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Keywords

Bullying, aggression, school culture, education, ethnography

Disciplines

Educational Sociology | Elementary Education | Sociology

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Abstract

Since the late 1990s, increased public and academic attention has been focused on topics related to bullying and peer aggression in schools, yet these behaviors have proven difficult for schools to address. Using data from an ethnographic study of two rural elementary schools in the Midwestern United States, I make both methodological and theoretical contributions to the literature on this topic. Methodologically, I show that examining 'minor' aggressive behaviors in schools reveals the way that more serious issues are also normalized. Theoretically, I show that students and adults actively construct shared understandings in these schools regarding the normalization of aggression, increasing the frequency of these behaviors, limiting the ability of adults to effectively deal with them, and contributing to the stigmatization of students who do not accept them. These findings add to our understandings of bullying and aggression in schools and the relationship between school cultures and peer cultures.

Introduction

Since the late 1990s, increased public and academic attention has been focused on topics related to bullying and peer aggression in schools. The association between these behaviors and suicides and school shootings, as well as a host of other negative effects (Ghandour et al. 2004; Takizawa, Maughan, and Arseneault 2014), reveals the importance of viewing bullying as a serious social problem. Despite the large amount of media attention and clear negative consequences, however, these behaviors have proven difficult for schools to address. Meta-analyses of bullying intervention programs, for example, find relatively few significant changes (Merrell et al. 2008; Evans, Fraser, and Cotter 2014; Jiménez-Barbero et al. 2015).

In this paper I examine *why* bullying and aggression are difficult for schools to address. Using data from an ethnographic study of two rural elementary schools in the Midwestern United States, I make both methodological and theoretical contributions to the literature on this topic. Methodologically, I show that examining 'minor' aggressive behaviors in schools reveals the way that more serious issues are also normalized. Theoretically, I show that students and adults jointly contribute to this normalization as they make sense of the large number of aggressive behaviors they encounter.

Bullying and Aggression in School Culture

Bullying is traditionally defined as repeated exposure to intentionally negative actions by one or more individuals in which there is an imbalance of power (Olweus 1993). These actions can take the form of verbal abuse, physical abuse (or attempted physical abuse), or indirect abuse through hand gestures, facial expressions, or systematically ignoring, excluding, or isolating an individual (Olweus 1993). Studies focused on individual characteristics conclude that victims of bullying tend to be physically smaller, more sensitive, quieter, and more withdrawn than their

peers (e.g., Hoover, Oliver, and Hazier 1992) while bullies are typically vicious, uncaring, and aggressive (e.g., Duncan 1999).

Although Olweus's (1993) definition of bullying has been widely used, researchers have also recognized that it focuses on a narrow range of aggressive behavior in schools, excluding peer aggression that occurs only once or between equals (Finkelhor, Turner, and Hamby 2012). As Espelage and Swearer (2003, 371) note, moving beyond a singular focus on this definition allows for research that 'recognizes that students tease their peers in more subtle ways and on a less regular basis [than stereotypical bullies]; however, these less frequent behaviors still have serious effects on their targets and, thus, are worthy of exploration.' Individualistic approaches stemming from this definition also neglect the role that students, teachers, and other adults play in contributing to the school cultures in which bullying is created and sustained (Espelage and Swearer 2003; Viala 2015).

In response to the traditionally individualistic framing of bullying, Pascoe (2013) calls for the development of a sociology of bullying that focuses on social contexts, aggressive interactions, and their meanings. In contributing to this development, I focus broadly on aggressive behavior, which Faris and Felmlee (2011, 49) define as 'behavior directed toward harming or causing pain to another, including physical (e.g., hitting, shoving, and kicking), verbal (e.g., name-calling and threats), and indirect aggression (also called social or relational aggression). Indirect aggression is defined as harmful actions perpetrated outside of a victim's immediate purview, such as spreading rumors and ostracism.'[1]

[1] In other work (Harger 2016a) I have discussed the similarities and differences between a broad emphasis on aggressive behaviors and research on microaggressions, defined as 'the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group' (Sue 2010:14) but a full discussion of these similarities and differences is beyond the scope of the current paper.

