

COMMENTARY

Sticks and stones: Verbal bullying on LGBTQ youth in Michigan and anti-bullying legislation

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Abstract

Michigan is one of five states that do not have statewide anti-bullying legislation. Yet, according to a statewide Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) survey, administered to teachers and students in 2005, over one-third of students believe bullying is a serious problem, and ninety percent of students hear anti-LGBTQ language on a "regular basis." Language is a direct reflection of the culture from which a person comes. Concurrently, culture is also a reflection of this language. However, language is rarely considered a necessary factor for understanding human behavior outside of the field of sociolinguistics. This paper will look at the importance of considering language as a cultural risk factor in the context of verbal bullying in LGBTQ youth and explain how verbal bullying is a problem that is often downplayed due to emphasis on physical bullying. It will reveal the necessity for and implications of an enumerated anti-bullying policy in the state of Michigan and discuss what is currently being done in this state to improve the welfare of LGBTQ youth. Both micro and macro perspectives will be considered. (A note about vocabulary: language serves the same functions in all societies. However, for the purposes of this paper, language means any of those languages which are spoken in the United States, and culture refers to any culture in this country ranging from large scale identities like race or sexual orientation to small subcultural groups based on aspects of a culture such as peer affiliation.)

Introduction

Language is one of the most important aspects of society; it is what separates humans from animals, the reason many different religions rose out of a single text, the way wars are begun and ended. From language comes calls for war and the restoration of peace, and it is the basis for the United States' constitution, laws, and policies. Nevertheless, sociolinguistics and the sociology of language rarely appear in scholarly texts outside of their own fields. Article 2.03 of the NASW code of ethics recommends interdisciplinary collaboration, and there is a case to be made that social workers can benefit from a better understanding of sociolinguistics (NASW, 2008). Listening to the vocabulary of clients will reveal that language has been used as a tool for oppression as well as a weapon to fight back with in many people's lives. A prime example of this is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) victims of verbal bullying who, within the state of Michigan, are not protected by anti-bullying legislation. This paper will explain the relationship between language and culture, look at the language of verbal bullying among this population, discuss its effects on individuals, and explore the necessity for and implications of developing K-12, enumerated,¹ anti-bullying legislation in Michigan.

Sociolinguistics and the sociology of language: How culture affects homophobic language and vice versa

Sociolinguistics is the study of the ways in which particular aspects of culture or society affect the language its members use. Aspects can include societal rules and norms, religion, geography, history, and peer affiliation. The sociology of language is generally considered a subcategory of sociolinguistics and refers to the ways in which language affects society. When introducing the sociology of language in comparison with sociolinguistics, it is easy to equate the two with the chicken and egg analogy. It is easy to imagine that

¹ Enumerated language would include actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. Unless otherwise specified, anti-bullying policies refer to ones that are enumerated.

society and culture came before language; thus, culture affected language before the opposite could happen. But once the first word was uttered, culture was evermore affected by language. There is a very fine line between culture's affecting language and vice versa, but it is important to understand that while language is a function of culture, culture is also a function of language.

Social work is among few other professions that work to understand and respect cultures, and to deliver services that are fine-tuned to and sculpted by numerous aspects of culture of which language is no small part. Understanding the connection between language and culture could greatly benefit the profession by providing insight into a part of human life that is often overlooked as a risk factor for oppression and vulnerability. Research has shown that children who have limited exposure to language in the home (e.g. children who are neglected by parents who rarely talk to them) are less likely to succeed academically and are often funneled into special education classes (Allen and Oliver, 1982). Conversely, girls who are exposed to abusive language in the home are more likely to grow up with low self-esteem and to enter abusive relationships themselves, while boys who experience this language are more likely to develop negative attitudes towards women and potentially become abusers themselves (Perry, 1997). These examples, among others, along with the current rise in occurrence and/or awareness of verbal bullying is evidence that language can affect a person's development from an early age and should be viewed as a serious risk factor in clients' lives.

