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To cite this article: Matthew M. Martin, Alan K. Goodboy & Zac D. Johnson (2015) When Professors Bully Graduate Students: Effects on Student Interest, Instructional Dissent, and Intentions to Leave Graduate Education, *Communication Education*, 64:4, 438-454, DOI: [10.1080/03634523.2015.1041995](https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2015.1041995)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2015.1041995>



Published online: 08 Jun 2015.



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# When Professors Bully Graduate Students: Effects on Student Interest, Instructional Dissent, and Intentions to Leave Graduate Education

Matthew M. Martin, Alan K. Goodboy & Zac D. Johnson

*Academia can be a hostile place when faculty members and departments mistreat their graduate students. This study used a survey of 272 graduate students enrolled in a variety of programs and investigated bullying from the graduate student perspective. Our results indicated when graduate students viewed that they had been bullied by professors in their department (via belittlement, punishment, managerial misconduct, exclusion), they reported lower levels of student interest (meaningfulness, competence, impact) and a greater intention to leave the program. Students also reported they were more likely to communicate expressive and vengeful dissent in response. In the discussion, we outlined the ways departments can improve the quality of their graduate education culture.*

*Keywords: Bullying; Graduate Education; Persistence; Student Interest; Instructional Dissent*

The faculty–student relationship is important because not only do faculty members engage in consistent interactions with graduate students, they also serve as advisors and mentors for graduate students. (Myers & Martin, 2008, p. 33)

Professors have a significant impact on their graduate students’ professional and personal lives. The relationships between graduate students and their professors differ from the relationships between undergraduate students and their professors. Many undergraduate students are only exposed to their professors in the classroom, and

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often that relationship consists of those students listening to their professors' lectures. For graduate students, their professors often serve numerous roles, including teacher, advisor, mentor, supervisor, and thesis/dissertation director or committee member (Braxton, Proper, & Bayer, 2011). Graduate students' success is often connected to their relationships with their professors. Graduate students look to their professors for guidance and support throughout their graduate education (Mansson & Myers, 2012). When graduate students receive supportive communication from faculty members, they are more likely to socialize within their departments and their discipline. These students benefit from the open lines of positive communication and are more likely to be successful (Martin & Myers, 2010). While many graduate students have healthy and productive relationships with faculty members, some graduate students have regrettable experiences with faculty as well. Graduate students who perceive their professors as being nonsupportive or even hostile and verbally aggressive could seemingly lose motivation, interest, and efficacy in succeeding in their graduate education, and possibly even leave their graduate programs without completing their degrees (Keashly & Neuman, 2010). In this study, we explored the relationship between faculty members' bullying with graduate students' interest, instructional dissent, and degree persistence.

Hickson and Roebuck (2009) reviewed potential bullying behaviors that graduate faculty members too often display toward their graduate students. These behaviors include grading to punish, preaching rather than teaching, spreading false rumors, discriminating, and using students for labor without pay. Graduate students concur that these deviant behaviors exist, stating that faculty members often bully them by disrespecting their efforts, harassing them based on their status and personal characteristics, suppressing whistle-blowing, and conducting or encouraging unethical research (Braxton et al., 2011). Keashly and Neuman (2010) concluded that more bullying takes place in academia (e.g., colleague-to-colleague, professor-to-graduate student) than in other workplaces. Yamada, Cappadocia, and Pepler (2014) argued that graduate students are particularly vulnerable due to the power differential in their relationships with their professors. When professors bully their graduate students, professors and their departments are failing in their responsibility not only to educate their students but also to model appropriate work behaviors and to train their graduate students to be collegial (Hall, 2007).

Why do professors believe they can bully graduate students? Keashly and Neuman (2010) offered several reasons for why professors might bully their graduate students. These reasons included beliefs that tenure allows them to bully their graduate students, that faculty members' stress and frustration lead to bullying their graduate students, and that bullying between members of the faculty spills over to their graduate students. Braxton et al. (2011) posited that bullying of graduate students might be prevalent due to faculty members possessing asymmetrical power in the relationship and having too much autonomy in their teaching of and research with graduate students. Hall (2007) stated that faculty members could often be cynical, paranoid, and ego maniacs, and thus justify bullying their graduate students. Hall

added sternly that “no amount of talent or ‘genius’ gives one the right to treat one’s fellow department citizens as objects of scorn or as pin cushions for abuse” (p. 68).

