COMMENTARY

Maintaining the Hegemonic Masculinity Through Selective Attachment, Homophobia, and Gay-Baiting in Schools: Challenges to Intervention

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I am pleased to discuss and offer commentary, with a focus on implications for intervention, on the issues and research findings presented in the articles that comprise this special issue of *School Psychology Review*, titled "Sexual Orientation, Homophobia, Bullying, and Psychological Sequelae in Adolescents: Research and Practice Findings." I imagine I was invited to comment on the studies because of my own scholarship in the area of sexual minority youth. I have written, with my graduate students, about the prevalence of homophobia and heterosexism in our culture and its effect on the development of gay, lesbian, bisexual (GLB), or questioning youth (Lasser & Tharinger, 1997; Lasser, Tharinger & Cloth, 2006). I have also applied attachment theory to the understanding of the "coming out" process for sexual minority youth, as well as the important roles family members and school personnel can play by providing a continuity of attachment behaviors for these youth as they are integrating their nonconforming sexual orientation (Tharinger & Wells, 2000). With Lasser (Lasser & Tharinger, 2003), I

have discussed strategies related to "visibility management" that may be useful to GLB and questioning youth to employ, especially when a relationship, system, or environment is not safe.

I draw from this combined base of knowledge in commenting on these articles. There is no doubt that in our current society being adolescent *and* GLB or questioning continues to be challenging and in many cases can be detrimental to the mental and behavioral health of the developing youth. The effect on health is primarily from the negative response that is still all too prevalent (often summed up with the words *homophobia* or *heterosexism*). The negative response has been viewed as the last bastion of prejudice in our society, and even applauded in some contexts. Efforts continue to be needed on individual, family, peer, school, community, societal, and legal bases to create a safe and healthy environment to eliminate harm and promote optimal development of GLB and questioning youth. I have addressed some of these needed efforts elsewhere (Lasser & Tharinger, 1997, 2006; Thar-

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inger & Wells, 2000), primarily from an attachment, relational psychology.

However, in preparing this commentary, I found that my existing knowledge was not sufficient. My deficiency became apparent as I was considering the question, "Why is it so difficult to intervene and why is there such resistance?" In response, I began to familiarize myself with another literature, which has its home in sociology, psychology, and the interdisciplinary area of masculinity (Connell, 2005; Garbarino & deLara, 2002; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Mills, 2001; Sroudt, 2006). I came to understand and maintain here that until educators and health/mental health professionals in and linked to schools, as well as parents and adolescent students, acquire a more in-depth understanding of gender politics, currently and historically, especially as it relates to masculinities and masculine hegemony, our interventions will be shortsighted. And I am starting to see and maintain here that masculine hegemony results in selective attachments—which results in a high cost, both for those withholding attachment behaviors and for those who are not receiving attachment behaviors they were accustomed to expecting.

Comments on Research Findings and Their Implications

I found the four research articles in this special issue to be well done, informative, methodologically sophisticated, and rich in ideas for further research and intervention efforts. The findings reported add to an accumulating literature that deserves serious attention in the academic community, but even more so in the community of schools and the policy that affects schools. I offer a tragic example of the need. The week I was finishing this commentary I was flying through the Dallas airport and heard on the televised news in the terminal about the ultimate type of bullying—the murder of a 15-year-old, openly gay adolescent in California. He was killed by gunshot wounds to the head, while he sat in an early morning class, by a 14-year-old male student in the school. I felt sick to my stomach, angry, and

astonished—and kept asking myself the question—why? Why do such tragedies occur? This special issue offers some explanation and calls for continued and heightened awareness, intervention, and commitment to stop such tragedies.

The combined findings reported in this special issue support the accumulating bodies of literature about (a) the harmful effect on all students who are recipients of verbal bullying based on homophobic, gender-nonconforming, and gay-baiting; (b) the recognition of a group effect that supports bullying and discourages natural intervention; and (c) the centrality of social support from family and schools in ameliorating negative effects of experiencing such bullying. Let me speak more specifically to the research findings presented. The findings of Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, and Koenig (2008) add to the body of research finding that lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) youth, as compared with heterosexual youth, are more likely to report high levels of distress and risky behavior, including depression/suicidal feelings and substance use. Of importance, they also found that students who were questioning their sexual orientation reported more negative indicators than either heterosexual or LGB students. Finally, they found that positive school climate and parental support protected LGB and questioning students against some negative indicators. Rivers and Noret (2008), in contrast, did not find many negative outcomes for the LGB youth in their study. However, they reported enhanced loneliness and hostility towards others among LGB youth, certainly areas of concern. These combined findings remind us that many LBG students continue to have compromised mental health from homophobia and heterosexism, that "questioning" youth may be particularly vulnerable, and that consistent support from school and home is a protective factor.