Combining this focus with observations of school contexts and meanings is in line with social-ecological approaches to bullying, which recognize that bullying is the result of interactions between individuals and social systems (Migliaccio and Raskauskas 2015). The emphasis of social-ecological approaches on understanding 'individual, family, peer, school, and community contexts' (Swearer and Espelage 2004, 1) is particularly useful for sociologists studying this topic and is reflected in much of the qualitative research in relation to bullying (see Thornberg 2011 for a review). Although this model originates in psychology, sociologists such as Migliaccio and Raskauskas (2015) and Thornberg (2018) have used a modified ecological model combining social-ecological theory with symbolic interactionism and the new sociology of childhood (Migliaccio 2015).

The school contexts in which bullying and aggression occur can be understood through sociological approaches to culture. Swidler (1986; 2000) argues that culture influences our actions by shaping a 'tool kit' of habits, skills, and styles from which we construct 'strategies of action' or 'cultured capacities.' Recently, Calarco (2014) has expanded Swidler's tool kit approach to demonstrate the use of 'interpretive moments' in the activation of tool kit resources. In these interpretive moments, inconsistent teacher expectations lead to conscious interpretations on the part of students, suggesting that the activation of these resources can be interpretive and situational.

Research on masculinity and heteronormativity among students provides an example of the maintenance of interaction norms within school cultures. There are many possible masculinities (Skelton 2001) but the form of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995) often valued among boys in school draws on traditional working-class masculine fears (Willis 1977) of being labeled physically vulnerable, emotionally weak, or cowardly (Evaldsson 2002). In schools, the

construction of 'appropriate' masculinity (Epstein 1998; Martino 2000) begins as early as preschool, where children receive gendered messages about movements, behaviors, and use of physical space (Martin 1998) as well as heterosexuality (Gansen 2017), which they use to police the behaviors of others (Davies 1989).

These behaviors are normalized within the broader school culture both by their frequency among students (Ringrose and Renold 2010) and by the practices of the school itself (Eder, Evans, and Parker 1995; Pascoe 2007). Pascoe (2007, 157) states, 'school ceremonies and authorities encouraged, engaged in, and reproduced the centrality of repudiation processes to adolescent masculinity.' Teachers contributed to the normalization of these behaviors by not intervening and, in some cases, by engaging in these behaviors themselves (Pascoe 2007; Klein 2012).

Research clearly shows that a wide range of bullying and aggressive behaviors can be accepted as 'normal' within peer cultures (Thornberg 2015) and this has been well documented in terms of gender and masculinity (e.g., Eder et al. 1995; Pascoe 2007; Klein 2012). In the case of a wider range of aggressive behaviors, though, it is unclear how this normalization occurs in schools (where most of these behaviors are against the rules). With few exceptions (e.g., MacDonald and Swart 2004), this research also neglects the way that adults contribute to the maintenance of interaction norms among students.

This paper builds on the previous work in these areas. In line with Pascoe's (2013) call for a sociology of bullying, I move beyond a singular focus on Olweus's (1993) definition through the inclusion of 'minor' aggressive behaviors. I also explore the contributions of adults to the maintenance of interaction norms among students. Combined, these approaches allow me

to focus on the interactions between students, their peers, and school staff members to better understand the school cultures that normalize aggressive behaviors in two elementary schools.

Setting, Methods, and Analysis

The data in this paper are drawn from a study of peer interaction among fifth grade students (10-11 years old) in two elementary schools. Located in a rural Midwestern city of about 15,000 people, Hillside[2] and Greenfield Elementary each provide education for roughly 240 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Students at both schools are largely white and from middle- or working-class families. At Hillside Elementary 98% of students are white and 30% receive free or reduced-price lunches, compared to 97% and 41% at Greenfield Elementary. Given that nearly all students and all teachers and school staff members were white, my own status as a white male in my late twenties at the time of this research likely helped the students and teachers feel comfortable around me.

In contrast to middle or high school, elementary school is a relatively stable environment in which to study aggression. In a typical middle school, for example, students from a number of elementary schools come together for the first time, leading to struggles for social status that likely exacerbate aggressive behavior (Eder et al. 1995; Milner 2004). Most of the fifth graders that I spent time with for this study, however, had attended school together since kindergarten. Understanding the contributions of both students and adults to school cultures that normalize aggression in this relatively stable setting provides useful insights while also providing a foundation for similar work among older students.