Graduate students are members of the department’s community and spend extensive time in the departmental workplace. “Bullying at work means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone’s work tasks” (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003, p. 15). In the academic environment, workplace bullying includes belittlement, punishment, managerial misconduct, and exclusion (Simons, Stark, & DeMarco, 2011). Belittlement includes intimidating behaviors and excessive teasing (e.g., a professor calling a student an unflattering nickname repeatedly). Punishment involves threats and reminders of errors (e.g., a professor, in public, frequently bringing up an embarrassing mistake a student made semesters ago). Managerial misconduct deals with unreasonable expectations (e.g., a professor assigning a time-consuming task to a student at the last minute that is not the student’s responsibility to begin with). Exclusion involves ignoring the individual (e.g., a professor inviting students to out-of-class activities while intentionally omitting a given student). Simons et al. concluded that unfortunately all of these behaviors occur too often in universities.

Bullying leads to unfortunate outcomes such as negative emotions (Glasø & Notelaers, 2012), less satisfaction and commitment (Glasø & Notelaers, 2012; Glasø, Vie, Holmdal, & Einarsen, 2010; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012), self-doubt (Lee & Brotheridge, 2006), stress (Balducci, Fraccaroli, & Schaufeli, 2011; Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007), confusion (Brotheridge & Lee, 2010), and even health-related outcomes over time (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). In academic departments where bullying takes place, graduate students may feel like they have little control or institutional support (Fox & Stallworth, 2010). We believe that how graduate students view their treatment by professors in their departments should be related to how they communicate with their professors, their likelihood of finishing their degrees, and how they feel about their education, including their current level of student interest.

### *Student Interest*

Student interest refers to students’ “affective-evaluative orientation toward certain subject areas” (Schiefele, 2009, p. 198) and consists of three dimensions: meaningfulness, competence, and impact. Meaningfulness is when students believe their coursework is relevant to them. Competence involves students believing they can succeed in their coursework, while impact relates to students feeling they have an impact of what happens in their courses (Weber, Martin, & Cayanus, 2005; Weber, Martin, & Patterson, 2001). Students higher in interest report greater affective learning, cognitive learning, and communication satisfaction (Goodboy, Martin, & Bolkan, 2009; Houser & Frymier, 2009; Weber, Martin, & Myers, 2011) as well as less stress and anxiety (Martin, Cayanus, Weber, & Goodboy, 2006).

Instructors influence students’ interest. Instructors who make the content interesting (Weber et al., 2001) and focus on prosocial influence techniques (Weber, Corrigan, Fornash, & Neupauer, 2003) have students with higher interest. When

instructors' self-disclosures are relevant and positive, students report higher levels of competence and meaningfulness (Cayanus & Martin, 2008). When instructors use an interactive teaching style, challenge students, and encourage independent thoughts, students report greater interest (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2010). Student interest is also higher when instructors are clear, confirming, and nonverbally immediate (Goodboy et al., 2009; Houser & Frymier, 2009).

We believe that how faculty members communicate with their graduate students would impact those students' interest. Specifically, we expected that when graduate students view their instructors as demonstrating bullying behaviors, they will report less meaningfulness, competence, and impact. Therefore, the first hypothesis was offered:

H1: Bullying of graduate students is inversely related to overall student interest (i.e., meaningfulness, competence, impact) concerning their graduate program.

### *Instructional Dissent*

When students communicate instructional dissent, they "express their disagreements or complaints about class-related issues" (Goodboy, 2011b, p. 423) by using expressive, rhetorical, and vengeful dissent. Expressive dissent is communicated when students attempt to vent their feelings and frustrations to receive sympathy/empathy from others. Rhetorical dissent is communicated as a persuasive attempt to correct a perceived wrongdoing in a course. Vengeful dissent is communicated as retaliation in attempt to damage an instructor's reputation and ensure that future students avoid that instructor.

