A Multilevel Analysis of School Climate, Homophobic Name-Calling, and Sexual Harassment Victimization/Perpetration Among Middle School Youth

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Objective: Using multiinformant, multilevel modeling, this study examines the association between teacher/staff perceptions of school environment and student reports of homophobic name-calling and sexual harassment. Method: Surveys were conducted with 1,447 teachers/staff and 3,616 6th grade students across 36 middle schools in the Midwest. Results: Bivariate associations revealed that when teachers perceive schools as committed to bullying prevention, students reported less homophobic name-calling perpetration, sexual harassment perpetration, and sexual harassment victimization. When adults reported positive staff/student interactions, students endorsed lower levels of homophobic name-calling perpetration and victimization and less sexual harassment perpetration. Higher teacher/staff reported gender equity was correlated with less homophobic name-calling perpetration and victimization and sexual harassment perpetration. In a model with all school environment scales entered together, school commitment to prevent bullying was associated with less sexual harassment perpetration; in addition, higher gender equity and intolerance of sexual harassment at the school level was associated with fewer experiences of homophobic name-calling perpetration and victimization and sexual harassment perpetration. Conclusions: Efforts to address gendered harassment should include support from the school administration and professional development opportunities for all teachers and staff. Adults in the school should create a culture that is intolerant of sexual harassment and supports equality between the girls and boys in the school.

Keywords: homophobic name-calling, school climate, sexual harassment

Aggression and harassment in schools is rooted in a school’s environment and culture (Meyer, 2008). The extant literature shows that negative school climate is associated with greater aggression and victimization; additionally, positive school environment is associated with fewer aggressive and externalizing behaviors (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000; Espelage, Polanin, & Low, 2014; Goldweber, Waasdorp, & Bradshaw, 2013; Wienke Totura et al., 2009). However, the literature is limited to a focus on individual- or student-level predictors of gendered harassment, with little attention given to the school-level correlates. Given the research on the associations between other forms of aggression and school environment, it is likely that students in school climates that are tolerant of gendered harassment are more likely to experience and perpetrate homophobic name-calling and sexual harassment. This study addresses this gap in the literature by examining correlations between teacher/staff reports of school environment at the school level and student reports of sexual and homophobic perpetration and victimization at the individual level.

Gendered Harassment

Gendered harassment includes any behavior that serves to reinforce heteronormativity and sexism (Meyer, 2008). This type of harassment reinforces heterosexual gender norms and can be psychological, physical, or verbal. Although sex, gender, and sexual orientation are distinct constructs, the dominance of heterosexual masculinity often results in the conflation of these dimensions in harassment and bullying situations (Butler, 1999; Bem, 1993; Sullivan, 2003). As a result, individual instances of gendered harassment often simultaneously target multiple intersecting identities (Meyer, 2008). Because of this unfortunate reality, in this study we examine both homophobic name-calling and sexual harassment as two aspects of gendered harassment.

Homophobic name-calling is a form of hate language and involves the use of slurs associated with a student’s presumed or assumed sexual orientation, often stated in a pejorative manner. In 2011, 1.3% of 12- to 18-year-old students reported being the target of hate-related words regarding their presumed sexual orientation (Robers, Kemp, & Truman, 2013). Homophobic name-calling is correlated with an increase in anxiety, depression, personal distress, suicidality, and other mental health problems (Cochran &
Sexual harassment is defined as unwanted sexual conduct, and can include unwelcome verbal, nonverbal, and physical behaviors that interfere with an individual’s right to receive an equal education (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 2011; U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2001). Sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination and is prohibited in schools by Title IX (U.S. Department of Education, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2001). Fifty-six percent of females and 40% of males in 7th through 12th grade experienced sexual harassment during the 2010–2011 school year (AAUW, 2011), which can also include being called “gay.” Sexual harassment is also associated with negative outcomes, including issues with mental and physical health, life satisfaction, and substance abuse (Corbett, Gentry, & Pearson, 1993; Gruber & Fineran, 2007; Hand & Sanchez, 2000; Lee, Croninger, Linn, & Chen, 1996; Ormerod, Collinsworth, & Perry, 2008; Stein, Marshall, & Tropp, 1993; Stratton & Backes, 1997; Tully, 2011).