First and foremost, in order for people to be able to learn language, they must have contact with other individuals. One of the primary ways language is useful to an individual is in interactions with others. The words "communicate" and "community" share the same root, "communis," which means, "shared by all or many" (Oxford, 1993). Hence, language is arguably the most important social tool, and one that varies greatly in its usage within large and small-scale cultures. A key aspect of language is that it is always changing – it changes for the individual user, as well as for entire cultures; it can move forward with societal trends, and can revert, eliminating once common words and phrases. This fact creates hope for an end to homophobic language and verbal bullying.

Members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) community are affected by language in some unique ways. Despite the ubiquity of gay and transgender behaviors across cultures and spans of time, it was not until the 1860s that people began trying to define sexual and gender identities verbally with words like “homosexual” and “heterosexual” (Herek and Garnet, 2007). Aside from slang and hostile language, there is a dearth of universally accepted, potent, and positive language to describe the community. Because the LGBTQ community has historically been regarded as a group of criminals, moral degenerates, and the mentally ill, the language to describe the community is controversial, emotionally charged, and transitory (this is particularly true in the transgender community). It is easy for non-LGBTQ people to describe themselves as “straight.” But for others there are numerous words to choose from, many of which are controversial. Homosexual is sometimes seen as a word created by the dominant culture to describe others; it is often used by older generations, but considered offensive by younger ones. Transgender, an umbrella term, may be seen as not specific. “Queer” is a veritable slang word and an in-group word which may be used by those who identify as such, but is often interpreted as offensive when used by others. The language of LGBTQ (a phrase that is controversial and flexible in itself) culture is so laden with political implications, overtones of dominant culture, and complexities of sexuality and gender, that it has not had time to galvanize and find a stronghold in popular culture. LGBTQ culture is affected by this lack of defining language in that it perpetuates a sense of alienation, while dominant culture remains satisfied that LGBTQ people are outside of the norms of society. This stigmatization will not end until the same laws and policies that protect all other Americans also protect LGBTQ people.

Homophobic language in schools and verbal bullying is closely tied to a key aspect of language, one of the aspects that significantly affects youth in particular – slang. Slang is one of the aspects of language that unites members of groups, or cliques, and pushes others away; slang is predominant in bullying language (Armstrong, 1988). The use of a word like “fag” creates a distinction between the powerful and the weak and presents two options to people who hear it: conform to the norm, or be cast out. Dalzell (1996) claims that

youth and oppression are two of four of the sources from which slang commonly arises; combine the two and a plethora of slang appears, which often takes the form of pejoratives. The study of the correlation between oppression, youth, and slang could potentially provide great insight for social work practice.

Slang is a reflection of the utmost current facets of society. It is one of the most fluid aspects of language with words going in and out of style almost daily (what Dalzell refers to as “fertility”); however, the most potent words take hold and become embedded in a society’s lexicon, at least temporarily (Dalzell, 1996). Fortunately, even the most deeply rooted slang expressions usually die out (Dalzell, 1996). This fertility of slang lends promise to the idea that with proper education for students and awareness of school staff, homophobic slang may be replaced and henceforth forgotten.

Possibly the most important way in which language affects our culture is in the influence it has over children’s lives. Children absorb language, often without questioning the meaning of what they are saying. A group of middle school children were asked why they use the expression “that’s so gay.” Each of them expressed that they used the words to imply that something was stupid, but that they neither believed gay people were stupid, nor had strong feelings about LGBTQ culture (Springboard After School Group, May, 2009). One of these, a fourteen-year-old boy, had a lesbian mother and stated that he would never say anything that would offend her. When the implications of using the word were explained to the group, each member expressed remorse and vowed not to use the expression in the future (Springboard After School Group, May, 2009).

Furthermore, as children experience the world, they begin to understand the ways in which they can manipulate language for their benefit. Poteat (2009) claims that many bullies do not actually have strong opinions about sexual orientation or gender identity. Instead, they take advantage of the stigma and negative connotations associated with homophobic language and use them as weapons of power against “weaker” students, while at the same time perpetuating cultural stigmas (Poteat, 2009).

