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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Bullying as an Expression of Intolerant Schemas

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Abstract The purpose of this study was to assess students' ($N = 186$) retrospective accounts of their bullying behaviors (in middle and high school), alongside their current, self-admitted intolerant schemas. Amidst intolerant schemas of sexism, ageism, classism, racism, religious intolerance, and sexual prejudice, all were correlated positively with the victimization of others in school (i.e., relational-verbal bullying, cyberbullying, physical bullying, culture-based bullying). Sexism yielded the strongest associations with bullying, and classism yielded the weakest. Men were more likely to report intolerant schemas and bullying. These findings add to existent theories connecting the cognitive and communicative manifestations of prejudice.

Keywords Bullying · Sexism · Ageism · Classism · Racism · Religious intolerance · Sexual prejudice

Intolerance is a potent, persistent phenomenon that is a necessary condition for communicated prejudice that ranges from inequality endorsement to violent hate crimes (Schütz and Six 1996). A manifestation of prejudice that is likely as timeless as intolerance, bullying has only recently received serious public and scholarly attention. Bullying is an epidemic in American schools (Smith 2012), and its victims suffer the gamut of negative outcomes, including anxiety, depleted self-worth (Grills and Ollendick 2002), and depression (Rothon et al. 2011).

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Drawing from social identity/categorization traditions (see Hornsey 2008, for an overview), we presume that bullying behaviors of middle- and high school students are social-group-based (i.e., sex, age, race, class, religion, sexual orientation) rather than (solely) interpersonally-based (Gini 2007; Jones et al. 2009; Schuster 1999). Therefore, we attempt to explain bullying in secondary school as an expression of specific group-based intolerant schemas held by students.

The Center for Disease Control designates youth bullying (5–18) as a health risk, and offers this definition: "any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated" (Gladden et al. 2014, p.7). Bullying behaviors are expansive, as they include physical and verbal displays, are both overt and passive (e.g., exclusion and avoidance), and occur in face-to-face encounters or via mediated channels (Pörhölä et al. 2006). As Jordan and Austin (2012) reviewed, bullying is typically one of five types: physical bullying (e.g., punching), verbal bullying (e.g., name-calling), relational bullying (e.g., exclusion), social bullying (e.g., gossip), and cyberbullying (e.g., posting pictures).

These unwanted, aggressive acts are often enacted between members of different social groups. They also tend to include hate speech about the target's social group memberships, including their religion or race, as well as sexual gestures or comments (e.g., Nansel et al. 2001; Qureshi 2013). Because of this, we assume that bullying behaviors are enacted, in part, because of and/or in accordance with prejudiced cognitions about (social) groups—specifically, the social groups in which the victims are presumed to be members. In doing so, we draw from previous multidisciplinary approaches that designate intolerance as the driving force behind group-based aggressive behavior, addressing bullying's links with intolerance toward several social groups.

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Intolerant Schemas

A plethora of studies demonstrate that while we might think of communication as existing between individuals, we tend to think about others, and are prone to communicate with others based on the groups to which we assume them to belong (e.g., sex, race, sexual orientation, age, class; See Hornsey 2008 for overview). In light of the power of social group categories to drive attitudes and communication, and in recognizing that those groups with lower social ranking are more prone to antisocial treatment (Tajfel and Turner 1986), the intolerant schemas framework addresses attitudes directed at several marginalized groups. As Oakes (2003) explained, humans' incessant quest for categorization (i.e., placing people into broad groups) is the first step on the "road to bias" in which these categorized groups map to various stereotypes which are easily, sometimes unconsciously, activated (step 1). These are then applied homogenously across the entire membership of each categorized group (step 2), ultimately directing a group-appropriate behavior at the individual presumed to belong to that group (step 3). This third communicative step may or may not manifest as antisocial behavior, particularly because humans tend to have more negative ideas about groups in which they do not belong than about their own groups (Tajfel and Turner 1986). In our current investigation's focus on intolerant schemas, we address these negative group-based attitudes (the manifestation of steps 1 and 2 in Oakes' explanation), as they pertain to specific bullying behaviors (i.e., the highly antisocial realm of step 3).

