
Gaslit! An Examination of Bullying on Doctoral Students

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Abstract

Bullying is the intentional and repeated infliction of duress upon another person. It may be psychological or physical, subtle or surreptitious; yet, regardless of form, the bully seeks to marginalize and oppress another in order to secure and/or enhance his or her own status (McDonald, 2011). Although bullying is often associated with children or adolescents, it is not restricted to youth and many adults experience bullying, incivility, and violence from other adults, reinforcing a culture of humiliation and antagonization. Like any form of violence, bullying affects the individual and the systems in which that individual operates. Whether overt or covert, bullying behavior is frequently embedded within the cultural context of organizations and often occurs in places of rigid structure, strict class division, and inflexible hierarchies, including some workplaces and places of higher education (Misawa & Roland, 2015). This study explores the presence of adult-on-adult bullying within the social environment of academia, as experienced by doctoral students.

Keywords: Adult-on-adult bullying, academia, higher education, students, marginalization

Twenty-five percent of all Americans reported experiencing some form of bullying as an adult (Namie, Christiansen, & Phillips, 2014; Randall, 2005). Among children and adolescents, bullying behavior is often rooted in the discrimination of someone seen as culturally or physically different or socially less (Olweus, 1993). Adults who bully other adults do not, generally, target those seen as *less*; rather, Ireland and Power (2004) found that adults who bully, tend to target those perceived as *threats*. Students who are capable, independent, and liked can become targets of whisper campaigns and repeated, intentional behaviors, which exist to undermine success (Randall, 2005).

Pierce, Hodge, Taylor, and Button (2017) defined the targeted undermining and cutting down of successful achievers as *Tall Poppy Syndrome*, sometimes found in highly competitive settings, where some persons are purposefully oppressed and marginalized by others. Such behavior is often embedded within the cultural context of institutions (Goffman, 1961; Misawa & Rowland, 2015; Rigby & Smith, 2011), with bullying seen as a by-product of top-down

hierarchies that encourage a culture of incivility, manifested through covert and overt forms of aggression of “interpersonal mistreatment and harassment” (Piotrowski & King, 2016, p. 299). Misawa and Roland (2015) explained bullying behavior, including marginalization (through exclusion, which creates isolation) and gas-lighting (through manipulation, which creates doubt) as particularly common in environments involving rigid hierarchies. Piotrowski and King (2016) noted that bullying behaviors, especially in academic arenas, may be supported by the hierarchy and class division common to academic settings where those who challenge power bases often incur marginalization and targeting (Flipper, 1878; Goffman, 1961; Rigby & Smith, 2011). Hierarchical expectations reinforce a culture of humiliation and antagonization, with abusive and repressive actions sometimes viewed as common to the doctoral experience, leaving those experiencing it with limited forms of redress, either personally or professionally (Hallberg & Strandmark, 2006). Although Bell-Ellison and Dedrick (2008) outlined the importance of supportive environments for doctoral students, especially regarding “feelings of acceptance and confirmation – *Believe in me*” (p. 566), collectivist behavior found in universities and colleges may contribute to mobbing and other bullying behaviors (Björkqvist, Österman, & Hjelt-Bäck, 1994; Vance, 2010).

Like any form of violence, bullying affects the individual and the systems in which the individual operates. The trickle-down effect from the trauma of bullying impacts not only the individual, but also those intimately connected to that individual. Hallberg and Strandmark (2006) found those who are aware of personal marginalization are often hypersensitive to the bullying of others and experience increased stress. Additionally, a report by Thomas (2005) found that almost half of all university employees had witnessed others being bullied by supervisors.

As noted by Hallberg and Strandmark (2006), the tightly-knit environment of higher education creates a great deal of social isolation for doctoral students being bullied. There is fear of additional rejection if one comes forward, and self-doubt regarding one’s perception of events. There is frustration regarding the lack of support from sanctioning bodies who dismiss incidents of adult bullying as mere personality conflicts. Students who complain about untoward treatment are labeled as weak or troublesome (Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007). Within the collegiate caste system, bullied students are often deemed untouchable, separated from others through surreptitious means, such as ostracism, gas-lighting, and gossip. These subtle tools are effective and covert, difficult to pinpoint as actions of targeting behavior, and often enduring as “a sting that burns long and fiercely” (Flipper, 1878, p.136), making systems of redress costly. Access to safety is limited for students dependent upon the university system for - contemporary and future - academic, financial, and professional support (Holiday & Rosen, 2010; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Misawa & Rowland, 2015).