During the 2007-2008 school year I conducted over 430 hours of participant observation at the two schools combined. In my observations I used an interpretive approach, viewing

[2] Pseudonyms are used for all names and places.

individuals as active agents who are influenced by social structures but take an active role in counteracting or modifying these structures (Mehan 1992; Eder and Nenga 2003). In both schools I entered students' interactions to varying degrees based on the situation. In the classroom I spent most of my time sitting in the back of the room and observing, while I was more involved at lunch and recess and during classes like music, physical education, and art. During recess at the schools I twirled jump ropes, played basketball, four square, football, and tag, used the swings and the slides, and just walked around. Through this approach I was able to observe many student behaviors that adults were not aware of but I observed adults primarily in their interactions with students and my ability to obtain adult perspectives was largely limited to interviews and brief interactions before school.

In addition to participant observation I interviewed 53 of the 82 fifth grade students, the four fifth grade teachers, both principals, and four school staff members who were frequently present during lunch and recess. All fifth grade students were invited to participate in interviews and interviews were completed with all who returned signed parent and student informed consent statements. In total, I interviewed 24 of 37 fifth grade students at Hillside Elementary and 29 of 45 at Greenfield Elementary. Student interviews typically lasted for 25-30 minutes and took place during periods of free time approved by the teacher in empty classrooms. Adult interviews typically lasted between 50 and 60 minutes.

Data from field notes and interview transcripts were analyzed using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis program. In ATLAS.ti I identified patterns in the data and searched for negative cases. I looked particularly closely at interactions involving aggressive behaviors but I was also careful to examine the school cultures as a whole and the ways that the actions of adults and students affected norms within the schools. Because I conducted my observations and

interviews in two schools, I compared my findings from each, looking for similarities and differences. Despite some differences in the ways that adults in the two schools discussed discipline (see Harger 2012), I observed equal amounts of aggressive behavior and the same processes through which these behaviors were normalized in both schools. My use of two schools in this paper, then, is intended to show that this process was not limited to a single school and is *not* intended to provide a comparison between the schools. The result is an in-depth look at the interactive process by which students and adults in these schools maintained a culture in which aggressive behaviors were normalized. In the sections that follow I first explore student behaviors that make the disciplinary process difficult for adults, then how adult responses to this difficulty lead them to contribute to the normalization of aggressive behavior and, finally, how the responses of adults influence student decision-making.

Student Behaviors

Stealthy Students

In the schools that I observed, both the ratio of students to adults and students' efforts to hide their behaviors contributed to the fact that adults observed only a small number of the total aggressive behaviors that took place. The aggressive behaviors that I observed included, but were not limited to, students taking others' pencils and other belongings, hitting, pushing, and throwing things at others, exclusion, and insults. The students I observed were skilled at hiding behaviors, including aggressive behaviors. While students were able to hide some behaviors in the classroom, their control was greatest on the playground and in other areas where supervision was more difficult. Marshall noted that in the classroom or hallway, teachers are 'always watching you. At recess, they have to watch everybody.'

The use of hiding places and lookouts also made detection by adults more difficult. Abigail noted that students would go 'behind where all the trees are' to avoid getting caught on the Hillside playground, while Jill stated that students at Greenfield 'usually try to play behind [the big jungle gym] so that teachers don't see them.' Ted and Brian noted that they sometimes employed the use of a lookout in the classroom and bathroom at Hillside, where actions could be hidden under a table or through a doorway but the teacher remained in close proximity. Christy, a student at Greenfield, commented on this, stating, 'They just watch. They have, like, a person watch for the teacher.'