Aspects of both dominant and peripheral cultures have a significant impact on the language that their members create, hear, and choose to use. At the same time, the language people hear and

use can have a dramatic influence on their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Inevitably, this not only affects individuals, but others around them, and the cultures with which they identify. Thus, language should not be overlooked as a cultural risk factor in clients' lives.

Social workers should readily consider not only the affect language may have on specific client's lives but also its multi-systemic affects on families, communities, and organizations. Furthermore, the language that helps to produce and is produced by dominant culture has just as much impact on social policy, social justice, and social change as do more traditional risk factors including race, socioeconomic status, and sexual/gender identity. Social workers are trained as critical thinkers and are thus more readily aware of the myriad factors that impact individuals and society. However, little emphasis has been placed on language as one of these factors. Social workers learn that in domestic violence, verbal abuse can be more damaging than physical abuse and that children, who are not exposed to a large vocabulary at home, are less likely to succeed academically. Recently, they have been exposed to endless information about the effects of bullying. In addition to the social, emotional, and psychological frameworks that social workers often work from, language should be included as an important structural element.

The effects of verbal vs. physical bullying

Bullying can be defined as the repeated harm caused by one person to another and is an expression of unfair distribution of power (Craig, 1997). Similarly language is defined as, "an act that can be violent, exclusionary, and coercive" (Armstrong, 1988). Unfortunately, there is little literature that deals specifically with verbal bullying. Most studies address bullying as a whole, dedicating a fraction of the research to the implications of verbal bullying alone.

In the case of verbal bullying, an indicator of the need to consider language as a significant cultural factor is the way in which it affects people's psychological functioning. Often, when people think about bullying, they picture children having food thrown in their faces, being crammed into lockers, or assaulted on

school playgrounds. Though all of these images draw from reality, verbal bullying is the most common form and can be more psychologically damaging than physical bullying. Hazler et al., 2001 state that verbal bullying occurs when one or more students are more verbally skilled than another. By no means is bullying solely about unequal distribution of physical strength, it is often about a person's ability to use language. There is an equation in people's minds between physical bullying and the most serious negative outcomes, but verbal bullying can lead directly to the same effects. Verbal bullying is a risk factor for eating disorders, substance abuse, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation and actions (Dake et al. 2003). Humiliation and self-pity are directly correlated with suicidal thoughts and behaviors – in January, 2011, Tiffany Maxwell committed suicide after being verbally bullied at school, over the internet, and via text message. Allegedly, she was never physically assaulted (WPXI.com, 2011)). Furthermore, bullying can lead to feelings of anger and thoughts of retaliation. This can cause victims to become bullies, can lead to life-long problems with anger control, and can spurn acts of unreasonable violence (Hazler et al. 2011) – each of the boys involved with the shootings and suicides in Columbine complained of being verbally bullied.

Following youth who are harassed about their physical appearance, LGBTQ youth are the second most likely population to experience any form of bullying (GLSEN, 2005). Verbal bullying has been shown to be the most common form of bullying experienced by LGBTQ youth (GLSEN, 2005). LGBTQ youth also witness the use of homophobic pejoratives in bullying towards non-LGBTQ youth which enforces the notion that any association with non-dominant sexuality is socially unacceptable. For youth who are exploring sexuality and gender, the damaging effects of bullying can be considerable. Youth often internalize what they hear, sometimes leading to the psychological effects previously mentioned as well as to lasting feelings of self-contempt and alienation, which can negatively affect healthy physical and emotional relationships throughout life (Thurlow, 2001).

Although verbal attacks may or may not precipitate physical bullying, many victims of bullying report persistent anxiety and fear that they will be physically harmed. For victims of LGBTQ related physical bullying, studies have shown a correlation between

homophobic language and the escalation of bullying behaviors – many victims reported being verbally bullied with homophobic epithets before other forms of bullying began (Poteat, 2008). Physical bullying is a serious problem in this country. However, placing emphasis on discouraging verbal bullying not only ensures that authorities take verbal acts seriously, but also serves as a preventive measure against physical bullying.

