

Bullying of Lesbian and Gay Youth: A Qualitative Investigation

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Summary

The preponderance of bullying research does not address sexual orientation as a possible factor. The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of service providers and youth advocates working with lesbian and gay communities in order to increase understanding of bullying of lesbian and gay youth. In depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine key informants from various education and social service settings. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Inductive data analysis was conducted using a constant comparative method. Six major categories emerged: prevalence, sites and perpetrators, institutional and community factors, effects of bullying, and barriers as well as strategies to address bullying. Several dimensions of bullying that may be specific to lesbian and gay youth (e.g. pervasiveness across their social ecology and risks to coming-out; sexual prejudice in the media; and 'conversion bullying') suggest the importance of investigations to support development of targeted, multi-sectoral interventions.

Keywords: Youth, bias-based bullying, qualitative research, lesbian and gay bullying, peer victimization

Introduction

Bullying is a complex phenomenon, for which a systems ecological framework is most appropriate, whereby the dynamics of bullying are understood as extending beyond the children or youth who are victimized or who bully. The attitudes of parents, teachers and school administrators may contribute to children's victimization, as may teacher and student tolerance of victimization (Twemlow *et al.*, 2003) and societal factors, such as attitudes towards violence (Atlas and Pepler, 1998). In this paper, we report on a qualitative investigation of bullying from the perspectives of service providers and youth advocates working with lesbian- and gay-identified youth.

Despite acknowledgment that societal attitudes such as homophobia foster bullying (Clarke and Kiselica, 1997), the preponderance of bullying research neither addresses nor acknowledges sexual orientation as a possible factor (Poteat and Espelage, 2005). Nevertheless, investigations focused on life experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth suggest that up to 84 per cent report verbal harassment (Poteat and Espelage, 2005), a quarter report physical harassment (Elze, 2003; Pilkington and D'Augelli, 1995), and up to 70 per cent experience problems in school due to prejudice and discrimination based on sexual orientation (Remafedi, 1987; Saewyc *et al.*, 2007; Telljohann and Price, 1993). Victimization of lesbian and gay youth has been identified across elementary (Solomon, 2004), high-school (Robin *et al.*, 2002; Thurlow, 2001; Williams *et al.*, 2005) and university (Janoff, 2005) settings. Moreover, lesbian and gay youth often hear derogatory homophobic comments and labels directed towards individuals regardless of their sexual orientation (Poteat and Espelage, 2005). It has been suggested that homophobic bullying is pervasive, insidious and starts early (Mallon, 2001; Solomon and Russel, 2004).

Reported bullying underestimates the problem, because many children and youth do not admit to being victimized (Mishna, 2004; Mishna *et al.*, 2006; Pepler *et al.*, 1994). Adults are generally unaware of bullying and when they do intervene, it is infrequent or ineffective (Atlas and Pepler, 1998).

Recognized barriers to addressing bullying of children and youth may be more pronounced for youth who are lesbian and gay. Sexual minority students report more bullying and sexual harassment than their heterosexual peers (Saewyc *et al.*, 2007; Williams *et al.*, 2005). Limited evidence suggests that sexual minority youth lack supportive family, friends and teachers (Warwich *et al.*, 2001; Williams *et al.*, 2005) and experience more victimization and isolation within their families and in schools (Garofalo *et al.*, 1998). Lesbian and gay youth report that educators often did not intervene, even when they witnessed harassment of students perceived to be gay or lesbian (Elze, 2003; Ryan and Rivers, 2003; Warwich *et al.*, 2001). Non-disclosure of peer victimization is likely to be particularly problematic among lesbian

and gay youth, who often hesitate to seek support generally from school professionals (Telljohann and Price, 1993), many of whom harbour intolerant attitudes toward lesbian and gay persons (Fontaine, 1998). Further, sexual minority youth may not seek support from their parents, who may be potentially available, out of fear that seeking support will lead to further victimization (Hunter, 1990; Williams *et al.*, 2005).

In this study, we address gaps in the literature on peer victimization of youth who are lesbian and gay. The goals are to increase understanding of bullying of lesbian- and gay-identified youth and inform intervention strategies. Given the lack of literature on bullying of lesbian and gay youth, we explore this phenomenon through the perspectives of key informants—most of whom are lesbian and gay themselves—who work with lesbian and gay youth.

