

Childhood Bullying of Males on the Basis of Sexual Orientation in Rural North America: A Longitudinal Examination of Victims' Perceptions

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Abstract

This research is the first (1960s) part of a three part longitudinal study that covers three decades (1960s, 70s, and 80s) of the lived experiences of school aged males who were bullied in rural areas of the North America on the basis of sexual orientation. The research draws on the urban-rural distinctions of Tonnies and Durkheim as well as the contrasting views regarding bullying of Social Skills Deficit verses Theory of Mind analyses. Particularly perceptive and articulate victims of bullying were selected. It was concluded that the following were central to the participant's perceptions of his bullying on the basis of sexual orientation experiences in the 1960s: 1. There was a pronounced cultural emphasis upon strength and athletics as the test of legitimate, socially approved masculinity, 2. There was a strong conservative religious and political condemnation of those who failed to achieve the socially determined standards of masculinity, and 3. An unsupportive family environment contributed to the participants being bullied.

Keywords: Sexual orientation; Bullying; Longitudinal bullying research; Qualitative research on bullying; Gender harassment; Sexual harassment; Bullying experiences

1. Introduction

Though this research is formally called qualitative research, it is essentially the carefully and methodically elicited "story" of a man in his 60s that experienced bullying on the basis of sexual orientation in a rural area of North America as a child. The story is a painful one both as he experienced it and as he now relates it. By careful examination of his subjective story as well as two future ones from similarly situated persons it is hoped that the voices of children in similar situations may be viewed from a longitudinal perspective and may give researchers greater ability to piece together patterns as the basis of future research that will provide greater understanding of their experience. Only in understanding their perceptions can policies then be devised that may aid them.

The participant in this research was asked his opinion of whether he thought qualitative research such as this (as contrasted to positivist, quantitative research) was valid. He said yes. When asked why, he responded: "Because it is a way to give life and texture to knowledge and human experience that would be dull, boring, uninspiring and probably ignored and overlooked if studied in the traditional methods of social science." I hope that the research achieves somewhat of what he so well described.

1.1 Research Question and Aim of Study

This research seeks to know whether and, if so, how the perceptions of male victims of bullying on the basis of sexual orientation have changed in rural areas of North America during the decades of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. The goal of the present research is to gain access to the voice and to the lived experiences of one such victim who experienced bullying on the basis of sexual orientation during the 1960s in a rural area. The future goal is to achieve a longitudinal examination of the lived experiences of similarly bullied victims that will also cover the 1970s and the 1980s. The immediate scholarly motivation is to identify patterns that can become the focus of future research that has the long term goal of improving social support systems victims of this bullying.

2. Perspectives and Theoretical Framework

The research implicitly draws upon the theoretical distinctions between rural (*Gemeinschaft*) and urban (*Gesellschaft*) made by Tonnies (1925) as well as the different kinds of human social bonds created by rural (mechanical) and urban (organic) noted by Durkheim (as cited in Tonnies, 1988) as well as the distinctions in the types of law and law enforcement that develop in each of these societies. The research further draws upon the theoretical distinction between viewing bullies as those who have deficient social skills (Social Skills Deficit View) and those who are in many cases perceptive and shrewd in social skills (Theory of Mind View) (Sutton, et al, 1999).

3. Literature Review

Both Canada and the United States have had major problems in the first decade of this century in preventing school bullying on the basis of sexual orientation. Smith (2000) reported “that 80 per cent of children of different sexual orientation (gay, lesbian) had experienced teasing about their sexual orientation, and over half had been physically assaulted or ridiculed by other pupils or teachers (p.298).” Stein (2007) described the United States by noting that “contemporary surveys attest to the ugly entrenchment of sexual and gender harassment in our schools” and that “(w)hat emerges from studies that do not hide sex and gender-based harassment under the euphemism of bullying is that such harassment is wide spread (p. 31).” Berlin et al. (2010) found that in a large sample of American youth that “(a)mong males, we found that mostly heterosexual and gay youth were at increased risk of victimization compared to heterosexual males (p. 367).”

Canadian education appears similarly plagued. In an extensive survey of Canadian education Taylor et al. (2008) reported that LGBTQ students experienced “ten times as much harassment about their sexual orientation” as non-LGBTQ students and that “the level of harassment was even higher for transgender students (pp. 40- 41).” According to Kosciw et al. (2010), students in rural/small towns in Canada reported higher levels of victimization in school based on sexual orientation.

So far as the research reveals, the specific topic of longitudinal changes in victim’ perceptions of sexual orientation based bullying during the last half of the 20th Century has received little attention. Taylor et al. (2008) did find that “(c)urrent students were... more likely than past students to hear homophobic comments from other students every day” which would seem to suggest that the issue is worsening.