Instructors are a main cause of dissent but can deter it by satisfying students' academic needs (Holmgren & Bolkan, 2014). Instructor incompetence, indolence, and offensiveness, perceived unfairness, lack of accommodation, violating the syllabus, and having a general lack of understanding for students' needs are related to increased dissent (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013; Goodboy, 2011a, 2011b). On the contrary, when instructors enact competent communication behaviors in the classroom (e.g., clarity, nonverbal immediacy, friendly communicator style), students communicate less expressive and vengeful dissent (LaBelle, Martin, & Weber, 2013).

Although instructor behavior is a major cause of instructional dissent, student factors also play a significant role in the process. For instance, students who are high in trait verbal aggressiveness tend to communicate rhetorical and vengeful dissent, whereas students high in argumentativeness tend to communicate only rhetorical dissent (Goodboy & Myers, 2012). Students higher in agreeableness are less likely to dissent overall (Goodboy & Martin, 2014). Moreover, students who tend to be entitled, care more about grades rather than learning, and lack academic self-efficacy tend to communicate more expressive and rhetorical dissent (Goodboy & Frisby, 2014; LaBelle et al., 2013). Collectively, however, research suggests that instructor misbehaviors (i.e., incompetence, offensiveness, indolence) play a stronger role in

influencing student dissent than student personality traits and beliefs about learning (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2013; Goodboy & Myers, 2012).

Workplace bullying mirrors many of the behaviors that can occur in a classroom (e.g., being humiliated or ridiculed at work versus in class). Furthermore, much of the research on organizational dissent (for a review, see Kassing, 2011) suggests that the expression of dissent in the workplace has been linked to the interpersonal treatment of workers and is influenced by organizational factors such as the quality of employees' relationships with supervisors (Kassing, 2000), perceived imposition of rights (Olison & Roloff, 2012), organizational climate (Kassing, 2008), and general treatment of workers (Kassing & Armstrong, 2002). Because students typically respond with expressive and vengeful dissent when they perceive their learning environments to be unfair (Goodboy, 2011b), we expect that graduate students' perceptions of bullying are positively related to their expressive and vengeful dissent. Therefore, the second hypothesis was offered:

H2: Bullying of graduate students is positively related to student reports of instructional dissent about their graduate program.

### *Persistence to Degree Completion*

Tinto (1993) identified three distinctions between undergraduate persistence and graduate student persistence. First, compared with undergraduate students, graduate students' satisfaction with the specific department and the subject matter (e.g., is this what I want to study, is this department going to help me achieve my professional goals) plays a greater role than overall satisfaction with the university. Second, social integration into the department is much more important for graduate students; "the local community becomes the primary educational community for one's graduate career" (p. 232). Tinto noted the third difference involves the student-faculty relationship and how that relationship evolves. The dissertation advisor and committee members have a unique relationship with each student and those interactions between faculty members and the student contributes heavily to the student's persistence (Mansson & Myers, 2012). If students believe they are being bullied, they will more likely threaten to quit or actually leave their programs (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006).

Moreover, since previous research reveals that dissent expression is a predictor of intention to leave (Kassing, Piemonte, Goman, & Mitchell, 2012), and employees who are bullied at work possess a strong intention to leave the organization (Glasø & Notelaers, 2012; Glasø et al., 2010; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012), we believed that graduate students who reported being bullied would also report a higher possibility of leaving their graduate program before completing their degrees.

