Peer Harassment and Adolescent Problem Behaviors. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 25, 453-477.
- Russell, B. L. & Trigg, K. Y, (2004). Tolerance of sexual harassment: An examination of gender differences, ambivalent sexism, social dominance and gender roles. *Sex Roles*, 50 (7/8): 565-573.
- Sandler, B. R. & Stonehill, H. M. (2005). *Student-to-student sexual harassment K-12: Strategies and solutions for educators to use in the classroom, school, and community*. Lanham, Maryland: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
- Sasson, T. (1995). *Crime talk: How citizens construct a social problem*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Spencer, W. (2005). It's not as simple as it seems: Ambiguous culpability and ambivalent affect in news representations of violent youth. *Symbolic Interaction*, 28 (1): 47-65.
- Stein, N. (1995). Sexual harassment in school: The public performance of gendered violence. *Harvard Educational Review*, 65, 145-162.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1999). *Classrooms and courtrooms: Facing sexual harassment in K-12 schools*. New York: Teachers' College Press.
- Stein, N. & Sjostrom, L. (1994). *Flirting or hurting? A teachers' guide to student-to-student sexual harassment in schools (Grades 6 – 12)*. Washington, DC: National Education Association.
- Tittle, C., Villemex, W., and Smith, D. (1978). The myth of social class and criminality: An empirical assessment of the empirical evidence. *American Sociological Review*, 43: 643-656.

- Van Langenhove, L. and Harre, R. (1999). Introducing positioning theory. In R. Harre & L. van Langenhove (Eds.) *Positioning theory* (pp. 14-31). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wagner, K. (1990). Prevention and intervention: Developing campus policies and procedures. Initiatives: *Journal of the National Association for Women Deans, Administrators, and Counselors*, 52(4), 37-45.
- Weiner, R. L. & Hurt, L. E. (2000). How do people evaluate social sexual conduct as work?: A psychological model. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 85(1): 75-85.
- Welsh, S. (1999). Gender and harassment. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 25, 169-199.
- Yllo, K. (1993). Through a feminist lens: Gender, power and violence, In R.J. Gelles and D.R. Loeske (eds) *Current controversies on family violence*. (pp.47-62). Newbury Park, CA; Sage.