Context for Practice

A member of a socially dominant culture may seek to maintain power at the cost of segregating and stigmatizing others (Lee, 2010). Bandura (1977) explained social learning as observational in nature, passed from one to another. Persons learn how to construct meaning and behaviors by observing the behaviors of others, within social context. Yet, Bourdieu (1987) developed a deeper understanding of this social learning, with collective and replicated meaning-making as a form of social control, embodied and embedded, within the *habitus* of the *milieu*.

Nelson and Lambert (2001) found “ivory tower bullying” (p. 84) an embedded behavior within university settings and the stratified social structure of tenure. Unchecked power, pressure to publish or perish, competition for scarce resources, limited accountability, and highly competitive research agendas contribute to an uncivil and hostile environment in which junior persons, whether faculty or students, are dependent upon those who have power to extend support and legitimize their presence within the social system.

University students who are bullied often learn to keep a low profile; people, who are neither bullies nor bullied, learn not to interfere, as association with either group is undesirable (Nelson & Lambert, 2001; Piotrowski & King, 2016). Individuals create and construct the meaning of the world, and the roles people play, through observing and experiencing the pleasures and punishments offered by the society in which they live and operate. The lack of preventive response to those who marginalize others creates an environment of implicit approval and “unconsciously acceptable” behavior (Reisberg-Ross, 2010, para. 7).

The subtle nature of most adult-on-adult bullying makes it difficult to define and detect, with indirect forms of adult-on-adult bullying maintaining oppression of a targeted person (Dentith, Wright, & Coryell 2015). Less-obvious tactics may go unaddressed by faculty and administrative personnel unable and/or unwilling to acknowledge the existence of such behavior. The doctoral student who is bullied may fear losing status in the eyes of the very people he or she is trying to please. They may not seek help for fear of being labeled as a trouble maker who has misunderstood or misread a situation. Witnesses may be unwilling to bring up issues surrounding oppression and privilege, and university leaders may resist any type of confrontation for fear of damage to the reputation of both individual and institution. Such lack of intervention only feeds into the cultural *habitus* and makes the lack of response normative (Bourdieu, 1987). While the pressure to perform may be understood as essential to success in the arena of higher education, the highly pressurized system cultivates an environment conducive to bullying (Dentith et al., 2015; Levecque, Anseel, De Beuckelaer, Van der Heyden, & Gisle, 2017; Nelson & Lambert, 2001). High levels of stress experienced by bullied students may be associated with avoidance, anxiety, and abandonment of goals (Sirois, 2004). One’s individual grit fails to compensate a student valued, merely, as grist.

Much of the literature on bullying behavior focuses on incidents among children and teens (McDonald, 2011; Misawa & Roland, 2015; Nelson & Lambert, 2001). The examination of bullying in higher education has focused on student-on-student bullying, neglecting what Dentith, Wright, and Coryell (2015) emphasized as a bullying-embedded culture, commonly occurring “between supervisors and subordinates” (p. 29). This study explores the presence of bullying experiences among doctoral students.

Methodology

To examine perceptions of bullying behavior, as experienced by doctoral students, this exploratory study utilized a 10-point survey, designed by the authors. The on-line survey was open for a period of 72 hours and distributed through purposive snowball sampling, via social media (Facebook and Twitter). Early local exploration of this topic revealed intense student concerns regarding fear of discovery. In acknowledgement of these concerns, this study does not include demographic information beyond whether the participant was, or had been, a doctoral student and what type of school the participant attended. Prior to the study, approval for research using human subjects was secured through the Institutional Review Board.