Relationships and Reporting

The available space on the playground combined with students' efforts to hide their actions in classrooms and other places meant that most punishments occurred because students reported these behaviors to adults. Interpersonal relationships played a key role in students' decisions to do so. As Ted stated, 'If I'm mad at someone, I will tell on them.' Students also reported that the opposite was true. Tim stated that whether or not somebody was his friend was his primary criteria for deciding whether or not to tell. Further, he revealed, 'me and our friends made up a thing. If we're friends, we do not tell on each other.' He later reiterated, 'True friends do not tell on each other.'[3]

The fact that adults in these schools did not directly observe most of the aggressive behaviors that were reported to them also allowed students to use the rules themselves as weapons against each other, similar to the situation described by Evaldsson and Svahn (2012) in which a group of girls uses a school's bullying intervention program as a system of retaliation against a peer. Students in my study did so by reporting the rule violations of peers that they

[3] See Harger (2019) for a more detailed discussion of students' decision-making processes regarding telling.

disliked, reporting behavior against them without mentioning that this behavior was in retaliation for something that they had done, and, in some cases, reporting things that were entirely fabricated. In each case the goal was to negatively affect another student through adult action.

Examples illustrate the use of these tactics. A school rule at Greenfield Elementary stated that students were not allowed to eat lunch with others that they were 'going with' or that they 'liked' in a romantic sense. As I wrote in my field notes:

> Mr. White (the Greenfield principal) approached our table and said that Nate had to move because he heard that Nate and Maggie liked each other. He said that the school didn't need any boyfriends and girlfriends or people liking each other too much. After this I clarified with Maggie, Tracie, and Scott that people weren't allowed to sit with those that they 'liked.' I also asked how Mr. White found out and Maggie said that it was probably from another girl who didn't like her.

This situation demonstrates how easily knowledge about breaking the rules could be used as a weapon against those a student disliked.

Students also attempted to use accusations against others in order to deflect blame from themselves. As Kaci noted, 'I've heard, "he hit me," but actually he hit the other person.' This statement was echoed by teachers, principals, and recess supervisors. Students were careful to note that, at best, these tactics worked only some of the time, but the chance that they *might* work provided enough motivation for students to try them. As discussed below, situations such as these were one of the reasons for the considerable detective work that adults put into their disciplinary procedures.

Finally, students attempted to use the rules as weapons when *no* rules had been broken. Christy pointed this out during my second week at Greenfield Elementary when I was trying to make sense of a playground interaction, as seen in the following field note:

> I was standing by the basketball hoop with Christy when I saw Kyle arguing with Jill and then fall down on the ground, looking like he was hurt. I was confused because I didn't see anything happen to Kyle that could have caused an injury. Jill told me that Kyle sometimes fakes injuries to get other people in trouble.

From Christy's perspective, Kyle had fallen down on the ground in an attempt to get a supervisor's attention. I came to share this perspective as Kyle continued lying on the ground and Christy and I walked closer but still remained outside of the interaction. From the ground, Kyle told Jill that she would not like it if someone had stepped on *her* hand, despite the fact that nobody had visibly caused Kyle to fall down or stepped on his hand. Kyle appeared to hope that a supervisor would observe his behavior and punish Jill, allowing him to indirectly win his argument through Jill's removal from the game. Since no supervisors were in the area, this effort failed and Kyle eventually got up and resumed participation.

Adult Responses

Playing Detective

The low likelihood of directly observing a behavior combined with the fact that students sometimes falsely reported aggressive behaviors made adults cautious about relying on a single student report. In order to discipline students, then, adults talked to multiple witnesses and weighed what each said, constructing a series of likely events. For example, when I asked Mrs. Wheeler, a lunch and recess supervisor at Hillside, how she dealt with student reports of aggressive behavior, she stated:

> You just gotta play detective. You just kind of try to dig 'til you get to the bottom of it... Like, if you come up and complain about somebody else I'll say okay, you go over there for a little bit while I talk to this person… and then you might even have to pull other people aside. I always say, 'Who was around? Who's seen or heard? Who was with you?' Again, they may lie. Who knows? You don't really know.

Mrs. Wheeler also recognized that students might not report the whole truth, saying 'they may come to me and say, "so and so hit me with the ball." And I'm like, "That is really weird. I can't imagine that person hittin' 'em with the ball." Well, that truly did happen *but* they left the first part off that they tripped 'em as they went by.' This detective work was further complicated by relationships between students, which influenced their responses to adult questioning much like their decisions to report behaviors.

Adults' responses to these reports were strongly influenced by the knowledge, beliefs, and expectations that they held about individual students, leading them to punish repeat offenders more harshly than others. Mrs. Knight, Hillside's principal, discussed this in her interview:

> Usually, in the end the truth will come out. But if it doesn't, I will tell them, 'I can't pick your side and I can't pick your side. Looking at your records, you had 15 [punishments] this year, he's not had any. I have to believe him. Because I have to punish someone.'

