



Boys, Bullying, and Gender Roles: How Hegemonic Masculinity Shapes Bullying Behavior

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Abstract

During adolescence, schools and peers are salient agents of gender socialization. Specifically, bullying is a common experience for many adolescents. While existing research has examined how bullying differs for girls and boys, very little has examined the ways that bullying serves to reinforce masculinity. This study combines quantitative and qualitative data to examine how bullying reinforces a specific lens of masculinity. By focusing on the experiences of bullying among middle school boys across the United States, we find that the context of school, peers, and bullying contributes to the social construction of masculinity for adolescents. By conducting a content analysis of data provided by victims, we find that many of the experiences of bullying are grounded in, or interpreted through, hegemonic masculinity. Four key themes that emerged from the data include the importance of heterosexuality, physical dominance and intimidation, acceptance and normalization of violence, and how gender intersects with other social locations. Findings from this study offer insight into how adolescent bullying perpetuates notions of masculine dominance and gender inequalities.

Keywords Bullying · Hegemonic masculinity · Gender · School · Gender socialization

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Introduction

As a social structure, schools reflect, reinforce, and enact gender roles in society. Past work has demonstrated that as early as primary school, children are active agents in the “(re)production” [11, p. 36] of gender norms and gender inequalities [71]. While there are many ways that gender is played out at school, bullying is a common occurrence for many school-aged children that is shaped by gender and contributes to gender inequalities. Research on bullying generally focuses on prevalence and frequency [63], the social and emotional consequences for victims and bullies [12, 69, 70], as well as the role of bullies, victims, and bystanders [32, 70]. Bullying is often found to be gendered, with different forms of bullying being experienced by girls and boys [27, 67, 70]. Bullying is also gendered in the way that victims are often singled out due to their gender presentation and/or perceived sexuality [43, 50]. However, there is limited research on the way that bullying may serve to reinforce ideas about gender, gender inequality, and masculinity.

At an individual level, gender must be learned through the process of socialization. While families are the first socializing agency, during adolescence, peers replace family as the prominent source of socialization [4]. Schools serve as an especially influential agent of socialization during this time, since adolescents spend much of their time in school. In addition to the manifest functions that school provides (e.g. reading, writing, science), students learn how to obey authority, be responsible, and conform to gender norms [26, 71]. Schools are a gendered institution, because their policies, practices, interactions, and ideology are distinctly patterned as either masculine or feminine [37, 71]. For instance, gender differences are reinforced through curriculum, teaching styles, dress code, sports, and discipline [20], as well as interactions between students themselves [53]. One way that gender differences are maintained in school is the practice of bullying. While bullying is related to many characteristics, including race, ethnicity, or religion, it is also shaped by gendered patterns of interaction that are part of the school institution and larger culture.

It is in school that children’s views of the world are formed, or challenged, and patterns of interaction are developed. Thus, understanding how schools play a role in gender socialization is important to understanding the larger gendered relations in society. Previous studies have examined how bullying is often gender specific, however few studies have looked at bullying as behavior that is shaped by, and reinforces, gender. This study fills that gap by focusing on how masculinity shapes bullying behavior and victimization. We examine both quantitative and qualitative data provided by a large sample of children in middle school to assess whether the experiences of bullying reify masculinity.

Literature Review

Gender, Context, and Learning Masculinity

Every society categorizes people based on sex and assigns specific expectations that are part of the social construction of gender. Within American society, masculinity and femininity are perceived as distinct categories and framed as opposites, often referred to as the gender binary [9, 46]. This distinction is reinforced by the gender order, in which power relations are established between women and men [20; see also “gender ranking” in 46]. For instance, interpersonal relationships and language, as well as social institutions, often favor masculine traits over feminine traits [36, 46]. Gender varies based on history, context, and culture [46] and is often conceptualized as a performance or something that is “done” within interactions with others [75]. Butler [14] developed a framework of gender performance that focuses on two key components. The first is that gender is socially constructed as a result of people producing their identities through “stylized repetition of acts” and the second, this process reproduces the social world around them [14, p. 191]. As a result, gender is embedded in social institutions such as family, politics, and the economy.

Current gender scholars recognize that multiple femininities and masculinities exist in various cultures and contexts. In spite of this range of possible gendered realities, there is nearly universal valuation of masculine traits over feminine traits [46]. Thus, it is paramount to understand how masculine traits are taught, internalized, and reinforced. Such a focused examination allows us to see how different social contexts contribute to reinforcing masculine values. For the purpose of this paper, masculinity will be examined through the context of bullying in schools.

Though there are multiple masculinities, not all forms are viewed as equal, and in fact, “one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted” [21, p. 77]. Hegemonic masculinity is a specific form of masculinity that is viewed as superior to all forms of femininity and alternative masculinities [59]. This form of masculinity emphasizes authority and power, along with male dominance over women [19, p. 832; see also 46, 49]. While all men benefit from the higher valuation of men over women, those who are able to embody the culturally defined hegemonic masculinity, including being “economically successful, racially superior, and visibly heterosexual” are most rewarded [46, p. 4; see also 19].

While hegemonic masculinity is considered normative and the type of masculinity all boys and men should strive toward, very few can truly achieve it [19]. The emphasis on social and physical power that are culturally tied to wealth, race and strength, mean that some groups, namely economically stable, tall and muscular, white men, are better able to achieve this rigid definition of masculinity. As a response to the challenge of successfully embodying this form of masculinity, some subcultures redefine what it means to “be a man,” into something that is more attainable given their social location and access to resources. For example, masculinity looks very different in the inner cities of Philadelphia for

economically disadvantaged Black men [1], for gay men of immigrants [54], for white fathers who work in high-tech workplaces in Silicon Valley, California [23], for Black and white adolescents in high school [61], or for Christian men who choose to abstain from sex [76, 77, 80]. Also, there has been increased attention to the influence that global politics and globalization have on gender relations and definitions of masculinity [8]. The ability to redefine masculinity is evidence that gender is shaped by social context and interactions [13, 19, 37, 46, 62, 66]. However, there still remains a clear culturally defined hegemonic form that subjugates and devalues alternatives.