Method

Purposive sampling (Singleton and Straits, 2004) was used to identify service providers and peer advocates with expertise on self-identified lesbian and gay youth. The selection process was facilitated through consultation with one co-investigator (SS)—a social worker with an urban school board's Human Sexuality Program. Selection criteria included expertise on lesbian and gay youth and the inclusion of men and women occupying diverse professional roles across various settings.

For the purpose of the study, 'youth' was defined as individuals aged between fifteen and twenty-four years (Statistics Canada, 2006), although bullying of lesbian and gay youth begins well before the age of fifteen and continues after the age of twenty-four. The youth referred to by key informants were predominantly 'out' and in contact with LGBT-identified service agencies; nevertheless, youth may not have come out intentionally or on their own timetable. The study received approval from the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board.

Participants

Nine key informants (four male, four female, one transgender male), ranging in age from twenty-five to forty-four years, were recruited and agreed to participate. Seven self-identified as lesbian (three) and gay (four) and two did not self-identify based on sexual orientation. Six informants identified as white, and one each as South Asian, Middle Eastern, and Persian. Informants provided services to lesbian and gay youth, from age fifteen to twenty-four, in various settings, and occupied diverse roles, including: a secondary school teacher and university-based social worker,

youth peer counsellors and advocates, and community-based social service support workers and advocates. Key informant levels of education included formal post-secondary professional programs such as clinical psychology (Ph.D.), and masters degrees in expressive arts therapy, social work, and education; and community-based training in social services including LGBT issues. They had from three to fifteen years of experience in providing services to lesbian and gay youth.

Data collection and analysis

Face-to-face, one to one-and-a-half-hour interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. Questions focused on the key informants' views and knowledge regarding bullying of lesbian and gay youth, including prevalence, sites, perpetrators and effects of bullying, factors that foster or mitigate bullying, and strategies and resources for lesbian and gay youth. Some participants offered perspectives from their own life experiences, which were identified as such, rather than those of the youth through clarification by an experienced interviewer. Interviews were conducted and analysed in a recursive process, and informants were asked to comment on emerging themes. Member checking among community stakeholders and peer debriefing were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The investigators' many years of clinical and research experience in this and related fields afforded additional perspectives to the analysis.

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were anonymized, and certain demographic details redacted, to protect participants' confidentiality. Inductive data analysis was conducted using a constant comparative method—a technique from grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Four independent investigators performed multiple readings of the transcripts to identify major themes. Next, line-by-line (Glaser, 1978) and in-vivo (Charmaz, 2006) coding of transcripts was conducted by two investigators. All codes were entered into NVivo (Richards, 1999) and tagged to associated segments of text. Next, focused coding (Charmaz, 2006) was used to build and expand categories. Finally, theoretical coding was conducted to relate categories to one another and to ensure category saturation (Glaser, 1978). Coding discrepancies were resolved by consensus among the four investigators.

Results

Six categories emerged: prevalence, sites and perpetrators, institutional and community factors, effects of bullying, barriers to addressing bullying, and strategies to address bullying.

Prevalence

Bullying of lesbian and gay youth was reported to be pervasive, occurring across multiple contexts. Some respondents emphasized that bullying of lesbian and gay youth continues despite an overall increased level of acceptance of lesbian and gay individuals by society. For example, a respondent explained that ‘things have come a long way, but I think it’s still happening in a significant amount. I don’t think I’ve talked to any high school students who haven’t gone through something. The severity differs from person to person, but for sure it still runs rampant in the high schools’.

Sites and perpetrators

Lesbian and gay youth were described as victimized ‘kind of everywhere’ by peers and adults, including parents, teachers, coaches, religious leaders, public transit drivers, social support staff and police. The locations named by respondents where bullying of lesbian and gay youth occurs included schools, families, places of worship, public spaces such as malls, bars, the street and public transit, and, increasingly, cyberspace. Respondents reported that many bullying incidents occur at school and at youth-oriented activities, such as sports events and teams: ‘In sport, for example, there is a huge culture of being bullied ... homophobic and lesbophobic.’ Respondents described considerable harassment and discrimination that lesbian and gay youth experience from family members who disapprove of their sexual orientation. ‘For example, if I have suspicions of my child being gay, setting examples of, “Oh my god, did you see that gay person? They’re going to hell!”; so really trying to prevent this person from coming out by setting negative examples.’ Another respondent reported that ‘They really get tormented by siblings’.