Gendered harassment is associated with characteristics of the larger school ecology (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Meyer, 2008; Stein, 1995). If, within a school culture, students do not feel safe reporting incidents of harassment, and girls’ reports of victimization are not believed as readily as boys’, then an “insidious cycle” of violence is created (Stein, 1995). Additionally, when students observe and imitate deviant behavior modeled in the school, aggressive behavior can increase (Rorie, Gottfredson, Cross, Wilson, & Connell, 2011). Students also learn homophobic and social dominance attitudes from their surroundings, potentially leading to increased levels of prejudice (Poteat, Espelage, & Green, 2007).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify the school-level characteristics that are associated with student self-reports of gendered harassment.

School Environment

Although there are many different definitions of school climate, it is consistently described as the character and quality of the school culture (Espelage et al., 2014). This culture is created through the values, goals, norms, expectations, teaching practices, leadership styles, and bureaucratic structure of a school (National School Climate Council, 2007). School climate influences the incidence of gendered harassment (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Meyer, 2008). Positive school climate can minimize problematic behaviors by promoting safe and supportive environments for youth. A positive school climate includes norms that support safety and respect for all members of the school and includes staff that model prosocial behaviors (“School Climate,” 2014). Additionally, if students have a positive perception of the school climate, they are less likely to engage in externalizing or aggressive behaviors (Espelage et al., 2000; Goldweber et al., 2013; Wienke Totura et al., 2009). On the other hand, a “culture of bullying” or aggression in a school can encourage aggressive behavior and discourage reporting of aggression (Bandyopadhyay, Cornell, & Konold, 2009; Espelage et al., 2000; Goldweber et al., 2013).

Commonly cited indicators of school climate include student and staff reports of school-wide willingness to intervene in aggressive situations and administrative support in efforts to prevent aggression in the school (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2009; Brand, Felner, Seitsinger, Burns, & Bolton, 2008; Espelage et al., 2014; Gendron, Williams, & Guerra, 2011; Goldweber et al., 2013; Harel-Fisch et al., 2011; Richard, Schneider, & Mallet, 2011; Wienke Totura et al., 2009; Waasdorp, Pas, O’Brennan, & Bradshaw, 2011). Although many school climate studies have used student self-report and aggregated student data at the school level, a multiple informant approach that considers both student and staff perceptions of perpetration and victimization is less common in the extant literature. These dual perspectives are important, as student and staff perceptions can differ in meaningful ways. To address this gap, this study examines teacher and staff perceptions at the school level as correlates of student self-reports of gendered harassment.

In this study, we examine how five important features of school environment correlate with perpetration and victimization of homophobic name-calling and sexual harassment. One aspect of school environment is student and staff’s willingness to intervene in various bullying incidents. Victimization occurs more frequently and students report less willingness to intervene in schools where students interpret teachers’ intervention efforts as ineffective (Goldweber et al., 2013; Waasdorp et al., 2011). Therefore, we hypothesized that higher levels of teacher, staff, and student interventions as reported by the adults would be associated with lower levels of student reported homophobic name-calling and sexual harassment victimization and perpetration.

Another relevant construct is that of the school’s overall commitment to bullying and harassment prevention, including the involvement of administrators, staff, and teachers. Some school researchers argue that aggression is less prevalent in schools where the school administration and staff work together to prevent bullying and harassment and address it when it occurs (Orpinas & Horne, 2006). Studies also indicated that school leaders, including principals, are critical change agents in creating safe schools (Astor, Benbenishty, & Estrada, 2009). Accordingly, we hypothesized that student levels of gendered harassment would be lower in schools where staff see bullying and harassment prevention as a priority.