School is an especially salient place for boys to explore, play out, and confirm gender and sexuality norms [58, 61]. Although the school is not usually thought of as a sexualized institution, several rites of passage take place in this social institution [52, 61]. One important role of schools is that they serve as a location to perpetuate hetero-normative practices [61] and stereotypical gender roles [52]. Overwhelming, boys are taught “what it means to be a man” includes opposite-sex sexual conquests and the use of intimidation [52, 61, 66]. One form of intimidation that is prevalent in schools is bullying.

Bullying in Schools

Bullying is defined as unwanted physical or emotional mistreatment that is intended to inflict harm on a person, often involves an imbalance of power, and occurs two or more times a month [50, 56, 70]. Within schools, “A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students” [55, 56, p. 9]. According to researchers at National Center for Education Statistics, in 2011, 28% of 12–18 year olds reported being bullied in school [63]. Sixth graders reported the highest rates of being bullied, at 37%, compared to 30% of 7th graders, 31% of 8th graders. High school students reported the lowest rate of experiencing bullying, with 22% [63].

Bullying is a serious problem due to a wide range of both short and long term effects. These effects include poor school outcomes and feeling unsafe at school [22, 29, 56]. Studies have also found bullying in childhood results in a wide range of adverse physical and mental health affects [3, 45, 68, 73, 79]. Being victims or offenders of bullying is linked to both suicide and criminal behavior as well [7, 39, 41, 72]. Thus, the impacts of bullying are very diverse and influence both behaviors and internalized processes such as gender identity.

Involvement in bullying is not uniform, particularly comparing girls and boys. Overwhelmingly, males are perceived as being more aggressive than females [27], and therefore are more often the targets *and* perpetrators of bullying [24, 56]. Boys are also more likely to use direct (physical) bullying [29, 56], which includes hitting, kicking, choking, spitting, or hair pulling [70]. Indirect bullying, including name calling, starting rumors and other forms of psychological bullying, while used by boys, is more often used by girls [24, 27, 29, 57, 70].

In addition to girls and boys using different types of bullying, their gender influences why they are victimized. Children who do not conform to traditional notions

of gender expression are often labeled as a “sissy,” “tomboy,” “dyke,” or “fag” [46, 50, 61]. In their National School Climate Survey of 2011, the Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) reported that over half of the students in their survey heard negative remarks regarding sexual orientation and gender expression from fellow students, teachers, and staff. Homosexual youth in particular are more likely to feel unsafe at school and miss or skip school as a result [10, 52] and to experience higher rates of threats and assaults at school [10, 43].

Girls and boys who do not “do” their gender in socially prescribed ways are often targets of bullying, as are children who are gay or perceived to be gay [50, 70, 75]. Boys are more harshly judged than girls for breaking traditional gender rules, and as a result often engage in more physical bullying as a means of asserting a heterosexual identity [50]. In other words, boys’ participation in bullying is often a direct result of them trying to affirm their heterosexuality and ‘manliness.’

The current study aims to understand how students’ bullying experiences are influenced by gendered expectations about masculinity. By examining boys’ written responses regarding their experiences of being bullied, we attempt to understand how hegemonic masculinity is being reinforced within the school setting amongst youth. To address this question, we focus on two areas. First, we examine to what extent victims of bullying report incidents that are related to gendered behaviors and expectations. Second, we evaluate whether bullying amongst middle school boys reinforces traits associated with hegemonic masculinity.

Data and Methods

Data for this study come from the Youth Voice Project. Conducted by Nixon and Davis [25], the Youth Voice Project is the first large scale national research study that aims to understand how bullying is experienced by youth. The overarching goals of the Youth Voice Project were to understand student perceptions of peer victimization, responsiveness of school staff, and student connectedness to their school [25]. Schools were recruited through email and word of mouth, and any school that wanted to participate was included in the sample. Students in 31 schools (28 public schools and 3 private schools) in 12 states throughout the U.S. completed the on-line survey via SurveyMonkey ($N = 13,177$), which consisted of 45 questions (33 multiple-choice questions and 12 open-ended questions). All questions were answered on computers, including responses to the open-ended questions. This took students approximately 45 min to complete. Participants ranged in ages from 11 to 19 years old, with 10% in elementary school (5th grade), 57% in middle school (6th–8th grade), and 33% in high school students (9th–12th grade) (for a complete description of the survey, see [25]).

Sampling Criteria and Characteristics

While the Youth Voice Project resulted in a very large and rich data set, the focus of our project and the use of qualitative analyses required that we narrowed our

sample in several ways. Our inclusion criteria included age, sex, meeting the definition of bullying, and provision of qualitative data.

Middle school students report higher rates of bullying and fear of peer victimization when compared to elementary and high school students [34, 42]. In addition, in the Youth Voice Project, the largest portion of the participants were in middle school. Therefore, for the current analysis we use the data from middle school respondents (grades six through eight).