Teachers and other school staff play an essential part in verbal bullying as well. It is becoming widely recognized that teachers' and administrators' unwillingness and/or inability to deal with verbal bullying situations is a nationwide dilemma. Because verbal bullying does not leave behind physical evidence, it is difficult to substantiate and often leads to apathy in teachers and administrators (Hazler et al., 2001). According to GLSEN, teachers and administrators can be informed numerous times before reacting to a situation (GLSEN, 2005).

In many cases teachers do not address the incidents of bullying. Nationally, teachers intervene in only 14 percent of verbal bullying incidents annually (GLSEN, 2005.) Teachers are overworked, unclear about the criteria for bullying, and unsure of their own rights as protectors (Hazler et al., 2001). Intervention is an important opportunity for social workers. At schools, instead of waiting to be called on, social workers can become educators. Understanding that words do indeed hurt, they can work to debunk the myth of sticks and stones. School social workers can provide a safe space for bullied children, and can help reverse the pattern of teacher, administrator, and staff apathy by raising awareness of the power of language.

Implications of anti-bullying policies

One's experience with language should be considered in the same way as other cultural risk factors. Statewide anti-bullying policies should incorporate all forms of bullying, including physical, verbal, and cyber bullying, while at the same time highlighting the necessity of addressing each isolated incident.

It is important to note that in the United States, language cannot be legislated, nor should it be. Censors can inhibit what is said to the general public, but individuals' freedom of speech is

protected by First Amendment Rights. However, in this regard, schools serve a unique function. Aside from home, school is where children learn the bulk of their language. Part of initiating anti-bullying legislation is taking into consideration the language that children learn in the halls and on the playground, as well as helping children to understand the meanings of these words and how to put them into an appropriate context. For example, “gay” should not be considered a bad word, and the use of injurious language can be used as a teaching tool from one child to another, or as an indicator to inform an adult of inappropriate behavior. Anti-bullying policies should not vilify bullies, should not punish children for their use of language, but should instead act as a continuation of a children’s education by providing them with information and critical thinking skills necessary to make their own decisions about the words they use and their implications.

Of course, the language used in the policy itself is of great importance. According to Eliza Byard of GLSEN, “Policies have to name the problem in order to have an impact...the ones that name it [have seen] an improvement” (Huffington Post, 2010). Enumerated language should protect not only those who identify as LGBTQ, but also those who are perceived to be or are in the process of defining their identities. The following is a brief overview of the ways in which enumerated anti-bullying policies serve to affect positively not only the lives of LGBTQ youth, but greater society as well.

Awareness –Anti-bullying policies bring the issue of discrimination against LGBTQ people to the surface, not just in schools, but for the public as well. Social workers and other clinicians need to recognize bullying as a potential risk factor in clients’ lives. Though homophobia and bullying are rampant, they are rarely openly discussed; when bullying is discussed, it is often a blanket issue. However, the recent media publicity, as well as depictions of bullying in popular media, have already shown that verbal bullying is no longer an individual’s problem, it is a social problem.

Education – Once the issue is on the table, education is key. As previously discussed in this paper, children are often not fully aware of what they are saying or are using pejorative

language as an instrument of power (Poteat, 2009). Educators need a better understanding of what constitutes bullying, as well as what their rights are as educators, and positive ways to intervene.

Teachers and schools – Teacher intervention is one of the most important factors in bullying, though not simply because it provides safety, and reliability for youth. A reduction in bullying behaviors in schools may improve academic behavior in both bullies and victims, and can thus improve the teaching environment for educators and raise a school's ratings. A study by Dake et al. (2003) reveals a direct correlation between bullying behaviors and academic performance. Youth who experience bullying are more likely to miss classes to avoid bullies, and the psychological implications mentioned earlier contribute to factors including lack of attention, fatigue, and physical symptoms like headache and stomach pain that can cause youth to miss school (Dake et al. 2003).

