

Slut Shaming as Bullying in LGBTQ Adolescents: A New Area for Inquiry and Intervention

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Abstract

In a recent investigation of bullying of LGBTQ youth, LGBTQ students who reported higher levels of sexual activity described increased peer victimization in comparison to heterosexual students. Such bullying may be likened to slut shaming, a set of behaviors in which women are humiliated and may experience loss of status for their supposed sexual behavior. Because of the limited empirical literature base documenting and assessing this behavior, this commentary represents an argument for the inclusion of slut shaming as a form of bullying used to victimize LGBTQ students and urges further research in this area.

Introduction

Although slut shaming, the practice of disgracing someone for inferred sexual activity, typically is a behavior directed toward women, it is likely not exclusively used against females. In a recent investigation of bullying of LGBTQ students, those who indicated engaging in higher levels of sexual activity were more likely to report being victimized through a few different subtypes of peer victimization, which was not the case for heterosexual students. While the empirical investigations of slut shaming are few, it may be helpful to conceptualize bullying about or in response to sexual behavior as a form of slut shaming in order to legitimize its study and increase the potential effectiveness of intervention efforts [1] (Crothers et al., under review).

Slut shaming refers to a set of behaviors used by both men and women to malign “women for presumed sexual activity” [2]. In Armstrong et al., ethnographic, longitudinal study of women attending a large, moderately selective Midwest university, the authors describe the practice of slut shaming as based upon sexual double standards developed and enforced by men, to the disadvantage of women. Schwalbe, Godwin, Holden, Schrock, Thompson, and Wolkomir’s concept of “defensive othering” offers an explanation as to why women participate in slut shaming, when they would otherwise appear to be vulnerable to the same behavior [3]. Essentially, because of their subordinate status to men, women are leery of damage to their reputation, and consequently try to distance themselves from this risk to loss of status [2]. Accordingly, in using slut shaming tactics, women were found to label other women with but also to distance themselves from claims of “sluttiness,” which represent a stigmatized, low-status sexual station [2,4]. When women engage in this form of sexual labeling, it may be seen as evidence of internalized, sexual oppression [5,6], in which young women are supposed to desire and be interested in sexual activity only when they are feeling love toward their partner and are in a committed relationship [2]. Armstrong et al., explain that women are vulnerable to being stigmatized as a slut when violating this sexual standard and then suffering the corresponding loss of status and discrimination [7,8]. However, women may not be the only victims of slut shaming.

Although some research suggests relationships between slut shaming and a number of characteristics, including class, culture, media, gender, feminism, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality [4], not all of these associations are well understood. One such relationship is that of sexuality and slut shaming, arguably a form of bullying. In a study conducted by Crothers and colleagues (under review), a sample of 98 LGBTQ adolescents and their allies were surveyed regarding a number

of topics related to bullying of LGBTQ youth. One of the findings included a significant positive relationship between self-reported sexual activity and bullying of LGBTQ students. LGBTQ students’ elevated reports of sexual activity were significantly correlated with instances of verbal bullying, relational bullying, and overall bullying, which was not the case for heterosexual students. Therefore, in addition to the likelihood of an increased prevalence of bullying for LGBTQ students, in this sample, those who engaged in increased sexual activity experienced further elevated levels of bullying victimization.

Indeed, bullying by peers has been established as a normative (frequently-occurring) and significant negative experience for LGBTQ youth; in a recent, nationwide survey of over 7,800 LGBTQ students, 55.5% of respondents felt unsafe at school due to their sexual orientation and 74.1% had experienced verbal harassment [9]. As a result of the harassment and victimization LGBTQ students experience, there are significant costs. The emotional sequelae of being bullied by peers include suicidal ideation, anxiety, depression, and [9,10], while the behavioral consequences of peer victimization include suicidal behavior, truancy, and school dropout for LGB individuals [9,11]. For LGBTQ youth, the academic effects related to being bullied are lower GPAs and a reduced likelihood of attending postsecondary education, as well as health concerns such as higher concurrent rates of substance use and high-risk sexual behavior [11,12].

Why may LGBTQ youth be vulnerable to slut shaming as a form of bullying? In schools, it is typical for adolescents to use heteronormative values about sexuality to regulate others’ behavior [13,14]. When children and adolescents violate gender norms, their peers may use harassment and bullying to communicate their disapproval through the threat of physical harm, social shaming, and loss of friendships [14]. Preston explains that “gender policing is used to assign or gain

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power and privilege, to regulate behavior, [and] to punish those who do not 'fit' within the norms" [14]. Interestingly, bullying about sexual behavior may not be restricted to upholding heteronormative values. In an investigation of the way in which conversations about sex could be obstructed or facilitated in a sample of gay men, the use of *judgmentalism* (e.g., calling a friend a "slut" or "whore" for having sex without condoms) a likely euphemism for slut shaming, was found to convey derision and inhibit perhaps further helpful communication about sexual risk [15].

In what way can slut shaming be considered a form of bullying of LGBTQ youth, and what are the benefits in doing so? Unlike slut shaming, a topic that has a relatively recent academic and empirical focus, the research on bullying has enjoyed a multi-decade confluence of efforts and a robust scientific spotlight in the last 15 years. Consequently, much more is understood about bullying, in terms of its definition, etiology, symptom presentation, and short- and long-term consequences for both bullies and victims, than of slut shaming. Considering the devotion of committed researchers and a powerful history of scientifically-rigorous methods and analyses to draw upon from the bullying literature, it would be beneficial to understand slut shaming as perhaps a form of bullying that is deserving of as much investigation as other forms of peer victimization. It seems probable that this form of bullying behavior is particularly resonant to and harmful for female and LGBTQ populations, both historically underrepresented groups in academic studies, and for these reasons, it is deserving of the scientifically-based inquiry that has been focused on other forms of bullying, with heterotypical populations. It is through these means that this evolving form of bullying will become to be better understood for the purposes of planning and implementing effective intervention.

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