Bullying of lesbian and gay youth was also reported to occur in settings that are devoted to ameliorating lesbian and gay youths’ victimization and are thus assumed to be ‘safe’, such as peer-facilitated anti-homophobia workshops and within queer communities. For example, a respondent commented that ‘our community is as racist and sexist and homophobic as any other community and it’s a big mistake to just assume that because we’re all queer, we all understand discrimination and racism and all these other issues’.

Institutional and community factors

A number of contextual factors at the institutional and community levels were identified that either mitigate or foster bullying of lesbian and gay youth.

Institutional level

Institutional contexts that emerged which foster bullying include schools, federal laws and policies, and the media. Institutional factors in educational settings that contributed to bullying of lesbian and gay youth comprise inadequate training for educators, social service providers and other adults working with youth, a lack of equity-based policies inclusive of sexual orientation and failure to hold staff and students accountable under existing equity-based policies. A respondent explained the importance of school administration and policies, beyond positive rhetoric: 'The administration has to support the teachers in teaching a common culture of tolerance and understanding and mutual respect; by just saying we're a racism-free zone, or by just saying we're a (queer-) positive space, that's not enough. You have to have policy and procedures which back that up.' Institutional-level factors emerged as creating a climate that is either hostile or supportive, and which strongly influences the attitudes and behaviours of staff, students and the experiences of lesbian and youth.

On the other hand, institutional factors in government and social policy were identified as mitigating lesbian and gay bullying. The inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982) and same-sex marriage legislation were identified as progressive and 'far reaching', and as inspiring hope for further change. For example, a respondent stated that 'people in a small town or a family from the Middle East would get the stories', which could result in individuals changing their negative views towards lesbian and gay persons. This, in turn, may contribute to a more accepting climate for lesbian and gay youth, in which bullying may be less apt to occur.

The media were viewed as powerful institutions that shape attitudes toward lesbian and gay youth and both foster as well as mitigate lesbian and gay bullying. Tolerance for violence as perpetuated by the media, as well as 'pervasive' heteronormative images of 'the perfect family', were seen to endorse bullying, whereas the increasing inclusion of lesbian and gay characters in television programming was understood as a mitigating factor, which has 'done a lot in terms of making it more acceptable for people to vary a little bit with sexual orientation'.

Community level

Several factors were identified at the community level that both foster and mitigate bullying of lesbian and gay youth. The family and religious institutions, in addition to contexts in which bullying occurs, were cited as potential domains of support. Respondents referred to recent positive shifts, albeit minimal, in places of worship and families, resulting in increased support for lesbian and gay youth. For example, a respondent

noted that ‘more and more we’re seeing parents calling up and going, “my son or daughter has just come out to me and I want to find them a safe space for high school.” Having parent support is wonderful because we’ve really noticed that since parent support is there, students are far more successful’. Other positive shifts included examples within mainstream religions, such as ‘rabbis that marry same-sex couples’.

Responses by educators and parents to homophobic bullying were seen as crucial in either fostering or mitigating bullying. A respondent explained inaction on the part of responsible adults not only as a missed opportunity for intervention, but as ‘sending a message that it’s okay to keep bullying’. Alternately, respondents stated that ‘if the teacher responds by stopping what’s going on and having a conversation’, the teacher is providing support and thus protection for lesbian and gay youth.

Respondents also noted rural–urban differences in vulnerability of lesbian and gay youth: ‘In more suburban and rural areas there is greater tolerance for homophobic bullying’.

Finally, respondents noted the importance of the lesbian and gay community as a potential protective environment. Respondents underscored the need for lesbian and gay youth to have a sense of their own community as a ‘place to retreat where he or she isn’t going to be victimized again’. However, they observed that many lesbian and gay youth experience a lack of community. Some commented that since much of the gay community revolves around bars, ‘as a kid you don’t have access to bars, so you might not have access to community’.