While girls are involved in the process of constructing gender within schools, we limited the sample to boys since we were most interested in understanding how hegemonic masculinity might play a role in boys' bullying experiences. Of course, girls are part of the picture in how boys construct gender and various bullying incidents of boys may relate to their relationships, or lack thereof, with girls. However, past work on bullying has shown important differences in boys and girls bullying. For example, while boys are much more likely to be involved as both the victims and offenders of physical bullying, this is not always the case for indirect, relational, or emotional bullying. These forms of bullying include being excluded from friendship groups, being the subject of gossip, or having rumors started [5, 29, 56, 74]. Two meta-analyses found sex differences in these types of bullying exist in early and mid-adolescence [2, 15], although sex differences disappear with age.

Other studies find that girls are more likely to be targets of the newest form of bullying—cyberbullying [5, 30]. In a meta-analysis on sex differences in cyberbullying, Barlett and Coyne [6] found that girls are more likely than boys to use cyberbullying in early adolescence, but that in later adolescence, boys become the dominant cyber-bullies. These are not just simple differences in the volume of bullying by sex, but indicate that bullying is likely to be gendered in very distinct ways. Thus, it is important to give adequate attention to the experiences of boys and girls separately in order to understand the nuances of gender construction. For clarity, the current study focuses on boys and hegemonic masculinity, with the expectation and hope that further analysis will examine the ways that femininity and gender may be part of the bullying experiences of girls.

The sample also excluded respondents who did not satisfy Olweus' [56] definition of bullying. Thus, only students who answered "every day," "once a week," or "two or three times a month" to the following questions were included in the sample:

Q29. In the past month, how often have students at your school hurt you emotionally or excluded you?

Q30. In the past month, how often have students at your school threatened to hurt you or hurt you physically?

The final inclusion criteria required respondents who provided qualitative descriptions of their bullying experience. Specifically, respondents were included only if they provided a typed response for the following open-ended question:

If you feel comfortable, please describe what happened to you [when you were mistreated by a peer]. Because this is a confidential survey, please also

tell an adult you trust at school about what happened if you have not already done that. Please do not include any names.

These limitations resulted in a final sample of 275 middle school boys who were victims of bullying and who were willing to describe their experiences. Though it would be beneficial to include responses from bullies, to assess if bullying is a means of achieving hegemonic masculinity, the survey did not include questions pertaining to whether respondents identified themselves as a bully. Thus, we were unable to make inferences on respondents' or as someone who is both a victim and a bully.

Analytic Strategy

The purpose of this study was to examine whether boys' involvement in bullying reinforces cultural ideals of masculinity. To answer this question, a qualitative content analysis was applied. Qualitative content analysis entails a close and thorough reading of the texts, identifying themes or patterns, then interpreting and translating their meanings. This enabled us to use a mixed methods approach which required an initial count of key words (quantitative) and then an interpretation of the underlying meaning of these counts (qualitative). As a result, we were able to go beyond describing the distribution of bullying and instead offer a more nuanced examination of the latent meaning behind the experiences [31, 44, 51].

First, we examined the frequencies of bullying experiences for the sample to describe both who is involved and the types and frequency of bullying the respondents reported. Next, we interpreted the underlying meaning of these counts. In an effort to capture the direct accounts offered by respondents, the original responses, including all the grammatical and spelling problems, are reported verbatim. The textual data of the open-ended question was not particularly rich, with responses ranging from one-word answers to a few sentences. Therefore, in searching for themes, the focus was on repetition, similarities, and differences between respondents' comments [see 65]. Since respondents offered short answers, their entire response is included in the findings. As a result, no respondent is quoted more than once within the findings. Therefore, we did not assign pseudonyms to the respondents and instead include demographics (age and race).

In order to ensure reliability in the identified themes and resulting codes, both authors followed the process outlined by Hruschka et al. [35] for qualitative analysis of open ended data. Specifically, this involves the development of a draft codebook based on possible themes, engaging in an initial round of coding, and assessing inter-coder reliability using Cohen's Kappa [17]. Based on this analysis, any needed modifications to the codebook were made, a second round of coding and reliability analysis was conducted, and final modifications in codes were made based on a discussion of any remaining differences [35].

For the initial step of developing a draft codebook, we discussed possible ways to group different key words or phrases that might occur, and how we might categorize these into broad groups such as "violence" or "sexuality." Using this general framework, a total of three rounds of coding occurred to both revise the codebook

Table 1 Themes and key codes or ideas in quotes

Theme	Key codes/ideas	Kappa	Asymmetrical standard error
Heteronormativity	Slurs/name calling (e.g. homo, fag)	.813*	.055
	Physical attacks targeting genitals		
	Reference to being girl/feminine		
	Rumors about sexuality		
Physical dominance	Physical attacks (hit, kick, punch, poke)	.930*	.023
	Focus on athleticism		
	Threats of physical violence		
Acceptance of violence	Normalization of victimization	.828*	.053
	Shrugging off being hurt		
	Being tough/not bothered by bullying (e.g. “boys will be boys,” “no big deal,” “just messing around”)		
Social Location	Physical markers of not achieving hegemonic masculinity	.881*	.044
	Appearance (short, ugly, acne)		
	Religion		
	Race or ethnicity		
	SES (poor, wrong clothes) Disabilities		

* $p < .001$

and reach an acceptable level of inter-coder reliability. In round one, which focused on refining the codebook, each author read the quotes and identified patterns that were relevant to any form of gendered identity held by the respondent, processes related to enacting gender, or acts that could be viewed as masculine. Even in this first round, there was a high level of overlap. For example, one author identified a theme of “sexuality/heterosexual preference” and the other “heteronormativity” to capture quotes that related to sexual behaviors, sexual attacks such as being kicked in the genitals, or teasing that referred to the victim as a “fag” or otherwise questioned their sexuality. Thus, while the titles of our categories may have differed slightly, the general meaning was very similar. We discussed the different versions, and ultimately identified four specific themes to include in the final codebook: Heteronormativity, Physical Dominance, Acceptance of Violence, and Social Location (see Table 1 for description of themes, codes, and reliability statistics).