H3: Bullying of graduate students is positively related to students' intention to leave their graduate program.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants in this study were 272 (men = 87, women = 183, nonreports = 2) students currently enrolled in a graduate program of study. Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 60 years ( $M = 29.4$ ,  $SD = 7.9$ ). Two hundred and nineteen participants were enrolled full-time, and 53 participants were enrolled part-time. The majority of the participants identified as white/Caucasian ( $n = 236$ ); other participants identified as Asian American ( $n = 7$ ), African American ( $n = 4$ ), Hispanic/Latino ( $n = 7$ ), Multiracial ( $n = 6$ ), and other ( $n = 9$ ), with three individuals not reporting their racial identification. The average length of enrollment in the graduate program was 3.5 semesters ( $SD = 3.2$ ). Within the sample, 150 participants received full funding, 39 had partial funding, and 83 had no funding. Participants were pursuing a variety of graduate degrees (M.A. = 61; M.S. = 61; M.F.A. = 6; M.B.A. = 8; Ed.D. = 12; Ph.D. = 93; J.D. = 3; M.D. = 1; other = 26; nonreport = 1). Participants were asked to report on their specific area of study and more than 80 content areas of study were represented. These content areas were representative of communication (e.g., human communication, organizational communication;  $n = 41$ ), education (e.g., educational leadership, higher education;  $n = 40$ ), natural sciences (e.g., biology, oceanography, physics;  $n = 27$ ), psychology (e.g., counseling psychology, sport and exercise psychology;  $n = 26$ ), health sciences (e.g., medicine, nursing;  $n = 22$ ), humanities (e.g., English, history;  $n = 21$ ), engineering (e.g., aerospace engineering, civil engineering;  $n = 17$ ), business (e.g., accounting, business administration;  $n = 16$ ), social work ( $n = 13$ ), and other areas (e.g., landscape design;  $n = 59$ ).

### *Procedures*

After obtaining IRB approval, participants were solicited online via graduate school and professional listserves, as well as social networking site recruitment. Individuals willing to participate were directed to a link leading them to an online questionnaire. After providing consent, participants were asked to complete a variety of measures related to their graduate education experience.

### *Bullying*

Bullying was measured using the Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R; Einarsen & Hoel, 2001). This scale is a self-report instrument that measures an individual's perception that they have been the target of bullying within the last six months. In this study participants were asked to respond based on their experience with professors in the graduate program:

The following behaviors are often seen as examples of negative behaviors in the workplace. Over the last six months, how often have you been subjected to the following negative acts in your academic department by your professors in your graduate program?

Responses were solicited on a Likert-type scale: *never* (0), *now and then* (1), *monthly* (2), *weekly* (3), and *daily* (4). Dimensionality of the NAQ (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997) and NAQ-R has been debated at length among bullying scholars. Indeed, multiple studies have reported differing factor structures (e.g., Einarsen & Hoel, 2001; Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaers, 2009; Simons et al., 2011). However, in a study examining the dimensionality of the NAQ-R, Simons et al. (2011) revealed the four-factor solution used in this study (i.e., belittlement, punishment, managerial misconduct, exclusion). To confirm the four-factor structure of the NAQ-R reported by Simons et al., we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with maximum likelihood estimation (ML) using LISREL 8.8. Based on the fit indices recommended by Kline (2011) and Diamantopoulos and Siguaw (2007), results of the CFA indicated that the four-factor model fit the data reasonably well ( $\chi^2(203) = 693.02, p < .01$ ; CFI = .94, SRMR = .07, RMSEA = .09 [90% CI = .087; .10]). Therefore, the four factor solution was retained, consisting of belittlement (6 items;  $M = 7.20$ ;  $SD = 2.34$ ), punishment (6 items;  $M = 7.04$ ;  $SD = 1.78$ ), managerial misconduct (6 items;  $M = 8.48$ ;  $SD = 3.30$ ), and exclusion (4 items;  $M = 5.70$ ;  $SD = 2.27$ ). For the summed 22-item scale Einarsen et al. reported an acceptable reliability ( $\alpha = .90$ ), and Simons et al. found that belittlement ( $\alpha = .74$ ), punishment ( $\alpha = .82$ ), managerial misconduct ( $\alpha = .77$ ) and exclusion ( $\alpha = .75$ ) all performed reliably. Reliability estimates for all measures are presented in Table 1.