The social identity approach has a long tradition in the assessment of macro-level discrimination between members of different social groups (Hornsey 2008). In comparison to these contexts in which the group categorization is the obvious source of the conflict, bullying seems incredibly micro at onset; thus, bullying is often deemed a relational problem that is more individualized than group-based (e.g., Farrell 2012). That is, bullying is treated as a personal issue between specific students, even though bullying does not occur only at the interpersonal/dyadic level. While bullying, as defined above, can certainly occur within interpersonal relationships, there is surmounting evidence to suggest that youth bullying is more of an intergroup (i.e., social group-based) phenomenon (Aboud and Joong 2008). This is evidenced by the intragroup conflicts that exist within cliques of adolescent girls (Willer and Soliz 2010). Moreover, youth are often bullied because they are members of minority and/or marginalized social groups (Priest et al. 2014). For instance, bullies target victims for intergroup victimization based on their weight, socioeconomic status, intelligence, sexual orientation, and religion (Aboud and Joong 2008; Gini 2007; Graham et al. 2011; Poteat et al. 2013; Scherr and Larson 2010). Bullies use multiple channels to communicate their group-based messages of hatred to their victims, whom they presume to be members of

those disliked outgroups. Therefore, we presume that bullies not only use social group status as means for victimization, but also they likely possess cognitive schemas that are intolerant toward specific marginalized groups (i.e., bullies will report intolerant schemas that are sexist, ageist, racist, classist, homophobic, and religiously intolerant).

Studied outside the current context, the intolerant schemas assessed herein have been shown to coincide with discriminatory behaviors. In fact, sexism, ageism, racism, classism, religious intolerance, and sexual orientation discrimination are among those most widely uncovered in prejudice literature. Some examples are as follows: sexist beliefs and rape proclivity (Thomae and Viki 2013), ageist beliefs and patronizing talk toward older adults (Nussbaum et al. 2005), and racism, classism, and sexual prejudice coinciding with numerous antisocial acts ranging from apathy to hate crimes (See Hecht 1998 for overview). We recall these particular findings because of their actively aggressive underpinning and, thus, similarity to bullying as it is assessed herein. We recognize that it is easy for bullies to target victims based on their outgroup membership (Gini 2007), but we attempt to explain intergroup bullying as an expression of developed schemas that justify the victimization of others in marginalized groups. Logically, then, we hypothesize that students' intolerant schemas will coincide with a broad assessment of bullying (i.e., relational-verbal, cyber bullying, physical bullying, and culture-based bullying). Further, within our self-report methodology, these bullying behaviors are to be admitted by those who endorse higher levels of group-specific intolerance. We hypothesized that:

> H: College students with current intolerant schemas, including (a) sexism, (b) ageism, (c) racism, (d) classism, (e) religious intolerance and (f) sexual prejudice, will report retrospectively more bullying behavior in secondary school.

Method

Participants

We sampled 186 undergraduate students (106 men, 79 women, 1 anonymous sex) enrolled in large lecture, upper-level communication studies courses at a mid-sized, northeastern university. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 36 years ($M = 20.66$, $SD = 2.07$). The races of the participants were as follows: Asian ($n = 3$), Hispanic ($n = 7$), Native Americans ($n = 2$), Black/African American ($n = 12$), white/Caucasian ($n = 156$), and other ($n = 6$).

Procedures and Measurement

IRB approval was obtained and participants completed an anonymous questionnaire during the middle of the semester. They were instructed to complete a retrospective questionnaire about their own bullying behavior (see Rivers 2001 for the validity of this procedure) in secondary school (i.e., middle school through high school) and current intolerant schemas as college students. The questionnaire was comprised of the personal experiences checklist (Hunt et al. 2012) and intolerant schema measure (Aosved et al. 2009), along with demographic questions.

Intolerant Schemas The *Intolerant Schema Measure* is 54 items and operationalizes the general intolerance toward non-majority groups. This measure consists of six subscales (9 items each) that operationalize sexism, racism, sexual prejudice, ageism, classism, and religious intolerance. Responses were solicited using a 7-point Likert-type response format ranging from (1) *Strongly Disagree* to (7) *Strongly Agree*. Previous internal reliability estimates for the subscales have ranged from .70 to .89 (Aosved and Long 2006). The obtained Cronbach alphas in our study were: sexism ($\alpha = .85$, $M = 2.07$, $SD = 1.06$), racism ($\alpha = .86$, $M = 2.27$, $SD = 1.12$), sexual prejudice ($\alpha = .89$, $M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.42$), ageism ($\alpha = .78$, $M = 2.04$, $SD = .84$), classism ($\alpha = .82$, $M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.12$), and religious intolerance ($\alpha = .76$, $M = 2.72$, $SD = 1.00$).

Bullying The Personal Experiences Checklist (PECK) is 32 items and operationalizes bullying experiences during youth across four types of victimization. This measure consists of four subscales that operationalize relational-verbal bullying (11 items), cyberbullying (8 items), physical bullying (9 items), and culture-based bullying (4 items). Responses were solicited using a 5-point Likert-type response format ranging from (1) *Never* to (5) *Most Days*. Previous internal reliability estimates for the subscales have ranged from .78 to .91 and strong test/retest evidence has been reported (Hunt et al. 2012). The obtained Cronbach alphas in our study were: relational-verbal bullying ($\alpha = .87$, $M = 1.81$, $SD = .62$), cyberbullying ($\alpha = .87$, $M = 1.39$, $SD = .53$), physical bullying ($\alpha = .89$, $M = 1.37$, $SD = .53$), and culture-based bullying ($\alpha = .87$, $M = 1.33$, $SD = .59$).