On the other hand, the same researchers found that “current students were significantly less likely than past students to report that staff never intervened (p. 27).”

It is suggested that the relative isolation and the emphasis upon religion and tradition often associated with rural environments might well be related to the issue of bullying on the basis of sexual orientation but, again,

other than as noted, the longitudinal aspect of it appears to have received little examination in the literature of bullying.

Tonnies' (1925) typology suggested that *Gemeinschaft* societies (rural societies) possessed a "closeness of holistic social relationships...imputed to the community as moral worth (p.69)", whereas *Gesellschaft* societies (urban societies) possessed a unity "based on common traits and activities and other external phenomena (p. 67)." Similarly, Durkheim (as cited in Tonnies, 1988) asserted that in societies with bonding patterns between individuals of mechanical solidarity (the bonding found in rural societies) that "beliefs and conduct are alike. People are homogeneous mentally and morally, hence communities are uniform and nonatomized... and that (o)ffense against the collective conscience is moral offense and is punishable by repressive law (p. 13)." Additionally, in contrasting urban and rural societies, Durkheim (as cited in Tonnies, 1988) noted that in urban societies with individual bonds of organic solidarity (as opposed to mechanical solidarity) that "(o)ffensive acts then lose their sacrilegious character and repressive law is replaced by restitutive law (p. 13)."

The distinction in the nature of morality as it is viewed in urban as compared to rural societies and, by implication, the harshness of social measures inflicted against violation of it may imply differences in enforcement of sexual related norms in rural and urban settings. Nevertheless, the literature of bullying offers virtually no previous research regarding studies addressing sexual orientation based bullying from both a rural as well as longitudinal perspective.

By examining the intersection of sexual orientation bullying, rural isolation and temporal (longitudinal) change in the lived experiences of its victims, educators and schools may be better prepared identify patterns for future research that could lead to provision of greater social support for such victims as learners in educational settings.

4.Methods, Data, and Participant Sample

Because this research is intended to be exploratory, it uses is the qualitative approach of grounded theory to distill the "thick descriptions" of the lived experiences of victims/participants and to then attempt to discover patterns or hear voices. The research seeks to focus on two general lines of inquiry; the lived experiences of the victims and how it (the experience) has changed over the selected time period. As the first part of the longitudinal research, the present research focuses only upon the first line of inquiry. Semi-structured interviews with open ended questions were used to initiate the participant's descriptions and the participant was then encouraged to be as expansive as desired in addressing the topic of the research.

Using the purposeful sampling methods of qualitative research, the present participant (as will be the case with future participants) was selected on the basis of his having been

1. male,
2. a childhood victim, of
3. bullying on the basis of sexual orientation in a defined geographically
4. rural area (no city greater than 5,000 population within 30 miles of his residence) in North America in the 1960s, who
5. was viewed as having unusually introspective and communicative capabilities and
6. who perceives the experience to have been memorably painful.

The present participant was a National Merit Scholar semi-finalist in high school, an honor roll student in sociology in college, a nationally recognized creator of a unique form of art, and his sexual orientation was

reported as homosexual. The participant in the present research (as well as those of later stages of the overall research) represents the process of “purposeful sampling” as explained by (Creswell 2012):

... in qualitative research, you select people or sites that can best help you understand the central phenomenon. This understanding emerges through a detailed understanding of the people or site. It can lead to information that allows individuals to “learn” about the phenomenon, or to an understanding that provides voice to individuals who may not be heard otherwise.

As noted in Creswell, in qualitative research participants may be as few as one and the test of adequacy is not, as in quantitative research, numbers but whether the participants are “information rich (p. 206).” In the present research the participant reported the perception of extreme pain that was associated with the bullying (making it memorable) and his generally introspective characteristics and the ability to articulate them would seem to qualify him for the status of what Creswell (2012) “a critical sample” where a participant is chosen because “Sometimes individuals or research sites represent the central phenomenon in dramatic terms” and “because it is an exceptional case and the researcher can learn much about the phenomenon (p. 208).”

5. Data Collection

Data for the present research consists of two interviews of the participant totaling three hours. The transcribed interview consisted of nine single space pages of typed information. The characteristics of the researcher (foreign, younger, female, neither confrontational nor supportive and possessing a strong, yet purposefully concealed, admiration of the participant for having survived the early years of his life with his humanity intact) were not thought to impact the participant’s responses. Pseudonyms were used throughout the interview and the participant was informed of his right to terminate the interview numerous times. The initial interview was suspended by the interviewer for the reason that she feared that the participant might be nearing a point of emotional exhaustion and then the interview was recommenced two days later after the participant reported that he felt comfortable in doing so.