The connectedness of the school, including the quality of the relationships among staff, teachers, students, and parents, is an additional aspect of school environment. Students who experience less school connectedness are more likely to report peer victimization (Espelage et al., 2000; Glew, Fan, Katon, Rivara, & Kernic, 2005; Goldweber et al., 2013). Therefore, we hypothesized that more positive teacher–staff–student interactions would be associated with less homophobic name-calling and sexual harassment.

One final facet of school environment that is potentially related to gendered harassment is that of school commitment to gender equity and intolerance of sexual harassment. A recent study by Espelage et al. (2014) suggests that increased endorsement of gender equity and intolerance of sexual harassment by teachers is significantly correlated with fewer student self-reports of bullying, aggression, and victimization, and greater willingness to intervene. Additionally, when staff and teachers treat boys and girls differently or are dismissive of sexual harassment, students report experiencing more victimization and less willingness to seek help (Charmaraman, Jones, Stein, & Espelage, 2013). Thus, we hypothesized that greater gender equity and intolerance of sexual harassment would be associated with lower rates of gendered harassment.
Current Study

To summarize, the existing literature indicates that school environment is connected to students’ experiences of aggression. This study aims to expand and improve on the extant literature by examining the correlation between school-level variables of teacher/staff-reported school environment and student-level rates of homophobic teasing and sexual harassment perpetration and victimization; these outcome variables are not as commonly explored as those of bullying and aggression more generally. This study improves on the extant literature by the use of multifactors (teachers, students), the use of scales rather than single-item indicators, and the use of multilevel modeling to examine the correlates of teacher/staff perceptions and student behavior. The purpose of this research is to address the following questions: (a) What bivariate associations exist between teacher/staff reports of school environment and student reports of gendered harassment at the individual level? (b) When using a multilevel modeling approach, which teacher/staff reports of school environment variables at the school level will be significantly associated with reductions in gendered harassment as reported at the individual student level? (c) Which school environment variables are most highly associated with reductions in gendered harassment?

Method

Participants

The present study used baseline data from a large-scale, randomized, controlled trial of a social-emotional learning program (Espelage, Low, Polanin, & Brown, 2013, 2014). Participating middle schools had to be willing to be assigned to either an intervention or control condition. Twenty-four schools from Illinois and 12 schools from Kansas participated in the project. Seven hundred thirty-two teachers/staff in Illinois and 715 teachers/staff from Kansas completed the survey. One school in Illinois provided only two teacher/staff surveys; all other schools had at least 10 teachers participate in the survey (Range = 2–101; M = 39.69; SD = 24.24). Schools were eligible for the school-level stipend if 80% of their teachers and staff completed the survey; all but three schools reached this goal. Respondents included 66% teachers, 10% support staff, 9% paraprofessionals, 4% administrators, 3% counselors or psychologists, 2% custodian staff, and 1% cafeteria staff. The staff identified as White (75%), Black (10%), and Hispanic (8%). 78% of the sample identified as female, and the average age of the teachers and staff was 42.5 years old.

A total of 3,616 6th grade students in Illinois and Kansas participated (see Table 1). The students ranged in age from 11 to 13 years old, and most were 11 years old (Illinois = 75.8%, KS = 78.4%). A slight majority of students were male (Illinois = 51.2%, KS = 52.9%). In Illinois, Blacks (33.5%) and Latino/as (33.1%) constituted the majority of students surveyed. Most students in Kansas schools were Latino/a (35.2%) or White (30.4%). Overall, 73% of students were eligible for free/reduced lunch.

Data Collection

A waiver of active parental consent and an active consent protocol were both approved by the university institutional review board, and districts could employ either method; 86% of students participated in schools using a waiver of active consent and 63% in schools using active consent. Students were then asked to consent to participate in the study through an assent procedure. Six trained research assistants, the primary researcher, and a faculty member collected the data. The research assistants informed students about the general nature of the investigation and then gave survey packets to students and read the survey aloud. Teachers and staff were sent an e-mail with a link to the online School Environment Survey.

Teacher/Staff School Environment Survey

Data were collected from school administration, teachers, and staff using the School Environment Survey (Espelage et al., 2014 for instrument development information). Five of the eight scales were used in the present study. Demographic information related to staff members’ gender, race/ethnicity, age, position in the school, and length of employment at the school is included in the survey.