Results

The hypothesis predicted that college students with current intolerant schemas would have bullied other students during secondary school. To test this hypothesis, Pearson correlations were computed to examine the bivariate relationships between the intolerant schema constructs and self-reported bullying behavior (i.e., relational-verbal bullying, cyberbullying, physical bullying, culture-based bullying).

Relational-verbal bullying during secondary school was correlated positively with sexism ($r = .43$, $p < .001$), ageism ($r = .42$, $p < .001$), racism ($r = .35$, $p < .001$), classism ($r = .18$, $p < .05$), religious intolerance ($r = .33$, $p < .001$), and sexual prejudice ($r = .24$, $p < .05$). Cyberbullying was correlated positively with sexism ($r = .28$, $p < .001$), ageism ($r = .33$, $p < .001$), racism ($r = .18$, $p < .05$), and sexual prejudice ($r = .15$, $p < .05$). Physical bullying was correlated positively with sexism ($r = .51$, $p < .001$), ageism ($r = .39$, $p < .001$), racism ($r = .42$, $p < .001$), classism ($r = .25$, $p < .001$), religious intolerance ($r = .38$, $p < .001$), and sexual prejudice ($r = .30$, $p < .001$). Culture-based bullying was correlated positively with sexism ($r = .38$, $p < .001$), ageism ($r = .38$, $p < .001$), racism ($r = .36$, $p < .001$), religious intolerance ($r = .25$, $p < .001$), and sexual prejudice ($r = .26$, $p < .001$).

Because compared to women, men tend to hold stronger prejudices against marginalized groups (e.g., Foels and Pappas 2004), and are also more likely to act these out through aggressive discrimination (i.e., bullying; Card et al. 2008), post hoc analyses were conducted to examine potential gender differences in intolerant schemas and bullying. A MANOVA was computed treating gender as the independent variable and the six intolerant schemas serving simultaneously as the dependent variables. The MANOVA yielded a significant model, Wilks' Lambda = .71, $F(6, 178) = 12.07$, $p < .001$, indicating overall gender differences among intolerant schemas. Follow-up ANOVAs are reported in Table 1, indicating that men had stronger intolerant schemas overall, with the largest effects revealed for sexism, ageism, and sexual prejudice.

Another MANOVA was computed treating gender as the independent variable and the four types of bullying serving simultaneously as the dependent variables. The MANOVA yielded a significant model, Wilks' Lambda = .84, $F(4,$

Table 1 Univariate ANOVA results for gender differences in intolerant schemas

Intolerant schemas	Gender	M	SD	$F(1, 183)$	η_p^2	p
Sexism	Men	2.45	1.01	38.88	.18	<.001
	Women	1.56	.86			
Ageism	Men	2.33	.85	35.00	.16	<.001
	Women	1.66	.65			
Racism	Men	2.51	1.11	11.04	.06	.001
	Women	1.97	1.04			
Classism	Men	3.65	1.09	5.56	.03	.02
	Women	3.27	1.11			
Religious intolerance	Men	2.95	.98	13.49	.07	<.001
	Women	2.43	.95			
Sexual prejudice	Men	3.12	1.33	34.95	.16	<.001
	Women	1.98	1.28			

Table 2 Univariate ANOVA results for gender differences in bullying

Bullying type	Gender	M	SD	F (1, 183)	η_p^2	p
Relational-Verbal	Men	1.97	.69	17.56	.09	<.001
	Women	1.59	.46			
Cyber	Men	1.48	.63	7.44	.04	.007
	Women	1.26	.35			
Physical	Men	1.55	.62	30.90	.14	<.001
	Women	1.14	.20			
Culture-Based	Men	1.43	.71	7.58	.04	.006
	Women	1.19	.34			

180) = 8.42, p < .001, indicating overall gender differences among bullying types. Follow-up ANOVAs are reported in Table 2, indicating that men reported more bullying in all four types, with the largest effect revealed for physical bullying.

Discussion

The findings in this study validate Aosved et al.'s (2009) claim that prejudice toward specific social groups should be assessed as unique subscales; we also offer evidence of these constructs' links with specific bullying behaviors. Overall, self-admitted intolerant schemas were related positively with reports of bullying in secondary school. Varying means across these schemas suggests that one can be sexist without being (as) racist, ageist without being classist, etc. This is not to discredit theories and evidence of some individuals' perpetual craving for strict social hierarchies in which some social groups "belong" beneath others (i.e., Social Dominance Theory, Sidanius and Pratto 1993), nor that which demonstrates the shifting salience of group categorizations (Hornsey 2008). In fact, further research might address the highly social dominant individual who scores high across these 'isms' due to a strong desire to maintain social group hierarchies that "rank" groups. Nevertheless, this study's self-report assessments of specific intolerant schemas correlated with almost *all* bullying behaviors—and not just those linked to cultural difference. This demonstrates that bullying coincides with intolerance toward social groups. In this way, bullying must be conceived of as a discriminatory act that extends beyond purely interpersonal dynamics.