Other adults also mentioned the use of students' prior behavior. As Mrs. Neely, a recess and lunch supervisor at Hillside Elementary, explained, 'First time offenders, depending on what it is, you are kind of more lenient about things than the people who are repeatedly in trouble. I mean, I'm not one to take recess all the time from somebody, but the repeat offenders, I sometimes don't think twice about making them go stand [for time out].' Mr. White, the

Greenfield principal, similarly reported considering a student's reputation along with what he called the 'witness accounts' he gathered through his detective work.

Students with good reputations were frequently called upon by adults to act as witnesses while students with bad reputations were accused more frequently and could be used as scapegoats for others. For example, Sandy argued Mike 'sorta has, not a bad reputation, but people know that he can get in trouble really easy. And so, if something comes up, then they're just like, "Mike did it."' Brian, who regularly teased, chased, and pushed others, reported being wrongly accused because of his reputation, stating, 'I know I've got told on for throwing a ball and I didn't throw it, and it hit somebody.'

The use of reputation in this way had important consequences for students. Those who were well behaved were perceived as being more trustworthy than others and had a greater influence on the disciplinary decisions of adults. Students who were often in trouble, on the other hand, sometimes found themselves accused of, and even punished for, things that they had not done. My data do not allow me to conclude how often students were wrongly accused or punished but it is important to note that even if most accusations and punishments were just, the possibility of incorrect accusations and punishments and the resulting caution on the part of adults caused confusion among students about the disciplinary process and reduced the perceived effectiveness of reporting aggressive behaviors, contributing to students' reluctance to report these behaviors to adults.

Adult Contributions to Normalization

The frequency of aggressive behavior meant that even when adults personally witnessed it they had to decide whether to take disciplinary action. This placed adults in a difficult position since most aggressive behavior violated school rules but sending students to the office for every

occurrence they observed would have resulted in nearly empty classrooms and investigating every report would have taken up all of their time. Instead, adults attempted to interpret the meaning of each interaction for the participants. For example, in one instance I wrote in my field notes that Jared jumped on Brad and pulled him down to the ground before running away. Brad chased him, pulling on Jared's shirt. Mrs. Wheeler, who observed the interaction between these two friends, said, 'You better be playing!'

Adults also sometimes intervened to stop aggressive behaviors between friends that they felt were getting out of hand without punishing the students involved, as the following field note demonstrates:

> At the beginning of recess some of the girls decided that they were going to play American Idol and Joanna, Brittney, and Emily were the judges, with Chelsea starting out as the contestant and Jody and Joel waiting for a turn. Chelsea started by pretending to sing a bad rendition of a Carrie Underwood song. Later, she pretended to be a contestant who was mad at the judges and had to have security called, playfully attacking Joanna and hitting her. The aide in the room said 'Chelsea. Chelsea! Chelsea, stop!' and Chelsea stopped. The aide said that they needed to settle down.

In these examples, the adults recognized that aggression can be used between friends but they also reinforced the idea that these behaviors are an accepted part of the school culture. In some cases, adults even participated in these interactions. In one instance, for example, Mrs. Lane chastised one of her students, stating, 'Dan, if you could see your face when you whine… I mean, you're a boy, you look like a little girl. Suck it up.' This exchange prompted Maggie, another student in Mrs. Lane's class, to exclaim, 'That's mean.' Like many students, Mrs. Lane used an insult to assert a norm of accepted behavior (not complaining), reinforcing the idea that

insults were an accepted element of the school culture and contributing to the normalization of these 'masculine' behaviors in the school (Ringrose and Renold 2010).