Student Intervention

Teachers and staff are asked, “How likely is it that STUDENTS at your school could be counted on to help out in the following situations?” The five items include, for example: (a) A student is making fun of and teasing another student who is obviously weaker; (b) A student is spreading rumors or lies about another student behind their back. Response options are 1 = very unlikely, 2 = unlikely, 3 = likely, and 4 = very likely. A Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of .84 was calculated for this sample of teachers and staff.

Staff Intervention

Teachers and staff are asked, “How likely is it that STAFF at your school could be counted on to help out in the following situations?” The five items from the student intervention (above)

Table 1

Participant and School Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Illinois</th>
<th>Kansas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of students</td>
<td>2,012</td>
<td>1,604</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of schools</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>75.8</td>
<td>78.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>52.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>47.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biracial</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>30.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher and staff, n</td>
<td>732</td>
<td>715</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average n per school</td>
<td>30.08</td>
<td>59.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median n per school</td>
<td>27.50</td>
<td>58.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
are presented. Response options are the same as above. Cronbach’s alpha = .91.

**School Commitment to Bully Prevention**

Teachers and staff are asked, “How much is your school doing in each of the following areas?” Examples of the eight items include: (a) Demonstrating administrator commitment and leadership to address bullies, bullied, and bystanders; (b) Implementing policies and programs to prevent bullying; (c) Supporting an active stakeholder group to address bullying and guiding implementation of bullying prevention activities. Response options include 1 = not at all, 2 = a little bit, 3 = a fair amount, and 4 = a lot. Cronbach’s alpha = .94.

**Positive Teacher–Staff–Student Interactions**

Teachers and staff are asked how much they agree with seven statements, including the following: (a) Teachers and staff in this school are willing to help students out; (b) Teachers and staff in this school can be trusted. Response options include 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree. Cronbach’s alpha = .88.

**Gender Equity or Intolerance of Sexual Harassment**

Teachers and staff are asked how much they agree with five statements, including the following: (a) Boys and girls are treated equally in school; (b) Boys understand that it is not okay to make sexual comments to girls at school; (c) Sexual harassment is not tolerated at school. Response options include 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree. Respondents were also allowed to respond I don’t know, and these data were converted to missing values. Cronbach’s alpha = .79.

**Student Measures**

Students completed a survey regarding their involvement in homophobic name-calling and sexual harassment. Self-reports of sex, grade, and race were also collected.

**Homophobic Name-Calling Perpetration and Victimization**

The 10-item Homophobic Content Agent Target Scale (Poteat & Espelage, 2007) assesses two separate outcome measures: homophobic teasing perpetration and victimization. Students were asked how often they directed homophobic epithets at others (perpetration) or were targets of this language (victimization) during the previous 30 days. For the five-item perpetration scale, students were asked “how many times in the last 30 days did YOU say [homo, gay, lesbo, fag, or dyke] to” various types of people, including friends and someone they thought was gay. Response options were 1 = never, 2 = 1 or 2 times, 3 = 3 or 4 times, 4 = 5 or 6 times, and 5 = 7 or more times. The five-item victimization scale consisted of the same items and response options, except asked how often others have called the respondent these names. Construct validity of this scale has been published previously (Poteat & Espelage, 2007). Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was .80 for perpetration and .81 for victimization.

**Sexual Harassment/Violence Perpetration and Victimization**

A modified version of the American Association of University Women (AAUW) Sexual Harassment Survey was used to assess two separate outcome measures: sexual harassment perpetration and victimization (Espelage, Basile, & Hamburger, 2012). Each scale (perpetration, victimization) included 10 items measuring unwanted verbal sexual violence, groping, and forced sexual contact. Response options were 1 = never, 2 = 1 to 3 times, 3 = 4 to 9 times, and 4 = 10 or more times. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was .80 for perpetration and .81 for victimization.