Effects of bullying

Respondents reported varied psychological, academic and social effects of homophobic bullying. Psychological effects included low self-esteem, anxiety and depression. A respondent explained: ‘You would begin to feel that you weren’t worth being protected if you weren’t protected by your school or your parents or the other kids. You would begin to feel that being different was bad’. Another poignantly stated that ‘it diminishes a person’s soul to bear the brunt of that kind of hate’. Respondents described poor academic performance and school drop-out as common effects of lesbian and gay bullying. A respondent observed, ‘almost all the youth in my group have either dropped out or transferred schools’.

The social effects of bullying, such as being ‘silenced’ and feeling alienated from peers, family and community, were described as a by-product of youth disclosing their sexual orientation. As a respondent commented, ‘they lose their social support when they come out. That is part of what homophobia does to us’. Another observed that ‘it’s hard enough to feel different, but to then be terrorized because of it and to have no one to turn to for support’.

Severe effects of lesbian and gay bullying reported by respondents included internalized homophobia, substance abuse, suicide attempts, and homelessness. Respondents identified internalized homophobia among victimized youth as a legacy of homophobic bullying, which they attributed to victimization and years of hearing comments, beginning in elementary school, such as 'That's so gay' or 'You're such a fag'. A respondent explained suicidality among some lesbian and gay youth as a function of feeling isolated in multiple spheres of life, including family, school and peer group: 'I guess people turn to suicide because they feel, "when I go home I'm isolated from my whole family, when I go to school and with my peers it's the same way. Nobody knows. I can't come out. What do I do?" I guess that's the only option of a lot of youth'.

Lesbian and gay youth were described as not only often feeling unsupported by their families and communities, but as abused by family members and peers. According to respondents, this lack of support and abuse is often re-experienced by lesbian and gay youth in shelters and hostels, which may lead them to homelessness. 'Youth that are identifying as lesbian and gay are either running away because their family is extremely abusive or not supportive or they're kicked out'. Another respondent explained that 'we know shelters aren't safe spaces for queer youth, so they'd rather be on the street'. This respondent added that several shelters are trying to make their spaces more inclusive for queer youth.

Barriers to addressing bullying: denial, dilution and fear of reprisal

All respondents expressed concern that lesbian and gay bullying is not adequately addressed and identified three main barriers to addressing bullying: denial, dilution and fear of reprisal.

First, respondents referred to denial of the existence of queer youth; consequently, bullying of lesbian and gay youth remains unacknowledged. Educators, service providers and other adults were reported frequently to adhere to the belief that youth are not lesbian or gay. As a respondent explained, 'Because communities think they don't exist, they don't feel they need to provide services or protections'.

A second barrier to addressing homophobic bullying is a discourse in which the underlying motivation is not named. As a result, respondents asserted, bullying remains located within a vacuum. Respondents described examples of homophobic bullying by peers: 'How do you know you're gay ... you just haven't been with the right woman yet; that's all you need'; and 'I'm going to teach you that you're not a dyke', said by a male to a lesbian youth. A respondent explained: 'I've seen the reason for the bullying—by a lot of service providers or teachers or even police—removed. Everybody wants to dilute it. So if it looks like bullying, then they just call it bullying rather than, "okay, maybe there's a sexuality kind of motivation or

discrimination that's going on". Respondents described this discourse as problematic, as it ignores targeted bullying of lesbian and gay youth. Furthermore, respondents described policies based on this discourse as enacting similar treatment for all infractions. Consequently, policy level responses are often untargeted and ineffective for lesbian and gay youth.

Fear of reprisal emerged as a third barrier to addressing bullying, not only among some lesbian and gay youth, but also among adults and authorities. In particular, respondents referred to educators who do not feel they will be supported by their administration. For instance, a respondent explained that 'So many teachers are afraid to do this kind of work. You're terrified of a confrontation with parents, not sure how your administration is going to support you'.

Strategies to address bullying

Respondents identified several strategies to address lesbian and gay bullying. A prominent strategy included additional funding for lesbian and gay youth programming within existing organizations, such as schools and shelters. The emphasis was on 'helping lesbian and gay youth feel they have a community—a space where they can go and not be bullied, where they can go and just be themselves and where they're valued and respected'.