6. Data Analysis

Following transcription, major concepts of the interview were identified and then categorized into 58 conceptual nodules that were placed in coded brackets representing significant mental states, ideas, attitudes, feelings and interpretations of the participant with the goal being to discover the meanings behind the participant’s words. Following identification of the conceptual nodules they were then subsumed into 16 analytically coded themes that were given definitions for purposes of the analysis and then traced to portions of the transcript from which they originated.

7. Results

The central research question of this research involves whether change has occurred in the lived experiences of male victims of bullying on the basis of sexual orientation in rural areas of North America during the decades of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Of course, the amount and form of any change requires the establishment of a baseline. The emergent themes of the “thick descriptions” of the participant in the present research are intended to establish the baseline against which change can be measured and evaluated in the remaining two parts (1970s and 1980s). Part one (1960s) of the research revealed three dominate themes in the perceptions of the participant regarding his experience of being bullied:

1.His perceptions of being bullied were frequently associated with athletics or physical education classes and the teachers who taught them;

2.His perceptions of being bullied were frequently associated with the ideologies of conservative religion and conservative politics; and

3.His perceptions of being bullied were frequently associated with a dysfunctional home environment. (All quotes are from the interview transcript.)

7.1 Athletics, Physical Education, and the Nature of Masculinity

The participant's recollection of bullying frequently involved mistreatment by his school aged peers and usually was based on his failing to meet their expectations of manly characteristics. He describes how it began to manifest early in the first grade:

I liked designing clothes. I would play with paper dolls and design clothes and I was stupid enough not to hide it. Uh, and another thing, I didn't know about sports...for Halloween we always had a parade downtown and the adults would come to watch and I wanted to be a witch and I was allowed to go as a witch. That was a big mistake. So ...I began being called sissy a lot. Little boys and little girls didn't use the word "queer" then, they probably do now, and they used the word sissy.

Even if the participant adopted what he thought were "manly" methods of reacting and opposing his being bullied by fighting against his peer tormenters the term "sissy" was unavoidable: "Even that (fighting) got changed to, "Oh he fights like a girl." Well, I won sometimes but I still fought like a girl. I did not know I fought like a girl, I just thought I was fighting the little sons-of-bitches."

He described his perception of the futility of trying to fulfill manly cultural expectation of manliness in school as he grew older:

I have been tested and I have naturally very slow reflexes. As a matter of fact, the professional who tested me said they were nearly the slowest in any person he had seen that was not retarded. And a person like that cannot move like other people, cannot be an athlete, cannot be fast no matter how hard he tries and you know, you get into 7th and 8th grade and all of a sudden there is physical education and sports.

When asked about the degree of his bullying by his school peers and his perceptions of fear, he replied:

Times could be completely anytime... the feeling was, and it was realistic, anything could happen anytime for any reason, or for no reason whatsoever...

I was most of the time the most bullied that I saw. Not always, but most of the

time and sigh, "Sissy". Oh, I remember one thing why I was a sissy. I used to get terribly dizzy on stairs and in first grade, and this all did begin early, my classroom was on the second level it was in the public library because our school was too small and to go upstairs there was an open staircase with open railings and I could go upstairs alright but to go downstairs I would feel like I was falling. I just couldn't do it and I had to sit down to go down the stairs, so sissy, sissy, sissy. I do not know if I was more afraid of more things or just afraid of different things. I know as I got older I was afraid of many, many, many things.

The participant perceived physical education and athletics to have played an especially central role in his lived experiences. His recollection of sports, of physical education classes, and of the coaches associated with them was consistently negative and even now, many decades later, produced painful emotional wincing as he related his memories. His perceived sports to be very important, saying: "Sports is a big thing in a little town. Oh that is maybe the main thing in a little town and it is not just the main thing to kids, it is the main thing to the adults."