**Analysis**

**Missing data analysis.** A multiple imputation procedure was used to address the issue of missing student data for the current sample (Little & Rubin, 1987). The percentage of missing data was consistent across the four outcome variables at wave 2 (Homophobic Perpetration = 16, Homophobic Victimization = 13, Sexual Harassment Perpetration and Victimization both = .14). Ten imputed datasets were computed using NORM version 2.02 (Schafer, 2002), and following the advice of Enders (2010), we included auxiliary variables in the imputation model as well.

**Hierarchical linear modeling.** Multilevel modeling was used in this study because of the hierarchical nature of schools and the importance of having an aggregate variable for the school environment at the level 2 predicting student reports. The multilevel or hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) approach is a departure from the traditional ordinary least squares regression (OLS) in that OLS assumes that participants within a school are independent of each other in regards to the outcome variables. Because of the inherent relationship between students within a school environment, this assumption of independence is not tenable (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002; Snijders & Bosker, 2012). In other words, the assumptions of uncorrelated errors and homoscedasticity that are held to be true in OLS are not plausible in the multilevel case, as error variance is likely to shift based on the group that students belong to. Additionally, multilevel modeling increases the precision of the model building process by accounting for more components more exactly, because of the procedure’s ability to model random intercepts and slopes.

The model building process was conducted using SPSS 22.0, and began with the estimation of an unconditional or null model with no school level variables in order to ascertain an estimation of the intraclass correlation coefficient (Heck, Thomas, & Tabata, 2010; Snijders & Bosker, 2012). The next step was to fit the model with level-1, that is, individual- or student-level variables. The coefficients resulting from this analysis can be interpreted similarly to traditional regression coefficients when the outcome variables are standardized, as was done in this case (Heck et al., 2010). Statistically significant random intercepts were found, indicating the utility of accounting for variation between schools in the model. The level-1 model is as follows:

\[ Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{ij} \times \text{Female} + \beta_{2j} \times \text{White} + \beta_{3j} \times \text{Hispanic} + \beta_{4j} \times \text{Asian} + \beta_{5j} \times \text{Biracial} + r_{ij} \]

where \( Y_{ij} \) represents each of the four outcomes (homophobic name calling perpetration, homophobic name calling victimization, sexual harassment perpetration, and sexual harassment victimization).
\[ \beta_{ij} = \gamma_{0j} + \gamma_{ij} \times \text{Student intervention} + \gamma_{02} \times \text{Staff intervention} \\
+ \gamma_{1j} \times \text{School commitment to bully prevention} \\
+ \gamma_{2j} \times \text{Positive teacher/staff/student interactions} + \gamma_{05} \times \text{Gender equity/Intolerance of sexual harassment} + u_{ij} \]

where \( \beta_{0j} \) represents each school’s intercept, and is modeled in detail through the aforementioned level-1 model. \( \gamma_{00} \) represents the grand mean of the outcomes over all of the schools, and remaining variables each model the relationship between the school-level school environment variable and the school’s intercept. To evaluate the model and its variables, traditional statistical significance testing was conducted; additionally, as mentioned, standardized regression coefficients were calculated to allow for more viable coefficient comparison across models (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

**Results**

**Frequency of Gendered Harassment**

In the schools sampled here, 33.7% of students reported calling fellow students homophobic epithets, whereas 31.3% of students reported being the victim of homophobic name-calling. Additionally, 7.6% of the participants reported being perpetrators of at least one incident of sexual harassment, and 14.8% reported being victims of at least one type of sexual harassment.

School-Level Associations Between Teacher/Staff Perceptions and Student Self-Report

The teacher/staff factors were each aggregated to the school level, and we estimated the intercorrelations between these variables as well as the outcome variables (see Table 2). Both student and staff intervention were not significantly associated with less homophobic name-calling or sexual harassment, which did not support our hypotheses. As hypothesized, school commitment to bully prevention was significantly correlated with less homophobic name-calling perpetration, sexual harassment perpetration, and sexual harassment victimization \((rs = -.49, -.54, -.39)\). However, school commitment was not associated with less homophobic name-calling victimization, which did not support our hypothesis. As hypothesized, positive interactions between teachers, staff, and students were significantly correlated with less homophobic name-calling perpetration and victimization and sexual harassment perpetration \((rs = -.52, -.36, -.40)\), but were not significantly associated with less sexual harassment victimization. Support was also found for our hypotheses that gender equity or intolerance of sexual harassment at the school level would be significantly associated with less homophobic name-calling perpetration, homophobic name-calling victimization, and sexual harassment perpetration \((rs = -.64, -.53, -.55)\). However, sexual harassment victimization was not significantly correlated with gender equity or intolerance of sexual harassment, which did not support our hypothesis.