The Survey Instrument

This study utilized a survey, developed to discover more about the experience of bullying behavior among doctoral students. The survey included nine items, analyzed through quantitative analysis, including: five yes/no/not applicable questions regarding experienced or witnessed bullying behavior and four multiple-choice Likert-scale questions regarding bullying experiences. Participants were also invited to include any comments regarding bullying experiences in an additional open response text box. Responses were analyzed through a constant comparative analysis, focusing on common themes. The survey instrument was informed by earlier conversations with doctoral students, many of whom had shared bullying experiences during doctoral studies. Care was given to differentiate conflict from bullying, with conflict defined as discord between persons of similar power and bullying defined as repeated, insulting, or marginalizing behavior by a person with greater power than the doctoral student.

Research Questions

This exploratory study sought to answer the following questions regarding bullying behavior, as experienced by doctoral students: 1.) How common is bullying behavior in the academic setting, as experienced by doctoral students? 2.) What is the common role of the perpetrator, in relation to the doctoral student? 3.) Do doctoral students perceive that bullying behavior effects relationships with others? 4.) Do doctoral students perceive that bullying behavior effects personal/professional progress?

Variables, Analysis, and Participants

The variables considered were bullying experiences, role of the bullying perpetrator, interpersonal relationships, academic progress, and professional progress. Quantitative analysis was completed with SAS 9.4 software; qualitative analysis was completed with ATLAS.ti v.8.0.42 software. A total of 48 participants were recruited using purposive snowball sampling, via online social media platforms. Sampling recruitment was open for a period of 72 hours and collected through an encrypted online survey tool. All participants were current or former doctoral students. As previously mentioned, to allay reported fears of participants, limited demographic information was collected for this exploratory study.

Findings

Results of the study were gathered following the close of the survey. Among the participants ($N = 48$), 70.83% ($n = 34$) of the sample reported experiencing bullying behavior, at least *occasionally*. This finding indicates that bullying behavior is a common experience among the participants. Such behavior was reported as *severe* 20.83% ($n = 10$) of the time, with 18.75% ($n = 9$) reporting having experienced bullying behavior from someone with more formal power *frequently* and 2.08% ($n = 1$) reporting bullying behavior as *always* experienced. Additionally, the majority, of participants reported having witnessed the bullying of other doctoral students, 72.34% ($n = 34$), whether they had experienced bullying behavior from others themselves. Please, see Figure 1 and Figure 2 below, for a visual summary of findings.

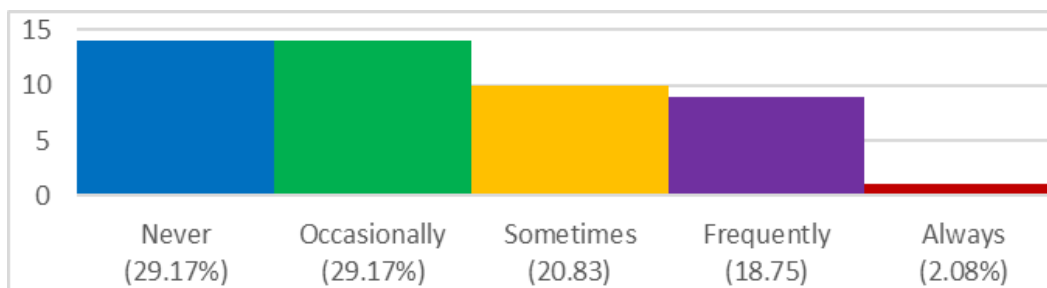


Figure 1: During my time as a doctoral student, I have experienced bullying, uncivil, or marginalizing behavior from persons with more formal power than myself. ($N = 48$)

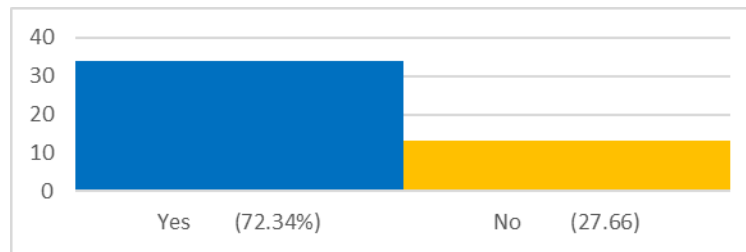


Figure 2: I have witnessed other doctoral students being bullied, treated uncivilly, or marginalized by others with greater power. (N=48)

To

determine the perception of origin of bullying behavior experienced by doctoral students, a question asked the participants to identify the role of the bully (administration, staff, tenured faculty, junior faculty, post-doc, advanced student, other, or no experience with bullying). The vast majority of participants reported bullying behavior by faculty (95.83%, $n = 46$), with 62.5% ($n = 30$) of participants reporting bullying behavior by tenured faculty. Please, see Figure 3, below, for a visual summary.