### Student Interest

Student interest was measured using the Weber et al. (2005) 18-item revision of Frymier, Shulman, and Houser's (1996) Learner Empowerment Scale. This

Table 1 Correlations between Variables

| Variables                      | $\alpha$ | 1      | 2     | 3     | 4     | 5     | 6      | 7     | 8     | 9    | 10   |
|--------------------------------|----------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|-------|-------|------|------|
| <i>Bullying</i>                |          |        |       |       |       |       |        |       |       |      |      |
| 1. Belittlement                | .82      |        |       |       |       |       |        |       |       |      |      |
| 2. Punishment                  | .69      | .74†   |       |       |       |       |        |       |       |      |      |
| 3. Managerial misconduct       | .80      | .60†   | .48†  |       |       |       |        |       |       |      |      |
| 4. Exclusion                   | .80      | .70†   | .69†  | .61†  |       |       |        |       |       |      |      |
| <i>Student interest</i>        |          |        |       |       |       |       |        |       |       |      |      |
| 5. Meaningfulness              | .92      | -.29†  | -.26† | -.38† | -.34† |       |        |       |       |      |      |
| 6. Competence                  | .91      | -.18** | -.28† | -.13* | -.15* | .16** |        |       |       |      |      |
| 7. Impact                      | .83      | -.29†  | -.34† | -.26† | -.39† | .59†  | .40†   |       |       |      |      |
| <i>Instructional dissent</i>   |          |        |       |       |       |       |        |       |       |      |      |
| 8. Expressive dissent          | .95      | .32†   | .32†  | .37†  | .38†  | -.36† | -.16** | -.30† |       |      |      |
| 9. Rhetorical dissent          | .86      | .01    | .06   | .02   | .06   | .05   | .11    | .21*  | .16** |      |      |
| 10. Vengeful dissent           | .82      | .30†   | .26†  | .23†  | .36†  | -.34† | .06    | -.23† | .38†  | .13* |      |
| <i>Persistence</i>             |          |        |       |       |       |       |        |       |       |      |      |
| 11. Intention to leave program | .69      | .31†   | .33†  | .34†  | .34†  | -.48† | -.31†  | -.42† | .32†  | .01  | .27† |

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; † $p < .001$ .

instrument assesses student interest across three dimensions: meaningfulness (6 items;  $M = 33.81$ ;  $SD = 6.36$ ), competence (6 items;  $M = 36.56$ ;  $SD = 5.61$ ), and impact (6 items;  $M = 29.86$ ;  $SD = 5.84$ ). Responses are solicited on a seven point Likert-type scale ranging *completely disagree* (1) to *completely agree* (7). Previous studies have utilized the abbreviated scale reliably (meaningfulness  $\alpha = .88$ , competence  $\alpha = .87$ , impact  $\alpha = .89$ ; Cayanus & Martin, 2008).

### *Instructional Dissent*

The Instructional Dissent Scale (IDS; Goodboy, 2011b) measures student enactment of three types of instructional dissent: expressive (10 items;  $M = 17.05$ ;  $SD = 8.81$ ), rhetorical (6 items;  $M = 7.51$ ;  $SD = 4.66$ ), and vengeful (6 items;  $M = .69$ ;  $SD = 1.83$ ). Responses are solicited on a 5-point Likert-type scale never (0) to very often (4). All three dimensions of the scale have performed reliably in previous research (expressive  $\alpha = .96$ , rhetorical  $\alpha = .87$ , vengeful  $\alpha = .90$ ; Goodboy, 2012). In the current study, all three dimensions reported acceptable internal reliabilities as well (see Table 1).

### *Intention to Leave*

Intention to leave was assessed with the Intention to leave scale (Weisberg, 1994). This three-item scale measures individuals' intention to depart from their job. In the current study, participants were asked to report on their intention to leave their current graduate program. Responses are solicited on a five point Likert-type scale ranging from *very little* (1) to *very much* (5). Previous reliabilities have been reported at acceptable levels ( $\alpha = .71$ ; Moneta, 2011). In the current study, a mean score of 5.39 ( $SD = 2.64$ ) was obtained.