In addition to the acceptance of aggressive behaviors as a part of the school culture, adults' interpretations of whether these behaviors necessitated disciplinary action sometimes differed from those of students. When students reported aggressive behaviors to adults, then, they had to contend with the possibility that the adults would not treat their reports seriously. Jerry noted that teachers were sometimes 'in the middle of somethin'' that they perceived to be more important than a student's interpersonal issues. Adults supported Jerry's statement, noting that the interactions that were reported were not always the ones they felt were most important to deal with, especially given the time required to 'play detective.' In her interview, Hillside principal Mrs. Winter mentioned that 'kids seem to tattle on the trivial stuff and then sometimes when it's the bigger stuff we don't know it. We had a little boy here who was black and someone was calling him "nigger." I want to know this.' By dedicating their time to investigating student reports of 'trivial stuff,' adults believed they would have less time to deal with issues that were truly important. Paradoxically, the reluctance of adults to investigate these reports may have reduced the likelihood that students would report more serious issues.

Efforts by adults to limit the amount of 'trivial stuff' that students reported further contributed to the normalization of aggressive behavior among students. Malcolm, for example, reported that Mrs. Knight, a fifth grade teacher at Greenfield, told students that the recess supervisors did not have time for tattlers. This is consistent with Mrs. Winter's statement above and other statements that I saw adults make during my observations. For example, early in my fieldwork I was in line with the Greenfield students at the end of recess when I heard one of the

supervisors say that students should not tell on others unless they do something 'really bad,' continuing to state that students sometimes tell on others too much.

Once created, the culture of aggression had ramifications for both students and staff members, whether or not they agreed with the normalization of these behaviors. By overlooking 'minor' transgressions and encouraging students to do the same, adults allowed aggressive behaviors to be used among friends as well as enemies. The sheer number of these interactions likely made it more difficult for adults to determine which should be addressed and which should not, as statements such as 'You better be playing!' indicate. The number of these interactions also prevented adults from dealing with all of the aggressive behaviors that were reported to them. The strong norms against reporting behaviors to adults among students in these schools (discussed further below) suggest that most students only reported things that stood out to them as particularly egregious. By discouraging some of these reports, then, adults reinforced the idea that some interactions were not serious and that students needed to be 'tough.' These findings support the norm of masculinity that Klein (2012) discusses, in which students should appear tough by not showing that things bother them.

Influences on Student Decision-Making

Along with the desire to protect their friends and the uncertainty surrounding the outcomes of telling, adults' messages contributed to students' decision-making processes. The behaviors of Kathy, a student at Hillside, exemplified the range of conclusions students drew in these moments. Kathy frequently bothered others by pushing and arguing while playing sports at recess, touching students who were standing near her in the lunch line, and kicking students who sat across from her at the lunch table. Kathy was also a frequent target of other students who called her 'fat,' told her to 'shut up' and 'sit down' in the classroom, and pushed and kicked her

while playing sports at recess. Students tended to see Kathy either as a bully or a victim, depending on their own interactions with her, demonstrating the way that even supposedly clear behaviors like pushing could be interpreted differently by different students.[4]

Most students' responses in these moments took personal interactions, peer relationships, and the schools' informal norms for behavior into account. Those who adhered more closely to formal school rules, however, were often labeled 'tattletales' or 'tattlers,' sometimes using language similar to adults to justify these labels. For example, Jim said, 'I don't like bein' a tattletale and stuff, and telling on somethin' that's not really that big of a deal.' Similarly, Leann defined tattlers as those who see 'Little things that are like no problem, not going to be a problem, but you go and tell anyway.'

Students faced pressure to avoid reporting things that they had observed as well as aggressive behaviors that had been directed toward them. Many students believed that by allowing others to see they were hurt or offended, they were revealing a weakness. As Kaci noted, if somebody was mean to her:

K: I wouldn't let it bother me. Because I would, I could feel hurt inside if I wan- if it hurt me that bad, but I wouldn't show it. I wouldn't be like, ((makes crying noises)) '*That. Was. So. Mean*.' I'd be like, 'Suuure.'

I: So if you were hurt by something somebody said, why would you not want to let them know?

K: Because that shows weakness and that's just what, then people are going to do it more and more. Like a bully, if you show that you're really scared of it, like then they'll keep doing it and doing it and doing it and it just won't stop. But

[4] See Harger (2016b) for a further discussion of the ways that adults and students defined bullying in these schools.

> if you let it not bother you, I guess they'll think, like, 'Hey, they're not going to listen to anything I say, so I should just stop.'

In these statements Kaci recognizes that not only are aggressive behaviors normalized within the school but also that responding negatively to these behaviors could increase the likelihood of being targeted in the future.