As noted earlier, only 14% of teachers nationwide reported taking action in response to reports of bullying, but in Michigan that percentage is nearly doubled. GLSEN's 2005 survey revealed that 27 percent of students who experienced bullying were protected by a teacher (GLSEN, 2005). This suggests that Michigan teachers may be better prepared to defend anti-bullying policies than those in other states, including those states that have policies in place.

Social workers and mental health professionals - One of the reasons homosexuality was previously listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), and part of the reason Gender Identity Disorder (GID) still is, is the belief that because this population exhibits more symptoms and cases of depression and anxiety, their sexual or gender identity must be at the root (Herek and Garnet, 2007). In reality, those depressive tendencies are often associated with a feeling of alienation from mainstream society perpetuated by discriminatory behaviors including

bullying (Craig, 1999). By bringing the issue of bullying to the surface, anti-bullying policies will have a positive effect, not only on LGBTQ people, but also on the clinical profession, by helping social workers and other mental health professionals to understand the etiology of symptoms, decrease the number of diagnoses directly correlated to sexual and gender orientation, and ultimately depathologize non-heterosexual or non-cisgender orientations.

Michigan

Michigan is one of five states that does not have a statewide anti-bullying policy.² In 2005, then representative Glenn Anderson introduced HB 4162. The bill included an enumerated “model anti-bullying policy” created by Anderson, and would require teachers to follow and be trained in whatever *enumerated* policy their school board chose to institute. The bill passed in the House, but was not approved by the Senate. In 2007, Representative Pam Byrnes re-introduced HB 4162 with the same results. In May 2010, Byrnes introduced HB 4580, a toned down version of 4162, which presented the same model policy, but which would allow districts more freedom in what they choose to include in individual policies. Therefore, HB 4580 would not create statewide protections for LGBTQ youth, but would instead leave this up to individual districts. Again the bill passed in the House, but has not yet passed in the Senate. Though it is obvious that bullying is a concern for Michigan residents and politicians, by not mandating statewide policies, as it stands, HB 4580 fails to address the needs of the LGBTQ community.

Current actions toward policy change

Climate reports

Michigan was one of twelve states to take part in GLSEN’s climate survey in 2005. The survey asked students, teachers, and

² The four other states that do not have anti-bullying policies are Hawai’i, Montana, South Dakota, and North Dakota

school staff to discuss their beliefs about LGBTQ bullying in schools and revealed that 35 percent of Michigan students believe that bullying is a problem, with verbal bullying and name calling the predominant form. Sixty seven percent of students did not report the bullying they suffered, and 26 percent of these said it was due to the belief that teachers and staff would not help them. The surveys were conducted in response to a rise in bullying related suicides that amount to a bullying crisis in the U.S. They aim to raise awareness by expounding experiences shared by countless LGBTQ youth and their educators across the country. The report also compared states and regions that have enumerated policies with those that don't, revealing a significantly reduced number of bullying incidents in the former category (GLSEN, 2005). Climate surveys are an effective tool for politicians, educators, social workers, and others to gain knowledge of their community's wants and needs in order to initiate policies that serve and protect all of its members.

Top-down, bottom-up, meet in the middle

There are currently several grassroots efforts in Michigan that share the goal of implementing a state-wide anti-bullying policy. One of these is an ongoing anti-bullying summit, held by Ann Arbor's Jim Toy Community Center. The summit has drawn educators, social workers, K-12 and college students, concerned citizens, and politicians and lawyers,. During the first summit, it was discovered that two types of people were in attendance: community members who are frustrated by the lack of political focus on this issue and politicians, and people with political connections, who shared the same frustration and wanted to convene with the public. It was soon decided that summit members would use a top-down, bottom-up, meet in the middle model in which the former and latter groups would work independently of one another, ultimately meeting in the middle with the culmination of a statewide policy. At the second summit, three groups were formed. Two groups are working at a local level: one with students, which will address youth education, including help for targets, bullies, and bystanders; one with teachers, parents, and administrators to address what their rights are when defending LGBTQ youth, how

they can create safe spaces for students, as well as how to become public allies. This group is also creating a handbook that can be easily accessed and widely distributed to educators. The third group is working at a city and state level, lobbying politicians and drafting policy documents. The groups intend to continue meeting and working until an enumerated policy is passed in the state, and is in the process of creating a strategic plan.