## **Results**

Table 1 presents the intercorrelations among variables and the internal reliability estimates for each measure.

### *Hypothesis One*

Hypothesis one predicted that the bullying of graduate students would be related inversely to graduate student interest. A canonical correlation analysis (CCA) was computed using the bullying dimensions (belittlement, punishment, managerial misconduct, exclusion) as predictors of the student interest dimensions (meaningfulness competence, impact) in order to evaluate the multivariate shared relationships. Only structure coefficients at the .45 level or above were interpreted (Sherry & Henson, 2005). Three significant functions were obtained and this hypothesis received support. However, only the first two significant functions were interpreted as the third function did not account for at least 5% of the variance (Thompson, 1984; Tucker & Chase, 1976) and as Sherry and Henson (2005) cautioned, "the CCA researcher should only interpret those functions that explain a

Table 2 Canonical Solution for Bullying Predicting Student Interest

| Variables               | Function 1   |             | Function 2   |             | $h^2$        |
|-------------------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
|                         | $r_s$        | $r_s^2$ (%) | $r_s$        | $r_s^2$ (%) |              |
| Set 1: Bullying         |              |             |              |             |              |
| Belittlement            | <b>.761</b>  | 57.91       | -.101        | 1.02        | <b>58.93</b> |
| Punishment              | <b>.818</b>  | 66.91       | <b>-.565</b> | 31.92       | <b>98.83</b> |
| Managerial misconduct   | <b>.817</b>  | 66.75       | .297         | 8.82        | <b>75.57</b> |
| Exclusion               | <b>.918</b>  | 84.27       | .150         | 2.25        | <b>86.52</b> |
| Redundancy coefficient  | [.690]       |             | [.110]       |             |              |
| Set 2: Student interest |              |             |              |             |              |
| Meaningfulness          | <b>-.873</b> | 76.21       | -.370        | 13.69       | <b>89.90</b> |
| Impact                  | <b>-.473</b> | 22.37       | <b>.857</b>  | 73.44       | <b>95.81</b> |
| Competence              | <b>-.881</b> | 77.62       | .092         | 0.84        | <b>78.46</b> |
| Redundancy coefficient  | [.115]       |             | [.016]       |             |              |

Note: Wilks'  $\Lambda = .72$ ;  $F(12, 701.42) = 7.61$ ,  $p < .001$ .  $r_s$ , structure coefficient;  $r_s^2$ , squared structure coefficient. Structure coefficients ( $r_s$ ) greater than .45 are shown in bold. Community coefficients ( $h^2$ ) greater than 45% are shown in bold.

reasonable amount of variance between the variable sets or risk interpreting an effect that may not be noteworthy or replicable in future studies" (p. 42). The first function ( $R_c = .442$ ) revealed that when graduate students simultaneously experienced bullying in the forms of belittlement, punishment, managerial misconduct, and exclusion, they believed they had less meaningfulness, competence, and impact in their graduate program. The second function ( $R_c = .233$ ), which accounts for remaining variance after the extraction of the first function, revealed that when graduate students did not experience bullying in the form of punishments, they believed they had more impact in the program. Table 2 presents the structure coefficients, squared structure coefficients, and redundancy coefficients for these functions.

### Hypothesis Two

Hypothesis two predicted that the workplace bullying of graduate students would be related to reports of instructional dissent. Another CCA was computed using the bullying dimensions (belittlement, punishment, managerial misconduct, exclusion) as predictors of three types of student dissent (expressive, rhetorical, and vengeful dissent) using the same criteria (Sherry & Henson, 2005). One significant function was obtained as this hypothesis received support. The function ( $R_c = .468$ ) revealed that when students simultaneously experienced all four types of bullying (belittlement, punishment, managerial misconduct, and exclusion from faculty), they communicated more expressive and vengeful dissent. Table 3 presents the structure coefficients, squared structure coefficients, and redundancy coefficients for this function.