The study by Swearer, Turner, Givens, and Pollock (2008) supports the negative indicator finding in the studies just mentioned, and provides, because of its design, a unique and profound result that demands understanding and, at the same time, changes the terrain of intervention. Swearer et al. found that the

boys in their study who were bullied because they were *called* "gay," not necessarily because they *were* gay or questioning, experienced greater psychological distress, verbal and physical bullying, and more negative perceptions of their school experiences than boys who were bullied for other reasons (such as getting good grades, having weird friends). These findings imply that the target of the bullying is not necessarily about a boy "being gay," but about a boy being dominated in some way by another boy. Kimmel and Mahler (2003) has used the term *gay-baiting* to describe this phenomena. Although *gay-baiting* is somewhat similar to homophobia, it originated in the field of sociology and refers to specific acts that include a male calling another male a queer, homo, sissy, or wimp to establish one's dominance over him—regardless of the victim's sexual orientation.

Poteat's (2008) finding that social context is central in accounting for adolescents' use of homophobic epithets and engagement in homophobic banter is critical to our understanding and to guiding intervention efforts. Specifically, he found that the social climates of aggressive peer groups accounted for increased use of homophobic epithets, over and above adolescents' own reported bullying behavior. Furthermore, he reported that the level of homophobic social climate moderated adolescents' engagement in homophobic banter, such that being called a homophobic epithet had a predictive effect of calling other students these epithets for individuals in relatively homophobic peer groups. These findings demand that interventions be directed at groups and systems, and not just individuals.

All four articles commented on the implications of their findings for intervention, and I embrace their wisdom and guidance. Their combined suggestions can be summarized as advancing the following intentions and actions. Countering the use of homophobic epithets and banter, gay-baiting, and bullying based on gender nonconformity that occurs among the student population should be a part of the broader efforts made by administrators, teachers, and school psychologists, parent groups, and student groups to actively promote a positive school environment for all students. Programs should be developed and implemented to promote respect for sexual orientation diversity and gender expression diversity that address both individuals and groups. These programs should be evaluated for their effect on the overall social climate of schools. Programs specifically addressing aggression and bullying should attend to the form that bullying takes (e.g., physical, verbal, cyber), as well as the content (e.g., gay-baiting). These programs should incorporate the discussion of homophobic and gender nonconformity attitudes and behavior and how they contribute to the perpetuation and effect of bullying. I could not agree more.

However, I now return to my earlier question. Why are intervention efforts so challenging? I turn to the construct and literature on masculine hegemony to inform my question, but first briefly address the attachment perspective.

Attachment Perspective

As I have written elsewhere (Tharinger & Wells, 2000), Bowlby's theory of attachment provides a way to conceptualize the propensity of human beings to make strong affectional bonds to significant others to promote human survival. This theoretical perspective also helps to explain many forms of emotional distress, including anxiety, anger, depression, and emotional detachment, which are often a result of unwilling separation and loss (or the fear of such), which includes being rejected and stigmatized, or again threatened by such action. According to Bowlby (1969, 1980), attachment behaviors are innate, promote survival of the species, and result in obtaining proximity to an attachment figure in times of stress and insecurity. Attachment figures allow the individual a secure base from which to explore, afford the individual safety when threats are encountered, and permit the individual to learn to regulate her or his level of stress. Attachment behavior contributes to the individual's survival by keeping him or her in touch with caregivers, thereby reducing the risk of coming to harm. Most people associate

attachment theory and the large body of corresponding research with infants and parents, particularly mothers. However, attachment theory and its principles are applicable across the life span and correspond to not only the central parent–child relationship, but all significant relationships, including siblings, friends, mentors, teachers, and so on. And I am taking the liberty to extend it to systems of relationships and larger systems that affect our relationships—an ecological attachment model.