For the second round of coding, each author coded each quote as a zero or one on each of the four themes, with one indicating that the theme was present in the quote and zero that it was not. This set of codes were compared and we found that for 66 out of the 275 quotes, there was some disagreement. Put another way, the coders were in complete agreement for all four of the themes for 76% of the quotes.

To assess the reliability of inter-coder reliability, there are a variety of proposed cut off points using the Cohen’s Kappa statistic [see 35, p. 313]. For our purposes, we used a cutoff of .80 or higher to indicate excellent or almost perfect

agreement. In the second round of coding, the Cohen's Kappa showed fairly high agreement for three of the identified themes (Heteronormativity=.774, Physical Dominance=.746, Social Location=.746). Acceptance of violence was substantially lower, at .550. However, none of these met the high reliability cutoff of .80. To improve the reliability, the coders discussed some of the specific quotes where the codes were not consistent and slightly revised the codebook to reflect a clearer division between several of the themes. For example, the codebook for round two had the theme "acceptance of violence" but it was not clear what types of words would qualify as acceptance. So, one author coded phrases like "kind of bullies me sometimes" as acceptance of violence since this indicates the victim may not have a strong opinion whether the acts were unacceptable bullying or not. Another word that was thought by one author to indicate acceptance of violence was "just," as in "they just say bad things" or they "just teased me." The other researcher had not considered this as acceptance of violence, but after a discussion of how this word changed the tone of the quote, downplaying the seriousness of bullying, we agreed that any such words in the quote would warrant being included into this theme. Similar discussions about each of the four themes led to slight revisions to the examples listed in the codebook.

The final round of coding (round three) used this final revised codebook. Any quotes where there was disagreement in the round two were read and recoded for the four themes. After this third round of coding, only 11% of the quotes still had any disagreement in individual codes. Across the different themes, there was very high reliability as demonstrated by Cohen's Kappa; Heteronormativity=.813, Physical Dominance=.930, Acceptance of Violence=.828, and Social Location=.881.

Findings

As a first step in our analysis we describe both who the victims of bullying are and their experiences.¹ Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample. The sample is fairly evenly distributed across the grades, with a slight tendency to the younger ages (40% in sixth grade as compared to 24.7% in eighth) and consists of 52.4% Caucasian, 5.9% African-American, and 6.7% Hispanic students. A third of the respondents (33.7%) report receiving free or reduced lunches and 64.7% live with both birth parents. Past research on bullying often finds that physical disability or being in special education class may increase the risk of being a victim of bullying [64]. In our study, less than 10% of the sample of victims reported having any type of physical disability and 12.4% reported having any special education classes. For most of the demographic measures, there

¹ In earlier analyses, we compared the group of 275 boys who provided qualitative data with the 622 identified victims of bullying who did not provide a quote. These two groups did not vary on any demographic characteristic other than grade level, with those who provided a quote being slightly younger. Those who provided quotes did report significantly more frequent and subjectively more harmful bullying than victims who did not include qualitative data. A full comparison of these groups is available on request.

Table 2 Demographic characteristics of bullying victims (N=275)

	Freq	Valid%
Grade		
Sixth	110	40.0
Seventh	97	35.3
Eighth	68	24.7
Total responses	275	
Race		
Caucasian	141	52.4
African-American	16	5.9
Hispanic	18	6.7
Multi-Racial	21	7.8
Other Race	49	17.8
Prefer not to answer	24	8.9
Total responses	269	
Free or reduced lunches		
Yes	91	33.7
No	179	66.3
Total responses	270	
Living with...		
Two birth parents	176	64.7
One birth parent	83	30.5
Neither birth parent	13	4.8
Total responses	272	
Any physical disability		
Yes	27	9.7
No	248	89.2
Total responses	275	
Any special education		
Yes	34	12.4
No	240	87.6
Total responses	274	

was very little missing data. The highest was for race, with only six cases missing. Since the focus of the analysis was qualitative, all cases were included and “unknown” used to indicate race or other demographics for relevant quotes.

Some past work has argued that masculinity is redefined by less privileged groups who would otherwise be more likely to fail in achieving hegemonic masculinity (for examples see [1, 23, 54, 76, 77, 80]). In the qualitative findings, characteristics such as race, ability, and class were viewed by the respondents as important in their bullying experiences. In order to assess if these qualitative experiences varied by different demographic groups, cross tabulations were run for different groups by the four main themes of bullying. Table 3 presents the

Table 3 Presence of hegemonic masculinity themes by characteristics of respondents

	Hetero-normativity		Physical dominance		Acceptance of violence		Social location	
	N	Group%	N	Group%	N	Group%	N	Group%
Free/reduced lunch								
No (N = 184)	23	12.5	72	39.1	26	14.1	25	13.6
Yes (N = 91)	8	8.8	33	36.3	10	11.0	10	11.0
Physical disability								
No (N = 248)	27	10.9	97	39.1	33	13.3	32	12.9
Yes (N = 27)	4	14.8	8	29.6	3	11.1	3	11.1
Receive special ed								
No (N = 241)	25	10.4	94	39.0	29	12.0	33	13.7
Yes (N = 34)	6	17.6	11	32.4	7	20.6	2	5.9
Racial/ethnic identity								
Caucasian (N = 141)	19	13.5	53	37.6	21	14.9	15	10.6
African American (N = 16)	2	12.5	5	31.3	1	6.3	4	25.0
Hispanic American (N = 18)	1	5.6	10	55.6	1	5.6	1	5.6
Multi-racial (N = 21)	4	19.0	10	47.6	5	23.8	5	23.8
Other race (N = 49)	1	2.0	21	42.9	6	12.2	7	14.3
Prefer not answer (n = 24)	4	16.7	5	20.8	1	4.2	2	8.3

results, but in all these comparisons, the small numbers in many of the groupings makes it only possible to use this as a preliminary descriptive analysis.