We found many small to moderate correlations between intolerant cognitions and bullying behaviors, which is consistent with previous literature on prejudicial thought and subsequent action (Baldwin 1998). These overt behaviors harm others in the public and private spheres by creating physical pain, depression, anxiety and a host of school-related problems (Cowie 2013; Klomek et al. 2010; Swearer et al. 2011; Vaillancourt et al. 2011). Because our effects are significant, albeit modest, it is impressive given that antisocial behaviors

are just a portion of those behaviors resulting out of prejudicial beliefs. As implied in our above description of Oakes' "road to bias," the behaviors that result out of group-based attitudes and stereotyping may be subtle, neutral or even positive (2003). It is common, for instance, for people to treat the suffering of marginalized groups with indifference and apathy (Cuddy et al. 2007), which becomes difficult for researchers (and interactants) to measure, and hard to find within bullying literature (e.g., Cappadocia et al. 2012). Social desirability, self desirability, and inadequate methods/measures are additional explanations for small effects.

Given that self-report measures are subject to great social desirability bias, it is unsurprising that our participants scored low on cyberbullying and that their greatest "admitted to" intolerance targeted social class. Cyberbullying literature suggests that many students do not perceive their aggressive behaviors *as* bullying acts, probably because of the ambiguous (no accompanying nonverbals of either party), depersonalized, and usually anonymous channel (Smith and Slonje 2012). This is ironic, of course, given that these factors are likely responsible for the magnitude of cyberbullying's negative effects on those bullied (Farrell 2012). Social-class discrimination reveals a different picture amidst existent literature. The justification of social hierarchy between varying socio-economic classes is prominent across cultures and across time (Sidanius and Pratto 1993). Thus, this specific intolerant schema perhaps best captures the "pervasiveness of intolerance" we described in our opening words about the study. Though classism did not correlate with all bullying behaviors, this should not imply that it has nothing to do with discrimination, as previous research suggests its links with approval for policies that reinforce social inequality. Also, because we often bully those whose oppression helps us maintain our own (heightened) group social status (Hornsey 2008), and because lower-class people lack group vitality that might realistically threaten higher-class individuals, they may be of little consequence to bullying behaviors.

Post-hoc findings indicate that, compared to women, men have a heightened intolerance and mistreatment of marginalized groups. Although this trend is largely consistent across the literature on prejudice and discrimination (though effects are often small), we caution readers that women are certainly capable of bullying, and that women tend to report doing so in response to relational bullying measures that we failed to include in this study (e.g., Card et al. 2008). Relatedly, social desirability is our primary limitation because many participants might not be willing to admit they are intolerant or that they bullied other students in school, and so we close with this, as well as the other limitations and avenues for future research.

Our self-report data is imperfect in its inability to capture what participants truly think about marginalized groups. Future research might consider use of implicit assessments

of the cognitive domains and empirical observations of behaviors. A second limitation is the inability to connect the specific schemas to specific behaviors and/or at specific target (social) groups. Of course, most people are unaware of how strongly their communication is based on group differences and stereotypes, making it difficult to link bullies' intolerance as their known motive for bullying (except, of course, in the case of hate crimes which are what is often uncovered in existent research among non-youth samples). Third, the scope of our study prohibited us from including context-based dynamics of the school (e.g., racial makeup of the school differentiates frequency of bullying against specific races, Hanish 2000) and family (family creates and moderates bullying; Duncan 2004; Kam and Bamaca-Colbert 2012; Matsunaga 2009) that have a demonstrated role in prejudice/discrimination dynamics. As this study lays groundwork for linking intolerant schemas and specific bullying behaviors, subsequent analyses might experiment with how a primed intolerant schema drives bullying behavior in scenarios typical to those experienced among middle- and high-school students.

Conclusion

In this study, college students' retrospective reports of their own bullying behaviors were positively linked with their current reported attitudes of intolerance toward specific groups. That our focus on bullying led us to address outward forms of discrimination, as opposed to more implicit, inadvertent, and/or apathetic displays of discrimination, we are encouraged of how our results could lend to future studies. Bullying is certainly a problem rooted in intergroup communication and it is disheartening to see college students admit they bullied other students in secondary school, as they currently endorse racist, sexist, ageist, homophobic, religiously intolerant, and to a lesser extent, classist ideologies. Perhaps interventions should start with creating more tolerant schemas that develop during childhood; the world needs more tolerance and less bullying.

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