He perceived his failures in physical related activities as especially painful to him and believed they were important in marking him off as unmanly. These failures led him to perceive gross and painful mistreatment by coaches and physical education teachers. His attempts to describe his perceptions were very emotional:

(T)here was a new coach who was a clod of clod. He was a popular coach in the town because was a “winner.” Well, I don’ t call him a winner because boys won. I don’ t think coaches are very important. But anyway, when I was in school, I wasn’ t good in physical education. I did try. I tried very hard. I tried harder than a lot of kids... We were having, the polite word is calisthenics, and with this coach (pausing with emotion) it was torture and humiliation... (Voice rising) and I do not want his name changed! I want it known. It is Mundane Jones! Don’ t change his name. Put in his name! It is not being changed. You don’ t change it (the name) to protect the guilty. The bastard is dead now. At least I outlived him. (Sigh)

When further asked to relate examples of mistreatment by this coach, he continued:

We were doing, we were on our backs on the floor and we were doing leg lifts and were having a contest to see how long we could keep our legs in the air and I was wobbling and panting and this and that and the other and most of the other guys were just doing fine and he said, “Look at “participant”! “Look at him. Look at him puff and pant and shake.” And everybody started laughing. Everybody started laughing. You know in all my years in school, although I have seen teachers get mad at students, never, ever in any school or any grade I was in, encountered that in any other teacher other than a coach... (hesitating and unable to proceed)

Regarding a second coach his outburst was equally emotional:

I have looked back in my adult life and I have thought he was a limited, limited, limited man. He was not very smart. The only thing he could do was coach and discipline. He wasn’ t a loving man. He was just a hard man... I remember he just stank. He always stank. I sometimes wonder if one of the reasons he was so hard on me was that he taught or tried to teach Geography. Basically, he talked sports in Geography but occasionally he would get to the subject and if there was anything I was good at it was Geography. I think maybe I was a threat to him there. I don’ t know. I just don’ t know.

When asked to relate his present feelings toward his former coach he replied: “ Well, I got to where I hardly ever remember him. Really except for his nastiness, he was an imminently forgettable person. He was as near to nothing as anybody I have ever met.”

Though none of his coaches ever directly or expressly linked the participant’ s physical inadequacy to his sexuality or sexual legitimacy, it was clear that the two were linked in his mind. The following reflected his attempt to avoid contact with coaches and physical education:

I told a lie. I told the truth and a lie to get out of physical education that year at Capitalville High. There was a counselor at Capitalville high and I told the counselor that I was a homosexual and that I was afraid that I would get excited in the gym room etc. I have been in I don’ t know how many gym rooms around naked boys and naked men, I don’ t get excited but I figured he would believe it and think it would be a pretty awful thing. He did believe it and I was excused from physical education. I do not know about other people but gym rooms just are not aphriasidal to me.

7.2 Religions and Political Conservatism

Close behind athletics and physical education followed another two- headed torment that was reported as part of the lived experience of the participant; the dual institutions of conservative religion and conservative politics. Throughout the interview the participant expressed deeply held resentment toward both. His natural

father died in an accident before he was born and the participant was raised by a stepfather. In describing his stepfather, he also reveals his perceptions of both institutions:

He didn't seem to have a lot of dimensions but the dimensions he had were iterated and reiterated, ad infinitum, ad nauseam: Church, church,

church! CHURCH, CHURCH, CHURCH! Of the most condemning fire and brimstone kind and of the most right wing Republicanism imaginable. There were no Democrats. They were all Communists... I just remember, fear, fear, fear, and finally, hatred of God and after that atheism for quite some time.

When asked whether religion provided support or refuge for him as a child as he attempted to define his own sexuality, he responded:

I couldn't talk to pastors or clergy. My church was a very ignorant church and the people were super, super conservative... They were very, very conservative and except for the minister who was a teacher, they were very ignorant and super conservative and I couldn't talk to them or get comfort from a pastor...they were the tormentors...the idea is ridiculous.

The participant frequently expressed ideas that suggested that he perceived the source of his bullying to lie in conservatism and unthinking traditionalism. His bullying experiences were frequently described in ways that linked or traced to conservatives or to conservative politics:

Uh, I will say something all sorts of people would love to argue with and, uh, it would anger them greatly. I think it is because it is right. Most bullies that I have known and that I have followed at all well...all them that I know of, are Republicans. Now a lot of whiners that I have known are Democrats but the bullies that I have known are all Republicans." (The participant reported that most of the people in his small town were Republicans and conservatives.)

7.3 Family and Home Life

An unexpected development appeared early in the interview. It was that the participant was not only the victim of bullying on the basis of sexual orientation, he was also the victim of family bullying by a mentally disturbed older sister. (In effect he was the victim of compound bullying.) Though his experience with his sister must have influenced him, since it was not the variety of bullying that was the focus of this research, it has not been analyzed here except to the extent that reinforces the theme that the participant's home life was disorganized and dysfunctional and that it failed to provide him with guidance, nurturance, and refuge.