In most cases, there do not seem to be quantitative support for the assumptions that are embedded in many of the quotes. In particular, respondents who were poorer (received free or reduced lunch) were not any more likely to have been coded as experiencing any of the forms of hegemonic masculine bullying. Very similar percentages for all four themes were also reported by those with physical abilities compare to those without disabilities. A somewhat higher percentage of those in special education programs were coded as having heteronormative bullying than those not in such programs (17.6% vs. 10.4% and to be accepting of violence (20.6% vs. 12.0%). In terms of ethnic or racial identity, no clear differences existed on heteronormativity bullying between Caucasians, African-Americans or those who identify as multi-racial, with between 12 and 19% of each group having experiences coded in this category. For every racial group, the most common form of bullying coded was physical dominance, with the Hispanic Americans reporting the highest percent (55.6%) compared to only 37.6% of Caucasians and 31.3% of African-American's providing quotes that were coded as this form of masculinity. Multi-racial respondents were nearly twice as likely to be coded as accepting violence (23.8% compared to 14.9% for Caucasians—the highest other percentage). As a whole, the results of this analysis indicate that the individual assessments and interpretations of the events may not relate to actual demographic characteristics.

Table 4 provides more detail on the quantitative experience of bullying by examining the type and frequency of bullying experienced, as well as the students'

Table 4 Analysis of Quantitative Bullying Experiences

	Freq	%
Type		
Called names	204	74.2
Rumors spread	112	40.7
Excluded	78	28.4
Threatened	103	37.5
Hit, kicked, other	101	36.7
Frequency—emotional/verbal		
Every day	76	27.6
Once a week	81	29.5
2–3 times/month	85	30.9
One time	19	6.9
Never	14	5.1
Frequency—physical		
Every day	35	12.8
Once a week	48	17.6
2–3 times/month	66	24.2
One time	54	19.8
Never	70	25.6
Impact of bullying		
Mild	111	41.4
Moderate	104	38.8
Severe	32	11.9
Very severe	21	7.8
I feel like part of this school		
No!/no	27	9.8
Unsure	48	17.5
Yes!/yes	200	72.7
I feel valued and respected at school		
No!/no	62	22.7
Unsure	89	32.6
Yes!/yes	122	44.7
I feel close to adults at my school		
No!/no	60	21.9
Unsure	77	28.1
Yes!/yes	137	50.0

assessments of the school environment. All these data were provided by the students and reflected their own interpretations of their experiences. The first set of data on this table indicates the types of bullying experienced by the respondent. Students could select multiple responses, providing a better picture of the range of types of bullying that occurred. The most common type of bullying reported was name calling, with over 74% of the boys reporting this type of victimization. All the other

forms of bullying were reported by about half that number of respondents. For example, being excluded was reported by only 28.4% of the respondents and 40.7% reported that rumors had been spread about them. Physical victimization and threats were reported by 36.5% and 36.7% of the sample respectively.

In order to determine if respondents reported multiple forms of bullying, a “total types” measure was created, adding the five possible reported types together. Sixteen respondents indicated none of these types occurred, which may seem inconsistent with how we narrowed our sample. However, this was one series of questions that asked about specific forms of bullying. It is possible that respondents answered that they were bullied and provided a quote, which led to them being included in the final data, but that they did not select any of the specific forms listed. Over half the sample indicated they had only experienced one or two types of bullying (35.3% and 22.5% for total of 58.8%) but 23 respondents, or 8.4% of the sample, indicated they had experienced all five possible types. These quantitative data indicate that bullying experiences cut across a wide range of types and that students often experience different forms of victimization.

The frequency of bullying for these groups is also examined to get a sense for how common these occurrences are. It is important to note that to be included in the sample, the student needed to report experiencing bullying at least 2–3 times in the past month for at least one form of bullying. But, in some cases, they may have experienced physical bullying at this level, but not any verbal/emotional bullying or vice versa. Thus, Table 4 allows us to examine how frequently each type of bullying occurred. A total of 57.1% of respondents reported emotional or verbal bullying occurring at least every week. In comparison, just over 30% reported physical bullying occurred on at least a weekly basis. When respondents were asked to rate the level of harm done by bullying, 41.4% indicated it was mild, with an additional 38.8% reporting it was moderate. Just under 20% indicated it was “severe” or “very severe” in the level of harm. Some students who were bullied also reported potential problems in school but overall these numbers were low. For example, only 9.8% reported they do not feel like part of their school, 22.7% that they do not feel valued or respected at school, and 21.9% that they do not feel close to any adults at the school. These quantitative findings could lead to the conclusion that most bullying that occurs at school is minor and does not in any meaningful way harm the student or their ability to function in school. However, it is entirely possible that victims of bullying have learned to downplay or dismiss the bullying as a coping mechanism. Therefore, having qualitative information about the bullying experiences is vital to understanding what really occurs.

Themes from Open-Ended Responses

Within the open ended responses, four key themes emerged; Heteronormativity, Physical Dominance, Social Location, and Acceptance of Violence. Many statements are not mutually exclusive to a theme, as illustrated in the following statement, “they would say ur ugly and shove me.” This statement addresses being a target of physical bullying based on the student’s physical appearance, which is

included in the both the Social Location and Physical Dominance themes. Specifically, the themes that arose from the data reflect many of the characteristics that are valued within the framework of hegemonic masculinity. Following are explanations of the themes using hegemonic masculinity as a framework and supported with verbatim responses from students.