Education

The number of educational forums throughout Michigan has grown exponentially in recent months. The University of Michigan hosted GLSEN's demonstration of "From Teasing to Torment: A Report on School Climate in Michigan," which included a hard copy of GLSEN Michigan's climate report and a documentary on bullying. In February, 2011, Ypsilanti Library hosted "Stand Up to Bullying," a conference intended to educate the community about a proposed anti-bullying campaign. Additionally, Stonewall Democrats, a University of Michigan LGBTQ group, hosted "Challenge Bullying: Making a Difference Every Day" on April 3rd, 2011. These are just three of the many educational campaigns throughout the state with a focus on enumerated anti-bullying policies.

Activism

Michigan residents have also sought policy change through political activism. On April 9, 2011, the first of several rallies to convene during the spring and summer was held in Howell, MI. The choice of Howell harks back to November 2010, when a high-school teacher was suspended for asking a student to leave his classroom after the boy stated he "didn't accept gays" (Michigan Messenger, 2010). The rally was intended to gain attention and support for anti-bullying legislation, and attendees were asked to reach out to five people each and ask them to join in future events. Attendees were also encouraged to schedule appointments with legislators on May 4th's "Lobbying Day" in Lansing (Dickinson, 2011). There also exist numerous LGBTQ rights groups in the state of Michigan. Equality Michigan recently hosted its 25th Motor City Pride Rally in Detroit, MI on June 4th and 5th (Equality Michigan, 2011). Michigan's ACLU

is currently the only organization defending LGBTQ rights in court; its Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Project was founded in 2001 (ACLU, 2008). The University of Michigan is home to the Spectrum center, the first LGBTQ campus center in the U.S.; 2011 marks its 40th year (Spectrum Center, 2011). Each of these organizations sees anti-bullying legislation as a priority in Michigan.

Conclusion

As evidenced by the impact of verbal bullying on LGBTQ youth, professionals should not hesitate to consider language as a cultural factor in individual's lives. However, what will improve the lives of LGBTQ youth more than anything is acknowledgement of their right to the same level of respect and safety to which all other individuals are entitled. The first step towards this end is the creation of an enumerated anti-bullying policy that requires all schools in all school districts to adhere to the same standards. Furthermore, all reports of bullying, including difficult to prove cases of verbal bullying, should be investigated to the fullest extent. This policy should be a top priority for schools, should include education for everyone on campus including victims, bystanders, bullies, teachers, administrators, bus drivers and crossing guards. Schools should provide visible safe spaces for LGBTQ youth. However, though one would hope all teachers would want to provide these spaces, the reality is that many teachers are not culturally sensitive to, or compassionate towards, the LGBTQ population. Thus, safe spaces should be restricted to the classrooms of those who are. This policy should not be viewed as punitive; discipline for people involved in perpetrating or encouraging acts of bullying should not simply be reprimands or suspensions, but should include a focus on education about the implications of one's actions.

Because identifying the root of client problems is a key component in effective treatment, social workers, no matter what their field, should assess the level at which language has affected their clients. As stated earlier, bullying language can leave deep scars and be the cause of many psychological problems. Social workers should be aware that low self-esteem, depression and anxiety, suicidal ideation, substance abuse, and eating disorders can be deeply rooted in language. Social workers who have this

knowledge will be better able to prevent, identify, intervene, and council victims, bystanders, and perpetrators of LGBTQ bullying and will also be able to work with other professionals including teachers and administrators in an educational role.

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