The third theme that emerged was the participant's perception that his bullying experiences were partly due to the fact that he received little guidance or protection from his weak and dysfunctional home. He described his family life as consisting of a dictatorial step-father, a loving but over-protective and weak mother, and a sadistic, psychotic and more powerful older sister. Numerous times the participant lamented the failure of his family structure to provide nurture, guidance and refuge for him. It was apparent that in retrospect, though he loved his mother very much, he felt that he had been almost betrayed by the little help he was given by his family to cope with his community environment and that he had been left almost wholly alone to suffer at its hands. He described them in the following terms:

I didn't feel like my stepfather hated me but he was a peculiar man. He would be called... I think most people would call him a crank although that is kind of an old-fashioned word... He was a very, very self-absorbed man and he bullied too but you can't exactly call it bullying because I know he did not mean to bully but I don't think he would have ever stopped if it were brought forward to him because he could not be criticized. He could not be. He would not take criticism from anybody, ever. He would have called what he did religious teaching and religious instruction.

Mom didn't have the choices that most people have. She had only a Sophie's choice with my sister and me. Mother was confronted with an impossible choice of keeping both children (himself and his mentally ill sister) or destroying one child (himself)...I got to where I would quit a lot of things...and that was a mistake on her part because she allowed me to...I think that if she could have talked to me and given me some cheerleading and some ideas that I had worthwhile character no matter what coaches said or the other people said and to hang in there, to go in there, don't let them get the best of you, that would have been better. Her other failure was if she knew I was going to fight somebody, she wouldn't let me.

I had an older sister who was psychotic, she was manic depressive and schizophrenic and she was a sadist and I was enough younger than she was that she could do basically what she wanted with me and she did...she could be pummeling me or scratching me or pinching me or kicking me or throwing firecrackers at me or anything she wanted and she would be smiling and laughing...I tell you, around Patroness (his sister) especially in the last year or so before she went to the State Hospital (Hospital for the Criminally Insane) I didn't feel like she was going to kill me, I felt like she was going to do something beyond that. If you can imagine, I felt like she was going to make it such that I never had any existence at all."

8. Conclusions and Discussion

The perceived bullies of the participant's 1960's environment were all very clearly in the category of the Social Skills Deficit view as described by Sutton, et al, (1999). The participant's father as well his coaches were described as "a crank," "self-absorbed," "peculiar," "clods," as "forgettable," as "unimportant," and "as near to nothing as anybody I have ever met." He further added that those "who bullied me weren't particularly intelligent and most of them were athletes." Only once did his descriptions of his bullies suggest any particular social skills and that was restricted to knowing who to pick out to safely bully: "There seem to be people who can just smell, as it were, someone who is safe to bully and I say safe to bully because I have also observed that a lot of bullies are really cowards."

Surprisingly, the participant focused very little upon specific childhood bullies in describing his perceptions of his bullying experience. He describes their painful taunts and teasing and how he fought back against them, yet in describing them, his perceptions were that, "I do not think the kids were sadists, I think they were just ordinary kids and I'm not saying that I was devoid of friends."

Instead of perceiving individual children as the sources of his bullying, the perceptions of the participant focused upon strong institutional pressures from home, church, politics, and culture that shaped his lived experiences. A cultural value of emphasis of the physical in men, a negative reinforcement of this value by the institutions of conservative religion and conservative politics, together with the absence of a protective and guiding function family go far in providing an understanding of the participant's perceptions of the ethos of bullying on the basis of sexual orientation that appeared to exist in the relative isolation of the participant's environment of the 1960s.

There are a number of challenges in this research. First, the significance of the role of homogeneity of members of rural communities and the type of bonds that exist between members of these communities was not established in the present research. Evidence of the significance of "ruralness" as a factor in this kind of bullying may become clearer as the research continues to the 1970s and 1980s. Secondly, the purposeful selection of participants for future installments of this research may be problematic. It may be difficult to find participants as introspective, thoughtful and articulate. A third challenge lies in developing methods of pursuing the open-ended questions required of qualitative research yet phrasing them in such a way as to insure that the

bench mark responses of the 1960s participant are offered for consideration without channeling or influencing those of participants representing the remaining decades of the research. The final challenge relates to how to use this participant's perceptions (as well as future participants from the 1970s and 1980s) in shaping policy to create better learning environments (as well as more humane treatment) for such bullying victims in the future.

What happens to the learning potential of young humanity when fed a steady diet of ridicule, ostracism, and fear, especially when the focus is on something as central to humans as sexuality? As this research moves to the last installments, will the environmental diet we provide for our children be similar to that perceived by the participant of the 1960s? Perhaps educational, religious, political, family and community changes will reveal his perceptions and experience to have become a painful artifact of the past; or perhaps not.

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