**Hierarchical Linear Modeling**

The intraclass correlations (ICCs) were calculated through the creation of an unconditional or null model. The null model excludes all predictors, allowing for an estimation of the amount of variation occurring between schools. The ICCs for each of the four outcomes were as follows: 1.69% for homophobic name-calling perpetration, .96% for homophobic name-calling victimization, .18% for sexual violence perpetration, and 1.33% for sexual violence victimization. These ICCs indicate the extent to which variation in outcomes is attributable to school-level rather than individual-level variables. Although these percentages were relatively low, because they are above zero, they indicate that there is some difference between outcomes according to which school a student attends. Additionally, the nested nature of these data indi-

**Table 2**

**School-Level Correlation Matrix \((n = 36)\)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Homophobic name-calling perpetration</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Homophobic name-calling victimization</td>
<td>.70**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Sexual harassment perpetration</td>
<td>.66**</td>
<td>.54**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Sexual harassment victimization</td>
<td>.43**</td>
<td>.65**</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Staff intervention</td>
<td>-.30</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>-.33</td>
<td>-.32</td>
<td>-.003</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. School commitment to bully prevention</td>
<td>-.49**</td>
<td>-.26</td>
<td>-.54**</td>
<td>-.39**</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.57**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Positive teacher/staff/student interactions</td>
<td>-.52**</td>
<td>-.36</td>
<td>-.40**</td>
<td>-.33</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td>.55**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Gender equity or intolerance of sexual harassment</td>
<td>-.64**</td>
<td>-.53**</td>
<td>-.55**</td>
<td>-.28</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.41**</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td>.59**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\* \( p < .05 \). \** \( p < .01 \).
cates that the data are multilevel in structure and should be analyzed as such (Snijders & Bosker, 2012), regardless of the extent to which outcomes vary between schools. Therefore, level-1 and level-2 variables were included in the model, and the intercept was allowed to vary randomly from school to school (see Table 3). However, random slopes were not necessary, as the variation between schools was not significant enough to warrant this approach.

**Homophobic Name-Calling Perpetration**

Teacher perceptions of gender equity or intolerance of sexual harassment at the school level were significantly related to lower levels of student self-reported homophobic name-calling perpetration (\(B = -0.40, SE = .11, p < .001\)). Male students at the individual level were significantly associated with higher reported levels of homophobic name-calling perpetration (\(B = 0.18, SE = .03, p < .001\)). Race at the individual level was significantly correlated with homophobic name-calling perpetration when the race variable was coded with Black students as the reference group. Compared with Black students, White students in this model were less likely to report homophobic name-calling perpetration (\(B = -0.10, SE = .05, p = .04\)).

**Sexual Harassment Victimization**

The results of the sexual harassment victimization model indicated disparate findings in relation to the other three models. None of the school environment variables were significantly associated with sexual harassment victimization. Hispanic students in this model were less likely to report homophobic name-calling victimization as compared with the Black students (\(B = -0.10, SE = .05, p = .04\)).

**Discussion**

This study adds to the existing literature on gendered harassment and school climate with its use of multititem, comprehensive measures of school environment from the teacher and staff perspective, as well as the use of multilevel modeling. The students sampled here reported experiencing gendered harassment, which is consistent with previous findings (AAUW Educational Foundation, 1993, 2001, AAUW, 2011). The percentages of both perpetration and victimization indicate that students are certainly experiencing homophobic and sexual harassment; it is probable that students are also bystanders in at least some of these events. Therefore, the process of learning through observation and imitation could well be active in many of these schools.