Respondents advocated for inclusive school curricula, beginning in kindergarten, with a focus on acceptance of individuals and communities and on appreciating differences, reinforced by support throughout the school. A respondent stressed, for instance, that if a youth sees a rainbow sticker in a school window, he or she might assume that it is safe to 'be totally out'. However, this same respondent pointed to the danger should the youth be victimized and then encounter a lack of support at different levels within the system. A need for school policies that incorporate zero tolerance for queer bullying was identified, 'to let them know that is not acceptable in any way, shape or form'. Respondents added that to support such policies, educators and other adults must receive training to interrupt homophobia. They repeatedly highlighted the need for 'clear and immediate action and intervention. It's about putting a stop to the situation, followed by discussion'.

Discussion

In this investigation of the perspectives of professionals and youth peer advocates, bullying of lesbian and gay youth emerged as pervasive, occurring across the entire social ecology of youths' lives, and often in the absence of adult intervention. The gravity of these findings is supported by literature that documents the pivotal role of the societal context and

the underlying motivations that are operative in the peer victimization of certain populations of youth—based on characteristics such as sexual orientation, gender, socio-economic status, race and ability (Greene, 2006; Rigby, 2002). Pervasive and severe forms of bullying motivated by intolerance towards others based on actual or perceived membership in a particular group, known as bias-based bullying, both reflects and contributes to a toxic environment, which fosters lesbian and gay victimization (Ryan and Rivers, 2003).

Similar to findings on ‘traditional’ bullying, peer victimization of lesbian and gay youth often goes unreported and is pervasive in the school context, leaving victimized children and youth at risk for internalizing negative self-images. However, several characteristics of bullying that victimizes lesbian and gay youth appear to be unique.

First, whereas traditional bullying and bullying of lesbian and gay youth are both strongly evident in schools, conditions that foster the bullying of lesbian and gay youth appear across their entire social ecology, including peers, siblings, parents, teachers, religious authorities, and coaches, as well as in social policies, laws, institutions and the media. Having no safe space and no adults to whom to turn may render lesbian and gay bullying especially dangerous. Vulnerability due to conditions across youths’ social ecology also may apply to other groups who are victimized based on characteristics such as their race or ability.

A second differentiating characteristic of victimization of lesbian and gay youth is that disclosing one’s sexual orientation, while vital to gaining support, is simultaneously a major risk (Newman, 2002). Often youth are victimized further when they disclose their sexual orientation—to peers and adults, and are at risk of losing social support. The double-edged nature of the coming-out process may be one key component to understanding the experiences of lesbian and gay youth and to providing support and interventions.

Third, while bullying is generally underreported, researchers, policy makers, and educators are increasingly acknowledging the pervasiveness of bullying and taking action to intervene. However, the motivations underlying lesbian and gay bullying are often denied or diluted by adults and policy makers. Merely including ‘bias-based’ bullying within the overall category of bullying conceals the underlying motivations and thus reduces the significance of the particular bias and its enactment (Greene, 2006; Stein, 2003).

Fourth, while a culture that glorifies violence contributes to all bullying, lesbian and gay youth are specifically victimized by homophobia in the media and social institutions. Individual perpetrators and a culture of acceptance of victimization of lesbian and gay youth are in effect supported by a system that does not acknowledge their existence and enables and even fosters stigmatization and violence against them. This powerful institutional context, based on entrenched sexual prejudice—for example, in schools, sports, religious institutions, and shelters—and enshrined in laws and

social policies that exclude, negate or discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation, is a crucial factor that may render victimization of lesbian and gay youth distinct.

Fifth, the pervasive sexual prejudice embedded in many religious institutions may hold a distinct place in the bullying experiences of lesbian and gay youth. A discourse of 'conversion bullying', whereby lesbian and gay youth are subjected to ongoing even if subtle harassment that suggests that they 'change' their sexual orientation or become 'normal', appears to be unique to bullying of lesbian and gay youth. Underlying the content of some aggression against lesbian and gay youth is the narrative of conforming to heteronormative practices, although such 'conversion' has been completely discredited by the American Psychiatric Association since 1973 (American Psychiatric Association, 2006; King, 2003). While certain dimensions of conversion discourse from well meaning, albeit misinformed parents or religious figures may not be acts of bullying per se, the resulting hostile climate is at times translated into de facto bullying.