Heteronormativity

Homophobia and heterosexuality are fundamental elements of hegemonic masculinity [16]. Homosexual males and gender nonconformists are considered subordinate to cisgender (gender identity aligning with their sex) heterosexual men. As a result, it is not surprising that boys' who do not embody heteronormativity are at risk of being victimized by their peers. Within this sample, boys reported being teased based on their real or perceived sexual orientation, sexual behavior, or gender presentation, and endured physical assaults to their genitalia.

Common responses are reflected in a statement from a Hispanic boy in 8th grade who wrote, "A boy told me that I cry like a girl and punched me on the arm" and by a white boy in 8th grade, "People make fun of my voice because it squeaks and they think I am homosexual." Other boys shared similar accounts of being teased or threatened based on their gender presentation, as conveyed by a white boy in 6th grade, "Kids made nasty comments to me about reasons of gender. They wanted to fight and called me mean names."

In regards to sexual behavior, one boy was called immature because he did not have a girlfriend, whereas another boy was teased because he hugged a girl. Teasing based on relationship status is not uncommon for grade school boys and often places boys in a double bind [see 60] that is often highlighted within the hegemonic masculinity framework. Boys' heterosexuality is confirmed if they are in a relationship with a girl, however their independence is compromised if they devote time to their girlfriend. Boys who were unable to display traits associated with hegemonic masculinity, most notably gender presentation and sexual orientation, were victimized by their peers. As a result, this reinforces the importance of heteronormativity as a way of achieving and presenting hegemonic masculinity.

Physical Dominance

Physical dominance is also a key characteristic of hegemonic masculinity, as men are expected to be independent, strong, invincible, and brave. One clear pattern within the quotes was that physical violence was very common. While this could just reflect past research which finds that physical bullying among boys is common [29, 56], being strong and aggressive, rather than being weak and a victim of violence, is also important within the ideal of masculinity. Boys who discussed experiencing physical forms of bullying and threats of physical violence may struggle to display adequate masculine traits. Following are quotes coded as having experienced physical dominance.

Common responses were boys' descriptions that a peer had "threatened to beat me up," or they were "choked," "punched," or "kicked." Accounts that related to

threats often revolved around physical aggression, as a 7th grade Native American boy explained, “a kid in my class said that he was going to snap my neck” and a boy in 7th grade wrote, “once this kid said ““IM GOING TO F***** KILL YOU”“ Another time this kid choked me on the bus. Another time i got wacked in the face and heard by you mother f*****.” Also noteworthy, is the implied anger and frustration in this boy’s response, given his use of capital letters and words (e.g. “kill” and “f*****”). Other boys discussed physical forms of bullying, as conveyed by a Hispanic boy in the 8th grade who wrote, “i got punched in the stomach and got the air knocked out of me.”

Though not common, a white boy in 8th grade wrote about being both an aggressor and victim, “I kicked him in the lunch line cause he was hitting my freind so i stood up to him and he threaten to punch me in the face and i gave him the oppertuning but he never did, whimp.” This comment hints at the respondent employing a “tough guise” [38] since he ridiculed and challenged his peer. “Tough guise” describes boys’ attempt to come off as strong and in control, while they might feel otherwise. When boys put on a “tough guise,” they are presenting themselves in an intimidating way to appear in control and masculine [38]. For example, a white boy in 8th grade didn’t discuss being bullied himself, but rather an incident in which he reacted to a bully who was targeting a peer; “so i put the matters into my own hands and confronted the kid kinda in a mean way but he diservend it and i told the kid not to do it again or ill kick his ass and there hasnt been any more problems... it wasnt so much of me being bullyed but my friends and thier friends.”

Given previous studies on bullying, it is not surprising that boys in this sample shared stories of experiencing physical violence (either directly or through threats). Such experiences are tied to hegemonic masculinity, as the perpetrators were demonstrating their adherence to hegemonic masculinity by partaking in physical forms of violence and intimidation. Also, boys who inferred feeling anger or attempting to retaliate are adhering to hegemonic masculinity themselves by implying they could be strong and brave, and attempting to recapture power after being a victim or seeing their friends be victims.

Acceptance of Violence

Given the omnipresence of stereotypical gender norms throughout society, it is not surprising that many boys in this sample supported the notion that “boys will be boys.” In other words, it is often socially accepted that boys will be aggressive, assertive, and violent just because they are boys (e.g. assuming such traits are innate). Boys’ masculine behavior is excused and accepted as something that is biological and out of their control. This is in opposition to gender scholars who conceptualize gender as being a learned, performed, and internalized role, not based on innate traits. The theme of “acceptance of violence” reflects this attitude that violence is normative for boys. This differs from the previous theme of physical dominance as it indicates the respondents believed the violence was not unusual or particularly noteworthy. In contrast, quotes that fit into the physical dominance theme more clearly defined these behaviors as violence and problematic, something to get angry or be scared about.

Many responses that were coded as acceptance of violence suggested that boys believed it was normal that their male peers would assert their masculinity by harassing them and as a result, believed that such behavior did not warrant special attention or was cause for alarm. For instance, a boy in 6th grade explained, “They just call everyone names because, well you know we are all boys.” A white boy in 7th grade offers an explanation for he and his peers behavior, “It was fine. We do it all the time. All it is are practical jokes. No one is really hurt.” Other responses implied an awareness that the respondent’s victimization served to boost their perpetrator’s status, as explained by a white boy in 8th grade, “People are just that way, they will do what they have to to get the respect or things they want.” Similarly, another white boy in 6th grade answered, “... it wasn’t bad those people were just trying to act tuff.” Over time, some boys became accustomed to being bullied, as one boy in the 7th grade explained, “I dont want to talk because bullies dont bother me that much anymore. I am just used to getting picked on a lot because it happens to me all the time.” Other boys explained how they coped with the repeated bullying, as an 8th grader responded, “they would say names and make jokes about me that didnt need to be said so i held it in and just laughed about it.”