Results of this study indicate that teacher perceptions of school environment and student reports of gendered harassment are correlated among a middle school–age sample. Specifically, in schools where teachers perceived greater administrative support for bullying prevention, students reported less homophobic name-calling perpetration and sexual harassment perpetration and victimization. Additionally, fewer instances of student-reported homophobic name-calling perpetration and victimization and sexual harassment perpetration were all associated with increased positivity in interactions between teachers, staff, and students, as well as higher levels of gender equity or intolerance of sexual harass-

### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Multilevel Model Results</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variable</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual-level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biracial</td>
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<tr>
<td>School-level</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student intervention</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff intervention</td>
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<tr>
<td>School commitment to bully prevention</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive teacher/staff/student interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender equity or intolerance of sexual harassment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. School-level n = 36 (df = 28); student-level n = 3,616. Black is the reference group for race variables. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
ment as reported by staff and teachers. These findings are consistent with previous research regarding the correlates between school climate and bullying (Espelage et al., 2014; Glew et al., 2005; Goldweber et al., 2013; Harel-Fisch et al., 2011). When the school environment variables were considered in the multilevel, multivariate model, gender equity or intolerance of sexual harassment had significant multilevel associations with lower student reports of homophobic name-calling perpetration and victimization and of decreased sexual harassment perpetration. The gender equity or intolerance of sexual harassment scale included teacher/staff perceptions of the prevalence of sexual harassment in their school, how equally boys and girls are treated, and how much both boys and girls know that sexual harassment is not acceptable or tolerated at school. These results indicate that in schools where teachers believe there is less tolerance for sexual harassment, there are lower levels of gendered harassment. This finding is not surprising, but it is worthwhile to highlight the impact that school environment can have on decreasing sexual harassment and homophobic name-calling. The recent “Dear Colleague” letters on harassment and bullying published by The Office of Civil Rights (OCR) in the U.S. Department of Education noted the legal obligations of schools to protect their students from gendered harassment under Title IX (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2010). This protection extends to the prevention of gendered harassment; thus, given the results presented here, schools would be wise to make their policies regarding gendering harassment clear to their students, and to encourage equality between their students regardless of gender. Additionally, staff and teachers must be aware of their legal obligation to prevent gendered harassment and intervene when it occurs.

Teacher and staff perceptions of higher commitment to bullying prevention were also significantly associated with lower levels of student self-reported sexual harassment perpetration. This scale included adult perceptions of school-wide commitment to address bullying, including developing policies and preventative programming, implementation of those programs, and ongoing supervision and training for staff to help prevent bullying. This finding is consistent with a meta-analysis of bully prevention programs (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011), which found a number of specific aspects of programming as significantly associated with reduction in bullying perpetration. These aspects included disciplinary methods, playground supervision, classroom management and rules, teacher training, and implementing a whole school antibullying policy (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Given the associations between sexual harassment perpetration and bullying among early adolescents, it makes sense that bullying prevention efforts would also help to lower rates of sexual harassment in schools (Espelage et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2013). Thus, to prevent sexual harassment perpetration, it is important for schools to create and implement a comprehensive prevention approach. This programming should include the voices of active stakeholders, including teachers staff, administrators, and parents, in promoting positive youth development. Additionally, implementation of this prevention programming should be continuous and include ongoing teacher/staff training and supervision.

However, results indicated that positive teacher–student relationships were not associated with decreased gendered harassment in the full model. This finding is in keeping with a recent study of the correlates of the same teacher–student relationship scale at the school-level and bullying at the individual level; the authors found that student reports of aggression were not associated with positive teacher–student relationships when school commitment to bullying prevention was accounted for (Espelage et al., 2014). These findings contradict earlier studies, which did find an association between decreased peer aggression and teacher-student relationships (Glew et al., 2005; Goldweber et al., 2013). However, these earlier studies did not assess the broader scale of school commitment to bullying prevention. Given the results here, it seems that to decrease gendered harassment, it is important for schools to focus on implementing bully prevention programming and to create an intolerance for sexual harassment in addition to promoting strong relationships between teachers and students.