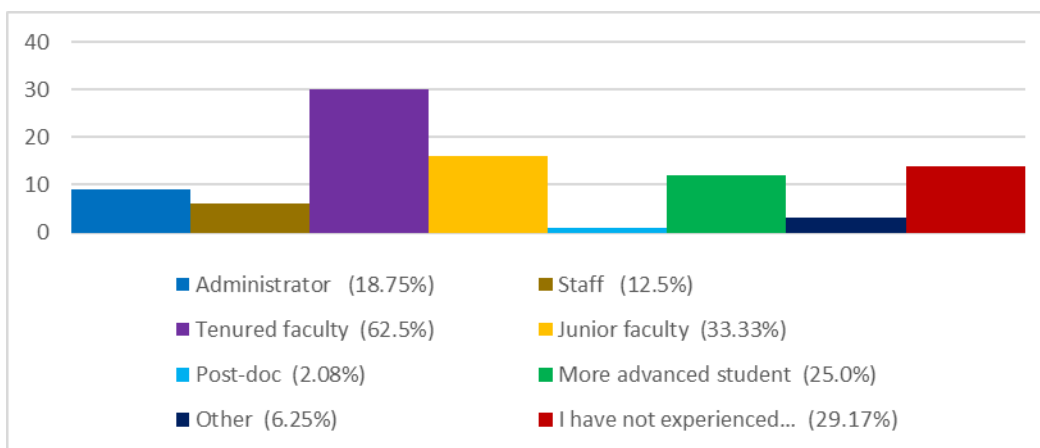


Figure 3: During my time as a doctoral student, I have experienced bullying, uncivil, or marginalizing behavior from a person in the following role. Please check all that apply. (N=48)

Previous studies regarding the effects of bullying indicate that bullying effects interpersonal relationships (Misawa & Roland, 2015; Namie et al., 2014). To determine any impact of bullying upon interpersonal relationships of doctoral students, the survey asked participants to identify perceptions of the effect of bullying upon relationships with others. Among the participants answering this question ($N = 48$), 56.25% ($n = 27$) identified that bullying behavior effected interpersonal relationships. Please, see Figure 4, below, for a summary.

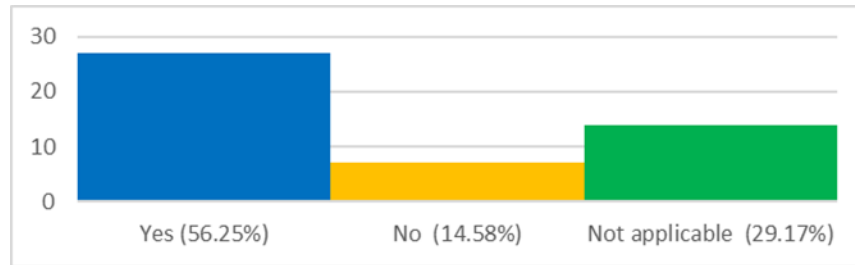


Figure 4: I believe that bullying, uncivil, or marginalizing behavior by others affected my relationships with others. (N=48)

Participants indicated similar experiences with regards to whether they perceived bullying to impact academic or professional progress, with approximately 71% ($n = 34$) of respondents indicating that they believed bullying would negatively influence progress, at least *sometime*.