According to Bowlby (1989), an individual's expectations about self and others, which Bowlby referred to as the internalized working model of self and other, are built up across infancy, childhood, and adolescence, and even continue into adulthood. Internalized schema of *secure* attachment allow the individual the flexibility to explore the environment and return to the safety of primary relationships when the outside world or perceived experiences become too overwhelming. It also allows the individual to have an internalized representation of the world as a safe and predictable place. In general, one can expect a pattern of secure or insecure attachment over time (Main, 1996). However, although current research indicates that there is a continuity of secure attachment status over time for the great majority of individuals, these findings occur within the context of a stable, predictable environment. Theorists and researchers are only beginning to consider the effect of events or processes that may adversely influence the stability of attachment. As I have previously discussed (Tharinger & Wells, 2000), one possible process is the effect of *disclosure* (coming out) of an adolescent's homosexuality on the parent–child attachment, as well as on other attachment relationships. Another likely process, related to the articles being discussed in this commentary, is the effect of heterosexist or homophobic bullying, gay-baiting, or bullying based on real or perceived gender nonconformity.

According to Bowlby (1980), "there is certain information we find difficult to process. One example is information that is incompatible with our existing models. . . we

find that to dismantle a model which has played and is still playing a major part in our daily life and to replace it by a new one is a slow and arduous task . . ." (p. 230). The new information (parental rejection, or by extension, peer and societal rejection or fear of it) may be so upsetting to the adolescent's internal working model of attachment that his or her emotional and behavioral status is compromised. The compromise may take the form of internal distress and self-stigmatization resulting in anxiety, depression, and even thoughts of suicide. The compromise may also be externalized, whereby anger and rage are directed at others, such as school shooters, described by Kimmel and Mahler (2003) and addressed in Swearer et al. (2008). Or the homophobic bullying or violence experienced now may be directed at others—the idea being "better them than me."

My question becomes, "What is so powerful as to result in human beings no longer extending their attachment behaviors to others?" Or perhaps my question is, "Why do attachment behaviors that were once offered broadly become selective?" I turn to another theoretical framework to inform my questions.

Masculine Hegemony Perspective

The concept of "hegemony" refers to the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position over another—a dominance—such that the ruling or powerful group—referred to as a hegemon—acquires some degree of consent from the subordinate, as opposed to dominance purely by force (Connell, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity serves as an idealized form of masculinity by which boys and men can be measured, by themselves and by others, to determine the extent of their "manliness." This idealized, or hegemonic, representation of masculinity is signified by the traditional forms of work that men and boys do, the popular sports they play, and the extent to which they can demonstrate power over women and other men (Mills, 2001). Common elements within all forms of hegemonic masculinities include strength (physical, intellectual, character, will power),

rationality, and supremacy over those who are "inferior." This construction of a homogeneous natural masculinity works to delegitimize those forms of masculinity that do not conform to this ideal.

Connell (2005) describes multiple masculinities, including hegemonic masculinities, subordinate masculinities, complicit masculinities, and marginalized masculinities, as well as the relations among them. Thus, although various versions of masculinity are available in contemporary society, they align in relation to the hegemonic masculinity, which is also reinforced by institutions (e.g., by military recruiters, coaches, teachers). "Manly" men are described as men of action, who are also silent, emotionless, and physically combative (and often violent) heroes (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Not too surprisingly, under this dominant construction, boys are given permission to act aggressively (and even violently), and this aggression often is directed toward homosexual and less aggressive or masculine boys, as well as girls and woman, and often in schools (Mills, 2001).

Masculine Hegemony Goes to School

Violence is embedded in the social fabric of the school. Mills (2001) concludes that "schooling cannot be separated from the sexualized violence that permeate societal relations. It is clear that schools are a major social site within which masculinities and femininities are formed and contested" (p. 77). School shootings are perhaps the most extreme and visible end of a continuum that includes the normalized forms of male violence that occurs inside schools every day—forms of violence that are embedded in and mediated through hegemonic masculine values (Stoudt, 2006). The relationships between hegemonic masculinity and violence and the ways in which practices within schools reinforce this relationship need to be disrupted if there is going to be a significant reduction in the amount of violence within schools (Mills, 2001). Mills recommends implementing change through a whole-school effort involving administrators, teachers, parents, as well as students.