### Hypothesis Three

Hypothesis three predicted that the bullying of graduate students would be related positively to intention to leave the graduate program. Results of Pearson correlations

Table 3 Canonical Solution for Bullying Predicting Instructional Dissent

| Variables                    | Function 1  |             |
|------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
|                              | $r_s$       | $r_s^2$ (%) |
| Set 1: Bullying              |             |             |
| Belittlement                 | <b>.803</b> | 64.48       |
| Punishment                   | <b>.748</b> | 55.95       |
| Managerial misconduct        | <b>.805</b> | 64.80       |
| Exclusion                    | <b>.951</b> | 90.44       |
| Redundancy coefficient       | [.689]      |             |
| Set 2: Instructional dissent |             |             |
| Expressive dissent           | <b>.888</b> | 78.85       |
| Rhetorical dissent           | .099        | 0.98        |
| Vengeful dissent             | <b>.754</b> | 56.85       |
| Redundancy coefficient       | [.100]      |             |

Note: Wilks'  $\Lambda = .76$ ;  $F(12, 701.42) = 6.50$ ,  $p < .001$ .  $r_s$ , structure coefficient;  $r_s^2$ , squared structure coefficient. Structure coefficients ( $r_s$ ) greater than .45 are shown in bold.

revealed support for this hypothesis as intention to leave was related positively to belittlement ( $r = .31$ ,  $p < .001$ ), punishment ( $r = .33$ ,  $p < .001$ ), managerial misconduct ( $r = .34$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and exclusion ( $r = .34$ ,  $p < .001$ ) from faculty.

## Discussion

In our sample, only 20.6% of the graduate students reported that no bullying occurred at all in their department (i.e., responded with "never" to all 22 bullying items). Our findings suggest that many graduate students think that bullying happens in their departments, and some feel bullied occasionally, if not often, by their professors. This bullying can occur in public and private contexts, and the results of our analyses show that this bullying has a negative impact on graduate students. The results show that when bullying takes place, students have less interest in their graduate education. They see their education as less meaningful, have lower expectations about succeeding, and believe that they have less opportunity to make a difference in their department. If the goal of bullying by faculty members is to make the students feel defeated, they have succeeded. Additionally, when graduate students report that the bullying is limited to punishing behaviors, they report that they believe they have little impact in changing their environment; students would appear to see their faculty members using coercive power as a means to motivate and would believe that they have little choice but to go along given the status differential.

Our results provide more evidence of the ineffectiveness and destructiveness of bullying behaviors; when graduate students believe that professors in their department bully, they vent their frustrations by complaining to people outside the department and intentionally try to damage the reputations of professors and departments. These students do not address their professors directly or constructively (i.e., rhetorical dissent), but instead, possibly due to fear or anger, they complain to others and portray their professors negatively. These results provide further evidence

that expressive and vengeful forms of dissent tend to be responses to aversive instructor behavior fueled by unfortunate teaching practices (Goodboy, 2011a, 2011b) and that those that are bullied are likely to retaliate by spreading hostile gossip (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). Rhetorical dissent however, was unrelated to any of the workplace bullying types, providing more evidence that rhetorical dissent may be a positive communicative response that has more to do with learning, rather than student affect and liking (Goodboy, 2011b; Goodboy & Frisby, 2014). Possibly, students avoid rhetorical dissent because they have low self-efficacy that their dissent can make a difference (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006).

Persistence and graduation rates are of increasing importance to universities. According to Tinto (1993), research involving persistence shows “that graduate persistence is also shaped by the personal and intellectual interactions that occur within and between students and faculty and the various communities that make up the academic and social systems of the institution” (p. 231). Our results provide further evidence of negative consequences of creating a bullying environment. Graduate students indicated they have stronger intentions to leave their program when bullying is prevalent. Although a professor might provide anecdotal evidence of his/her own bullying being an effective teaching technique, the results here consistently show that graduate students view all of these bullying behaviors negatively. It is important to note that this study focused on current students; it is quite possible that graduate students who believed they were bullied already have departed from their graduate programs (Salin, 2003).