Lastly, all youth who are bullied are at risk for internalizing problems such as depression or anxiety. However, lesbian and gay youth face added dimensions of complexity related to the coming-out process—an important potential avenue to social support and acceptance. The pervasiveness of homophobic images and discourse in the media, and discrimination against lesbian and gay persons in policies and laws, place lesbian and gay youth at higher risk for problems due to internalization of stigma and intolerance (Hetrick and Martin, 1987; Hunter and Schaefer, 1987). Recent scholarship also highlights the agency of lesbian and gay youth in understanding and navigating unfriendly environments and their efforts to resist dominant homophobic and heterosexist discourses (Hillier and Harrison, 2004; Oswald, 2002). The psychological process of internalization must be understood as inextricably linked to ongoing interactions in the context of social relationships and the external world (Newman, 2002). Addressing 'internalized homophobia' merely as a psychological phenomenon risks further victimizing lesbian and gay youth (Newman, 1998, 2002)—as if they remain the focus of 'treatment' or intervention—whereas the lion's share of change should be implemented in families, schools, religious institutions, social policies and laws to combat sexual prejudice and to provide lesbian- and gay-affirmative and supportive environments for all youth.

In fact, the main barriers to addressing bullying of lesbian and gay youth, identified in this study as denial, dilution and fear of reprisal, find parallels to recognized barriers in the literature on 'traditional' bullying. Students often do not feel that teachers intervene consistently to stop 'traditional' bullying (Craig *et al.*, 2000). The extent and seriousness of certain bullying behaviours, such as indirect and non-physical bullying, are often denied or minimized (Batsche and Knoff, 1994; Mishna *et al.*, 2006). Hence, the damage that these behaviours can cause may be overlooked (Roberts and Morotti, 2000).

The finding that merely locating lesbian and gay victimization within the rubric of generic bullying may dilute its seriousness is supported by literature on 'bias-based bullying'. Within the inclusive bullying label, a number of actions may be disregarded, such as racist assaults, hate crimes and discrimination due to disability, sexual orientation, religion, and race. Attention to the underlying motivation of these behaviours is required in order to intervene effectively (Greene, 2006; Rigby, 2002; Stein, 2003).

The third identified barrier—fear of reprisal—is considered a prime reason that children and youth do not report bullying (Clarke and Kiselica, 1997). However, in the case of lesbian and gay youth, this barrier appears to extend to adults as well.

Some barriers to addressing bullying of lesbian and gay youth, therefore, are analogous to identified barriers to addressing 'traditional' bullying, whereas others correspond to barriers that apply to motivational bullying that targets particular populations, and some appear unique to lesbian and gay youth—such as lacking any safe space or person to whom to self-disclose or to turn for help, and the entrenchment and even acceptance of sexual prejudice in social policies, laws and institutions. It is critical to address all of these dimensions—barriers that are generic to bullying, those that apply to bias-based bullying, and those that are unique to victimization of lesbian and gay youth. Further research is needed to specify the barriers that are similar to other bullying situations and those that are unique to lesbian and gay youth.

The present findings suggest that it is vital to address bullying of lesbian and gay youth through a systems ecological framework. Indeed, one key to understanding the vulnerabilities wrought by bullying of lesbian and gay youth is to map the existence of bullying across multiple levels of lesbian and gay youths' social ecology (Astor *et al.*, 1999). Eco-mapping (Hartman and Laird, 1983) of lesbian and gay youths' life spaces may reveal many spheres of vulnerability to victimization and very few domains in which they feel supported, loved and cherished as whole people who are lesbian or gay. Approaches that tend to operate on one level, particularly those targeting individual-level dynamics of lesbian and gay bullying, not only may be ineffective, but actually risk contributing to the problem; lesbian and gay youth might become identified as the locus of the problem rather than families, schools, sporting events, places of worship and other key social and community institutions, as well as laws and social policies that ignore or exclude lesbian and gay youth from their purview.