Mills (2001) cautions that impediments to be expected in the quest to promote alternative forms of masculinity in the schools include resistance from the many men and boys who currently benefit from the privilege of hegemonic masculinity. In addition to privilege, fear and shame are at work. Homophobia contributes to the fear. Homophobia serves as a kind of "gender police" to ensure that not too many boys challenge the existing gender order. Homophobia works to make sure that both heterosexual and homosexual boys who do not conform to the requirements of hegemonic masculinity always have the potential to be subordinated within the social organization of masculinity. The fear of this happening leads many boys to become complicit in maintaining existing gendered power relations. Swearer et al. (2008), discussed this fear, by citing the work of Pollack (1998, 2006) addressing "boy code."

In addition to fear, shame also prevails. Both threat of loss of attachment/affiliation and being shamed are very effective means to reinforce a desired hierarchy. Individuals defend against the experience of shame in several ways: (a) by identifying with the other (the person shaming them) and externalizing their shame by directing bullying or violence at others, as discussed earlier; or (b) by substituting emotions more tolerable to the self than shame, such as guilt, sadness, depression, or humiliation, and thus directing the distress onto themselves by internalizing, also discussed earlier. These two options seem overdetermined.

Preparing for Intervention in Schools

In many of the concerns raised about violence in schools, masculinity as a problematic concept is seldom raised (Mills, 2001). Administrators and mental health professionals planning to conduct work on violence issues need to have some understanding of the ways that these processes operate to normalize and even promote violence. Recognition has to be given to how violence is used in ways that shore up masculine privilege and create a hierarchy of masculinities (Mills). Mills alerts

us that acts of violence are *not* best regarded as individual pathological behaviors or the product of boys' "nature" (i.e., boys will be boys). Rather, acts of violence are systemic acts of injustice that preserve existing relations of power.

It also is essential to consider whether it is reasonable to expect that boys can come to challenge entrenched attitudes that are so prevalent in our society. We must ask, "Do schools provide safe enough environments for those who want to make changes to the masculine hegemony?" Mills (2001) thinks they can, if schools: (a) work to understand boys' violence as a masculinity issue; (b) explore the social organization of masculinity operating within the general regime of the school; and (c) confront homophobia as a matter of priority.

Conclusion

In this commentary, I briefly summarized the research findings of the four articles, as well as suggestions for intervention offered by the authors of the articles. I then discussed the heuristic of an attachment perspective, followed by the masculine hegemony perspective. In doing so, I advanced that maintaining the masculine hegemony is in conflict with sustained and healthy attachment behaviors, and often results in selective attachment. I then called upon educators and mental health professionals to take a central role in educating teachers, administrators, parents, *and* students about the research evidence on the serious and sometimes tragic effects of bullying based on heterosexism, homophobia and gender nonconformity, and gay-baiting. I further challenged school professionals to plan thoughtful interventions that are informed by a sophisticated understanding of the significance of attachment behaviors in promoting mental and relational health, as well as the even greater significance of the masculine hegomony to selectively undermine mental and relational health to maintain existing power hierarchies.

I advance that until we take the bigger frame, the issue of homophobic bullying and violence will be seen as a "gay" issue and not the larger issue that it is—that of the dominant masculine hegemony. Until we understand this bigger picture, I advance that interventions will focus solely on how to support youth who have been bullied, gay-baited, and recipients of violence (good efforts, but . . .), but not on how to prevent the emotional and physical violence in the first place. And until we take more responsibility for being part of systems that implicitly and explicitly participate in and benefit from the dominant masculine hegemony, we will at best be able to aid youth "manage their visibility" of homosexuality or gender nonconformity to help keep themselves safe (again, good efforts, but . . .). Until that time, we will not be able to work effectively toward changing environments that are built on masculine privilege and hegemony and that, in turn, serve to oppress gender-nonconforming boys, as well as many girls and women (and often exact a high cost from dominant masculine boys as well). I close by cautioning that this work will not be easy, but it is sorely needed, as the health of our youth, and even lives, are at stake.

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