Limitations

Although this study contributes to the literature on school level correlates of gendered harassment, there are some limitations. The data are cross-sectional; therefore, causality cannot be determined from these results. Longitudinal research would be necessary to infer directionality. Additionally, as the data are self-report, it is possible that certain aspects of gendered harassment were under- or overreported. Another limitation to the analysis is the relatively low ICCs. Values for ICCs in educational research reportedly often range from between 10% to 25%, indicating that the ICCs in the current study are lower than what is common (Snijders & Bosker, 2012). These relatively low ICCs indicate that interpretations of the differences between schools should be made with some caution. Finally, there may be some limitation to the generalizability of this sample, as only public schools in the Midwest were included.

Research Implications

Surprisingly, the model for sexual harassment victimization included no significant correlates at the individual or school level. However, when bivariate correlations were considered, school commitment to bullying prevention was significantly associated with less sexual harassment victimization. These findings warrant further investigation, as it is unclear which aspects of school environment are connected with decreased victimization. Other studies have found that teachers find it especially difficult to intervene in instances of gendered harassment (Meyer, 2008), and it is likely that this difficulty could explain an aspect of these results. Less understandable is the lack of correlation between decreased sexual harassment victimization at the individual level and increased gender equity or intolerance of sexual harassment at the school level. It is possible that because sexual harassment victimization is often underreported, this study was not able to fully capture the relationship between school environment and this behavior (AAUW, 2011).

In the current study, positive teacher–student relationships were not associated with decreased gendered harassment. However, because past research has found these relationships to be associated with decreased peer aggression, more research needs to be done in this area, as it is possible that positive relationships are a necessary but not sufficient aspect of prevention. Further assessment of various aspects of teacher-student relationships could be done to better parse out which dynamics and types of relationships are most preventative of gendered harassment.
Clinical and Policy Implications

In terms of individual-level correlates with gendered harassment, males reported higher levels of both homophobic name-calling perpetration and victimization. This finding is in keeping with previous research, which suggests that for males homophobic name-calling can be an aspect of bantering between friends and peer groups (Birkett & Espelage, 2014; Poteat & Espelage, 2007). Although this name-calling may be normative and considered harmless by participants, researchers have found that for males, being the target of homophobic name-calling significantly predicted increased levels of anxiety, depression, personal distress, and lower sense of school belonging (Poteat & Espelage, 2007). These negative mental health consequences indicate that it is necessary for schools to commit to prevention of homophobic epithets in bantering situations as well as in more obviously victimizing situations where a weaker or less powerful student is subjected to homophobic epithets. Additionally, it could be useful for schools to specifically focus on males in their prevention efforts regarding homophobic name-calling, as this group is more apt to be involved in these behaviors.

In sum, these findings indicate that school psychologists and school administrators alike should regard improvements in school environment as an avenue to reducing gendered harassment. Too often, prevention efforts narrowly target student’s conceptual understanding of bullying rather than the broader school climate. Given the psychological and social repercussions of these behaviors, it is important to identify preventative factors that can reduce the occurrence of gendered harassment in schools; one such protective factor is school climate (Espelage et al., 2000; Goldwebert et al., 2013; Wienke Totura et al., 2009). Given our findings, it is important that schools work to increase gender equity and intolerance of sexual harassment. This could be done by directly addressing issues of gender equity in the classroom as well as other locations throughout the school. Although it can be difficult for teachers to intervene when they witness instances of sexual harassment and homophobia, it is important that staff be clear that gendered harassment is not tolerated or acceptable behavior on school grounds (Meyer, 2008). School leaders need to make a commitment to prevention of bullying and gendered harassment by including stakeholders in planning and implementation efforts. All staff and teachers throughout the school need to demonstrate their investment in engendering gender equity, enforcing rules regarding sexual harassment, and implementing bullying prevention strategies.

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SCHOOL CLIMATE AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT


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