While ignoring a verbal attack was seen as a sign of strength, some students felt that a different response to physical attacks was necessary. As Jason noted:

> If they like hit me in the shoulder and just kept hittin' me and bullyin' me around, I'd probably like hit 'em back and make 'em stop hittin' me. Like, I'd probably hit 'em a bunch, not a bunch, but like, I'd hit them in the shoulders. Prove to 'em that-that I can. Like, 'stop bullyin' me around.' But if it was something, just someone called me like, 'retard,' like, 'your mom's stupid,' I wouldn't do anything. I would just ignore 'em.

For Jason, like Kaci above, it was important not to show weakness. While ignoring a verbal attack demonstrated that a student was emotionally strong, however, students such as Jason believed that ignoring a physical attack demonstrated that a student was willing to be pushed around. By calling attention to behaviors that were overlooked by others, tattletales appeared to demonstrate that they were not 'tough' enough to participate in the normalized school culture of aggression. The need to appear 'tough' is also strongly related to norms of hegemonic masculinity within schools (Connell 1995; Evaldsson 2002; Klein 2012).

Finally, tattling was strongly associated with younger children. Chad argued that 'nobody ever tells unless you are really little,' while Malcolm stated that Hillside Elementary had 'hordes of little kids' that 'come and tattle.' By linking tattling to young children, students further

rationalized aggressive behaviors, arguing that older students should not report them. As noted above, the stigma against reporting 'trivial' aggression on the part of both adults and students likely prevented students from reporting more 'serious' violations.

A reputation as a tattletale could also reduce the likelihood that a student's reports would be taken seriously by adults. Furthermore, it is possible that some of the students who were known as tattletales were more sensitive to the aggressive behaviors that other students accepted as the norm. If true, the fact that students saw a relationship between tattling and age may have indicated that these students learned to stop reporting negative behaviors to adults as they got older even if they did not stop being negatively affected by them.

Conclusion

By using an interpretive approach, viewing individuals as active agents who are influenced by social structures but take an active role in counteracting or modifying these structures (Mehan 1992; Eder and Nenga 2003), this research allows me to examine the numerous interrelated factors contributing to school cultures in which aggressive behaviors are considered normal. Because aggression is prevalent and students are often able to hide their behaviors, adults do not directly observe most negative interactions and are forced to rely on student reports, which may be falsified in attempts to prevent or cause punishment for others. Adults, then, must frequently 'play detective' by interviewing witnesses in order to determine appropriate punishments. Finally, the time-consuming nature of this work leads adults to reinforce student-held stigmas against 'tattletales' who report behaviors to adults. This normalization increases the frequency of these behaviors, limits the ability of adults to effectively deal with them, and contributes to the stigmatization of students who do not accept them.

These findings add context and an important cultural component to our understanding of bullying and aggression in schools by contributing to both social-ecological approaches to bullying (Swearer and Espelage 2004; Migliaccio and Raskauskas 2015) and to sociological knowledge on the relationship between school cultures and peer cultures (Calarco 2014). Although aggressive behaviors between peers can serve positive functions (Voss 1997; Mills 2018), my findings show that these behaviors reinforce the acceptance of aggression within the school culture even when used between friends. In doing so, this work furthers the development of a sociology of bullying that takes these cultural factors and a wider range of aggressive behaviors into account (c.f. Pascoe 2013; Migliaccio and Raskauskas 2015). By examining a wide range of aggressive behaviors within the culture of these schools, I show how interactions between and within groups of students and adults contribute to a school culture in which aggression and hegemonic masculinity is normalized, providing a backdrop against which traditional bullying is difficult to define, detect, and punish for both students and adults.

These findings also suggest ways that adults in schools may be able to disrupt the processes that normalize aggressive behaviors in the school culture. Because of the myriad motivating factors that prevent students from reporting behaviors to adults, the first step toward disrupting these processes may be for adults to refrain from discouraging reports of aggression and to treat all reports seriously. This would likely require increased investment in school personnel given the amount of time necessary to investigate these reports. Additionally, adults in schools must change their own perceptions of 'normal' interactions if they are going to help students see that a wide range of their daily behaviors are potentially harmful to their peers. When teachers, staff members, and principals develop common understandings of unacceptable behaviors they are likely to be more effective in communicating these understandings to

students, reducing the need for students to determine the best possible response on their own (Calarco 2014). Even simply bringing the students involved together and talking to them briefly about what had transpired would support the idea that these behaviors are not a normal part of attending school, thus changing the meanings of these actions (Fine 2012).