#### *Limitations and Future Directions*

This was an initial investigation looking into bullying in higher academia. Graduate students completed a self-report survey; there would be significant value in asking students to provide their own experiences of being bullied by their professors. Although not intentional, our primarily Caucasian sample does not reflect the experiences of international or non-Caucasian students. Our sample was also cross-disciplinary; focusing on one discipline or a specific degree could provide more insight into a discipline’s or organization’s use of bullying. There are many more research questions about bullying to ask and explore. Lester (2013) noted that most discussions involving bullying in academia are anecdotal based, not research based. One area of interest would be student-on-student bullying in graduate school. Whether it is considered as initiation, as motivational, as a survival technique, or due to disdain, graduate students do display horizontal violence to their peers, and attention and action are needed in this area (Becher & Visovsky, 2012). An important question for graduate students to ponder is how they believe bullying in their departments could be reduced. Also, what about the professors’ views of the existence and appropriateness of bullying? Salin (2003) noted that bullies often view the rewards of their behaviors as outweighing the costs and that bullies rationalize their bullying behaviors. It is possible that some professors instrumentally bully their graduate students.

Another question involves whether students lose interest in their education and in pursuing a degree because they are bullied, or whether students who are losing interest in their education and in pursuing a degree view their professors as using more bullying behaviors. Attention could also focus on the advisee–advisor relationship as far as to what extent the advisor bullies (or assists) the advisee. Moreover, the role that peers’ social support plays during bullying should continue to receive empirical attention (Matsunaga, 2010, 2011). The bullying of undergraduate students also warrants attention. The more we learn about bullying in education, the more likely we should be able to reduce the amount of bullying that takes place. Bullying in graduate education is inappropriate and should not be condoned or ignored.

Numerous researchers who study bullying have offered suggestions on how to decrease it in the workplace (Cowan, 2012; Gallant, 2013; Hickson & Roebuck, 2009; Lutgen-Sandvik & Fletcher, 2013; Lutgen-Sandvik, Namie, & Namie, 2009; Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012; Samnani & Singh, 2012). These suggestions include:

- Departments need to clearly identify and define bullying behaviors for faculty, staff, and students.
- Departments should post antibullying policies where everyone can see them.
- Departments must have zero tolerance policy on bullying.
- Departments need to be committed at all levels of the department against bullying.
- Departments need to provide training about what is bullying and its negative impact.
- Departments must reprimand faculty members who bully, and repeat offenders need to face increased consequences.
- Departments should never punish students that file a charge of bullying.
- Departments must never protect bullies.

## Conclusion

As Berg (2011) noted from an intergroup perspective, dissent “can be an important corrective process in groups and organizations” (p. 58). Rhetorical dissent specifically could be instrumental for graduate students. If, or when, graduate students feel like they are being bullied, these students could directly state their concerns. Possibly, there is a misunderstanding, and bullying is not taking place, but if bullying is taking place, and a student is unable to resolve the issue with the specific faculty member, De Luca and Twale (2010) argued that it is a chair’s responsibility to intervene, mediate, and eventually eliminate the bullying that is taking place.

Hickson and Roebuck (2009) contended that *academic citizenship* should count as much as teaching, research, and service in faculty members’ yearly reviews, stating that some individuals could excel in the traditional three categories yet be unsatisfactory in academic citizenship (e.g., bullying graduate students, shunning departmental activities) and causing considerable harm to the departmental culture

and to graduate students' success and satisfaction. We support this recommendation and contend that it deserves serious consideration, as research highlights the importance of fostering positive emotions in the workplace (Miller & Koesten, 2008), including compassion (Miller, 2007).

When bullying takes place in an organization, even the nonbullied individuals view the environment negatively (Misawa, 2015; Skogstad, Torsheim, Einarsen, & Hauge, 2011). The results of our study offer considerable support for the proposition that bullying by faculty members is related to numerous negative student outcomes. Decreasing or eliminating this bullying should be a priority. Encouragingly, Davies (2012) asserted that "the vast majority of professional educators are ethical in their conduct" (p. 76). This vast majority needs to speak up and silence the minority of bullies.

### Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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