Physical dominance and violence have become commonplace occurrences for some boys. As a result of shrugging off the severity of such attacks or merely deciding to “live with it,” these boys may be increasing the likelihood of future attacks [see 78]. Traits associated with hegemonic masculinity demand strength and exerting power over lesser individuals. From boys’ responses in this sample, it is evident that their perpetrators are doing just this.

Social Location

The final theme that was identified was that of social location. As past literature on hegemonic masculinity discusses, most men and boys cannot achieve the ideals of this form of masculinity due to their race, class, or physical traits. Similarly, an intersectionality approach urges us to consider how different identities intersect and influence the degree of privilege or oppression we experience in any given situation [18, 33, 59]. Although the quantitative analysis did not find any clear differences between respondents based on their demographics, many quotes indicated that the victims believed their traits led to their being targeted for bullying. Thus, this theme identified any quotes that mentioned physical traits such as body size or attractiveness, as well as characteristics that may be viewed as less in line with masculine ideals including race, ethnicity, religion, or social class.

Physical attractiveness and strength are key attributes in aspiring to achieve hegemonic masculinity. Boys who do not ‘measure up’ were often teased and taunted by their classmates, as the following examples demonstrate. Boys who were short or not physically attractive (as defined by their peers) were targeted by bullies, as conveyed by a Native American boy in 7th grade who responded, “they just said i was short and ugly” and a white boy in 7th grade who answered, “... people would make fun of my height.”

In addition to being targeted based on their physical appearance and size, other boys were taunted due to their abilities, disabilities, and health. An Asian American

boy in 7th grade was targeted because of his appearance and non-masculine abilities, “A lot of kids think that I’m weak because I’m short. Also, they make fun of me because I’m very flexible.” A multi-racial student in 6th grade was stigmatized based on his health, “i was told i was different because i had diabetes...” Other boys who were perceived as coming from a lower social class were also targeted, as a white boy in 7th grade explained, “I feel somewhat comfortable at my school. A few days ago i was told i was fat or i was poor.” Another white boy in 7th grade shared a similar experience, “...they have been calling me fat and poor, and ugly.” As implied by these accounts, being short, having a disability or health related concern, or being perceived as poor are markers of weakness. As a result, boys who had these traits were likely perceived as easy targets for other boys who were able to exercise their masculine dominance.

Many boys discussed how their race, ethnicity, or religion was the cause of their victimization. Although these responses are not overtly tied to masculinity, gender intersects with a number of different social locations, most notably class and race [18, 33]. Therefore, a boy’s ability to achieve hegemonic masculinity is influenced by his race, ethnicity, and class standing. Some boys were targeted based on their race, as conveyed by an African American boy in 6th grade, “Well, people usually talk about my race around me, usually bad things” and a multi-racial boy in 7th grade, “well, i tell people that i am brazilian, and they say im mexican, and my religion is a japanese religion, people say that’s a dumb religion.” A white boy in 8th grade wrote, “I get pushed around and people are constantly making fun of me for being jewish with such phrases as ““Your such a jew.”” and ““Don’t jew me.””” And as answered by another white boy in 7th grade, “i was told that i was going to get beat up because i was white and i did get punched a couple of times.” When confronted with racially motivated attacks, an African American boy in 6th grade retaliated, which appeared to exasperate the situation, “A hispanic kid called me the n word almost every day and I called him a cholo. He and got into a fight and also we’d had to right an essay about how these words were wrong.”

These attacks, either verbal or physical, are not overtly linked to masculinity. However, masculinity intersects with other identities and therefore, warrants attention. Just as there is a hierarchy with masculinities, so too exists a hierarchy regarding social location. Within this theme, boys’ responses illustrate that they were stigmatized based on their appearance, size, race, ethnicity, or social class and therefore, were not demonstrating hegemonic masculinity.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study provides insight into how bullying serves to enforce gender in schools, most notably hegemonic masculinity. Power is an integral part of gender, which reinforces boys’ status, or ranking, over girls. Furthermore, boys and men are ranked based on certain types of masculinity. Though there are a variety of different nuances to hegemonic masculinity, the broad concept provides a useful lens in examining how gender inequalities persist. The results of this study illustrate that ideals associated with hegemonic masculinity are clearly present within the experience of

bullying for middle school boys. To examine this more closely, two key conclusions are discussed; masculinity and bullying and normalized violence among boys.

Masculinity and Bullying

Notions of hegemonic masculinity are reinforced through bullying behavior. Gender roles are very strict for boys, whereas girls have more flexibility in breaking away from traditional gender norms without their sexual orientation being challenged [46]. As a result, boys are more likely to find themselves victims of gender harassment. If boys do not exhibit heteronormative behavior and appropriate gender presentation, they are often teased with homophobic slurs [36], most notably “fag” [60, 61] or “that’s so gay” [40, p. 1453]. Therefore, homophobia and masculinity influence bullying in ways that are unique for boys. Based on tenants of hegemonic masculinity, boys are expected to be muscular, tall, dominant, and heterosexual. This is supported by our findings, which reveal that boys who do not demonstrate masculine traits, either in size, appearance, or sexual behavior, reported these characteristics were relevant to being targeted as victims by their peers.