Suggestions for Future Research

This study examines the cultures of two elementary schools in the rural Midwestern United States and suggests the importance of future work that further explores the construction and maintenance of school cultures in different types of schools and the impact that increased use of technology may have on these interactions. Despite the small scale, the fact that these norms operated in the same way in both of these schools suggests that they are not entirely unique. Paulle's (2013) finding that teachers in urban schools frequently let 'minor' provocations slide suggests that school cultures in other types of schools may be similarly constructed.

The fact that these data were collected over a decade ago provides an opportunity for research exploring the ways that increased access to communication technologies outside of schools affect the interactions of students within them. During my data collection many students had cell phones, some had online social networks on sites like MySpace, and a few played online games but the interactions facilitated by these technologies outside of school did not typically affect their in-school interactions. This was likely a function of both technological access and age. Although the age at which kids first have access to these technologies has decreased in the intervening years, fifth graders in the U.S. today still appear to be near the transition point for technology use, with the average child getting his or her first phone at 10.3 years old and first social media account at 11.4 years old (Influence Central 2016). Future research should explore

how increased access to smartphones and tablets affects the school cultures of preadolescents and how this access intersects with social status and other factors.

Due to the relatively homogenous nature of Hillside and Greenfield Elementary Schools and my focus on the broader school culture, this paper largely sets aside the issue of inequality explored by others (e.g. MacDonald and Swart 2004; Calarco 2014) and given a central role in Pascoe's (2013) sociology of bullying. As Pascoe (2013, 98) notes, 'when we call aggressive interactions between young people… bullying and ignore the messages about inequality (e.g., gender inequality, embedded serious and joking relationships), we risk divorcing what they are doing form larger issues of inequality and sexualized power.' Calarco (2014, 204) also notes that inequalities 'hinge on the activation of particular strategies of action and the interactive processes by which those strategies of action are interpreted and rewarded in institutional settings.'

These findings suggest the need for future research to explore the ways that inequality influences, and is influenced by, the use and interpretation of aggressive behavior. The fact that teachers were influenced by student reputation, for example, suggests that their disciplinary decisions were likely affected by perceptions of gender and social class. In my observations, girls participated in aggressive behavior as either actors or targets roughly half as frequently as boys. Whether these gendered differences were the result of actual differences in the prevalence of aggression or simply differences in my ability to observe the different types of interactions used by boys and girls is an important question for further study, as is the contribution of these processes to the production and regulation of masculinity and femininity in schools.

Norms regarding aggressive behaviors may also develop and affect students differently in schools with larger populations or more economic or racial diversity. Research finding that black

students are more likely than white students to receive punishment for the same behaviors supports this (e.g. Bowditch 1993; Pascoe 2007; Bell 2015). Research in different types of schools would also provide a deeper understanding of the connections between microlevel interactions, school cultures, and macrolevel cultural structures, which have been suggested by social psychologists (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1994; Fine 2012; Collett and Lizardo 2014).

Many of my conclusions were made possible by moving beyond the traditional definition of bullying used by Olweus (1993) and others. In her interview, Mrs. Knight, Hillside's principal, reported that she believed there was only one bully in the school and that in her 19 years there she could think of less than five. Mrs. Knight's statements reflect the extent to which aggressive behaviors were normalized within these schools. By focusing her attention on bullies who she considered 'mean by nature' and 'born that way,' Mrs. Knight downplayed the significance of the aggressive behaviors that occurred every day in her school. In contrast, by not limiting my observations and analysis to intentionally negative actions that were repeated over time and in which there was an imbalance of power I was able to 'shift the unit of analysis from the individual to the aggressive interaction itself, attend to the social contexts in which bullying occurs,' and 'ask questions about meanings produced by such interactions' (Pascoe 2013, 89). Doing so reveals the joint maintenance by students and adults of a school culture that normalizes aggressive behavior.

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