This exploratory research supports findings that interventions must be tailored to particular populations and social and institutional contexts. Further areas to investigate include the distinct difficulties in engaging parents, who might traditionally be sought as advocates for their children. In the case of lesbian and gay youth, however, disclosing a youth's sexual orientation to his or her family might result in more rather than less danger. The present findings tentatively suggest that there may be

increasing supports in the family and places of worship. Further investigation is needed to explore this systematically and to identify factors that distinguish youth and families in which there is family support from those in which such support is not available. Research on effective means for supporting teachers and school staff who may not report homophobic bullying for fear of being unsupported or targeted themselves is also warranted. Greater attention to lesbian and gay youth in research on bullying is needed to inform interventions that address the unique challenges related to bullying of this population. Obtaining the perspectives of lesbian and gay youth and the significant adults in their lives will be critical to guide effective prevention, education and intervention.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include the small sample size in one geographical area. However, existing research on lesbian and gay youth, while not focused on bullying per se, tends to provide support for the present findings (Elze, 2003; Pilkington and D'Augelli, 1995; Poteat and Espelage, 2005; Robin *et al.*, 2002; Russell *et al.*, 2001; Saewyc *et al.*, 2007). The small sample size also constrains our ability to make distinct comparisons by gender, race/ethnicity and other social identities among lesbian and gay youth. Additionally, while most informants were lesbian and gay themselves, and all worked with lesbian and gay youth, they were not youth. Further research eliciting the voices of lesbian and gay youth is vital to increasing our understanding of bullying of lesbian and gay youth and their pathways of navigating oppositional contexts and resisting dominant discourses that support and produce sexual prejudice (Hillier and Harrison, 2004). Further research should also explore the bullying of youth 'perceived' to be lesbian and gay, but who may not identify as such, to identify similarities and differences that may exist between self-identified and non-self-identified lesbian and gay youth. And, finally, the study is limited by the absence of key informants' insights and experiences on the peer victimization of bisexual and transgender youth, the lack of focus on the intersection of sexual orientation and gender nonconformity with respect to lesbian and gay youth, and on issues related to gender norms and gender nonconformity more broadly (D'Augelli *et al.*, 2006).

Implications for practice

Evidence suggests that systemic interventions, such as the whole-school approach, are effective in reducing bullying (Olweus, 1991; Pepler *et al.*, 1994). The mixed success of whole-school anti-bullying programs (Olweus, 1994), however, has been attributed partly to inconsistent commitment of

institutions and society (Pepler *et al.*, 1994) and to insufficient attention paid to issues such as school characteristics (Stevens *et al.*, 2000). Environments that actively or passively support a hostile milieu for lesbian and gay youth fall directly in the realm of factors that must be identified to ensure the success of anti-bullying interventions (Murdock and Bolch, 2005). At a broader level, societal stigma and prejudice against lesbian and gay people must be addressed (Newman, 2002; Williams *et al.*, 2005).

Strategies to address bullying of lesbian and gay youth require interventions at various levels within the ecological context: interruption of homophobic acts by educators and adults; accessible lesbian and gay affirmative support in schools, shelters and other institutional contexts; training for educators and social service staff; funding for queer youth programming; queer-positive spaces of worship; support for youth initiatives within lesbian and gay communities; and greater attention among mental health professionals to lesbian and gay issues. Silence on the part of educators and mental health and other professionals devalues the problem of lesbian and gay peer victimization, leading to further stigmatization and disenfranchisement of vulnerable youth. Importantly, responses by individual educators and adults to homophobic bullying, such as tacitly communicating acceptance for bullying or censoring disparaging comments about gay or lesbian individuals, were seen as significant in facilitating or mitigating bullying, as identified in a study of lesbian and gay high-school youth (Murdock and Bolch, 2005). Clearly, the role of schools is crucial; inaction is not simply a lost opportunity, but may result in doing more harm.

Conclusion

Several dimensions of victimization of lesbian and gay youth emerged in the present study that may be particular to lesbian and gay youth; these suggest the importance of continuing investigation of the peer victimization of lesbian and gay youth. Research that assesses the social ecology of bullying of lesbian and gay youth is needed to facilitate the development of effective prevention and intervention responses. Furthermore, increasing our understanding of bullying of lesbian and gay youth may contribute insights to the field of bullying in general, which has the potential to benefit all youth and lend further substance to multifaceted and multi-sectoral interventions.

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