Normalized Violence Amongst Boys

Many boys reported “shrugging off” the severity or frequency of being victimized. Denial is an acceptable response to bullying within American culture, as it is often voiced that “kids will be kids” and bullying is a “natural” experience for school aged children. Denial for children is a defense mechanism, which may enable victims to compartmentalize any hardship they experienced [28, 42]. This technique can also have dire consequences in the long-run, including low self-esteem and depression [78]. Denial then acts more as a temporary bandage than a healthy means of coping with bullying. Similarly, other works have documented the parallels of school-aged bullying with adult criminality and in extreme cases, school shootings [40]. Examining why boys downplay their experiences of victimization could help challenge hegemonic values of masculinity, as well as interrupt the normalization of violence experienced by school-aged boys.

Boys who were victimized by their peers and indicated that the situation was not worrisome are indirectly reinforcing ideas of hegemonic masculinity. If boys accepted their status as a victim, they are admitting their vulnerability and defeat, thereby calling into question their masculinity [see 52]. However, if boys shrugged off their experiences as just something that “boys do,” the victims were able to save face and once again affirm their masculinity. This in turn, further reinforces the notion that bullying amongst boys is not a grave concern and instead a natural part of their adolescence.

Limitations

Although this study provides valuable implications for educators, it is not without shortcomings. As a secondary data source, we did not have control over the

questions, survey format, or methods of recruitment and implementation. A major limitation of using open-ended questions from secondary data is the inability to ask follow-up questions and probe for more thorough answers. Students' familiarity with computers may have contributed to the thoroughness of their typed responses. However, given that previous qualitative studies relied on smaller sample sizes, this non-ethnographic qualitative content analysis had a relatively large sample size and thus can provide valuable insights.

Based on the written responses, it was unclear if respondents were referring to a specific incident of bullying or if they summarized their experiences. It would be interesting to know the sex of the culprit for each incidence of bullying the respondents experienced. While preceding close-ended questions asked about the sex of the bully, these were limited to being called names or being excluded, and the written responses do not clearly indicate which event the respondent was referring to. Distinctions confirming the sex of the bully and victim and the types of victimization experienced could offer additional information on how bullying is used to enforce hegemonic masculinity. Also, masculinity intersects with class and race [18, 33], as well as sexuality [48, 59]. The Youth Voice Project did not ask participants their sexual orientation and therefore, we were unable to see how this might have played a role in the respondent's experiences. This could have offered insight into how self-identifying as being LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) might have played a role in why a boy was targeted.

Implications

Scholars have offered concrete suggestions for how educators can remedy bullying in their schools [70]. Many of the anti-bullying campaigns and interventions have sought to include all parties involved with bullying; teachers, staff, parents, and children (perpetrators and victims). Extending on present anti-bullying programs are two key suggestions derived from the current study. First, the role of schools, and most notably teachers, can be addressed. Teachers and school staff may unknowingly be reinforcing the normalcy of bullying behavior amongst boys by not calling into question the gendered motives at play. The children who are most disadvantaged in these situations are also those with the least amount of power to actually do something about the inequality [see 36]. Therefore, those in powerful positions within the school system, namely teachers and administrators, need to draw attention and give voice to the powerless and interrupt gender inequalities. They may also consider the importance of role modeling, promoting the acceptance of gender diversity, and teach victims of bullying adaptive coping techniques. This may be accomplished by teachers receiving formal training on topics pertaining to gender and sexuality diversity and sexual and gender harassment within schools. Such lessons can then be transferred to students, thereby promoting diversity and observing more closely the gendered behaviors of girls and boys.

Secondly, prevention programs must incorporate explanations of gender difference and promote acceptance of gender diversity. Such programs could offer students, regardless of their gender identity and presentation, information on

masculinity and femininity as it pertains to bullying. Students could acquire healthy coping techniques that may be used in place of anger and violence. Such lessons would help remedy the normalcy of bullying, as well as foster healthier relationships later in life. As a result, what is considered ‘hegemonic’ may change, as multiple masculinities become more accepted and perhaps even celebrated.

Lastly, promoting gender presentation and sexual orientation diversity is essential in deterring future incidences of bullying. Based on previous research and findings from this study, it is abundantly clear that gender nonconformists are especially at risk of being victimized. In addition to the prevalence of such accounts, victims of homophobic bullying suffer grave psychological problems [50, 70]. To address the prevalence of LGBT students being mistreated, GLEN established Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) in schools. Feedback from children who had access to a GSA in their school were significantly less likely to feel unsafe or experience verbal and/or physical bullying [43]. Therefore, implementing a GSA in schools and involving teachers and staff in promoting a safe space and healthy relationships with LGBT students can have a great impact in diminishing bullying. In light of our research aims, we narrowed our sample to include only boys in middle school. However, gender differences persist because children continuously shape and affirm these differences [47]. Future studies may consider the interplay between how girls and boys experience and participate in bullying behavior. For instance, it would be interesting to explore if emphasized femininity plays a role in how girls experience bullying. Such insight would paint a more complete picture as to how girls’ and boys’ bullying behavior is shaped by gender and contributes to gender inequalities.

Despite some limitations, findings of this study illustrate how ideals of hegemonic masculinity influence how boys experience bullying. As a result, the gender order and gender inequalities are reproduced. These findings are important because they offer anti-bullying advocates a new framework in which to understand bullying behavior. By drawing on the framework of hegemonic masculinity, we can conceptualize how bullying behavior serves to reinforce gender differences and value this limited form of masculinity.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. As a secondary data source, data for this manuscript received permission from Penn State University’s Institute Review Board. In addition the IRB at The University of Akron was consulted and the project registered with “exempt from review” status.

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