Finally, we provided an open text box and invited participants to share any information regarding bullying experiences. A small number ($n = 7$; 6.865) of participants included comments; however, there were common themes among the participants, including hostile learning environment, institutionalized bullying, difference in treatment from other schools and departments; and witnessing of bullying of others. Please, see comments, below:

Respondent	Comments
4	I had horrible experiences with both senior faculty and junior faculty. I have witnessed others humiliated in the class and in meetings by faculty as well. As a doctoral student I find this issue especially disturbing. I am curious if it is just the culture (here) or if this behavior is found at other schools, as well.
5	The most heinous bullying I've experienced has come from students less advanced than me. I think it's just because the newer cohorts are significantly less competitive students than older cohorts who entered at a time when our program was more prestigious, and they feel intimidated. But even though they lack a higher status than me, their comments have been very hurtful and cruel. Other than that, I would say the bullying I've experienced has largely centered around tenured faculty making discriminatory comments based on my decision to change my last name after marriage (which was seen as anti-intellectual by them).
11	Thank you for doing this survey... Thanks again and good luck!
13	An unhealthy environment with student marginalization is structurally part of (our) doctoral program. It is institutionalized and (an) accepted way of doing by faculty and staff. I've been mocked and treated unfairly in class in front of other students. This never happened in classes that I took outside the college of social work. I was always treated with respect in outside departments.
18	I have experienced bullying and have witnessed bullying of others. It disgusts me that this behavior is found in (the department). I have not experienced any bullying behavior or anything less than total respect in other departments, whether in my own university or in other universities.
37	The bullying I experienced almost led to me not completing my proposal and I know of at least 2 others this person ran out of the program. It is shameful that faculty are not more supportive.
48	I have not been personally affected by this, but I do know that some of my peers have been.

Discussion

This exploratory study examined the presence of bullying experiences among doctoral students. Although no explicit descriptive information from this study has been shared due to concerns of discovery, it is notable that participants identified as being current, or former doctoral students, in schools of Library Science, Nursing, Social Work, and Public Health. These disciplines have adopted professional codes of ethics; however, most of the participants reported experiencing, or witnessing, conduct specifically outlined within ethical codes as being disparaging, distressing, devaluing, and disrespectful (American Library Association, 2018;

American Nurses Association, 2014; National Association of Social Workers, 2018; Public Health Leadership Society, 2002).

Ethical codes note “bullying, harassment, manipulation, threats, or violence (as) always morally unacceptable behaviors” (American Nurses Association, 2014, p. 15); yet despite admonishments to create a culture of “civility and kindness” (American Nurses Association, 2014, p. 15); to “defend and assist colleagues” who are treated unjustly (National Association of Social Workers, 2018, p. 21); to “assure all in a community have a voice” (Public Health Leadership Society, 2002, p. 8); and to “treat co-workers and other colleagues with respect, fairness, and good faith” (American Library Association, 2018, para. 9), participants reported feelings of indignity and isolation. Additionally, participants identified bullying behavior as “shameful” and endemic to departmental culture.

Hatzenbueler, Phelan, and Link (2013) examined the process of targeting individuals as a function of social control, which creates stigma to *keep people down, keep people out, and keep people away*. The repeated and intentional bullying behaviors experienced by some doctoral students separates and squanders those who are bullied by the dominant culture. Toxic learning environments influence a student’s well-being, including the roles and relationships of doctoral students, which are fundamental for a student’s academic, personal, and professional development (Bell-Ellison and Dedrick, 2008).

Doctoral students who encounter bullying may experience depression, sleep deprivation, substance use, and dropping grades (Hallberg & Strandmark 2006). Levecque, Anseel, De Bueckelaer, Van der Heyden, and Gisle (2017) noted the relationship between the reported prevalence of mental illness among doctoral students and organizational policies and procedures inherent to the *academé*. Extant literature illustrates high degrees of depression, social isolation, and suicidal ideation among doctoral students (Levecque et al., 2017, Misawa & Roland, 2015; Nelson & Lambert, 2001). High rates of attrition are a costly product of the *habitus* of doctoral programs, manifested in lost time, lost effort, lost energy, lost funding, lost research, and lost talent.

Limitations

Because of the purposive snowballed sampling frame, the participants in the study were likely to be students who have already experienced bullying as doctoral students. Essentially, students who may have experienced this type of behavior, self-selected into the study. Additionally, snowball sampling, which often reveals rich descriptive data, is often disproportionally skewed by first participants. Future studies may benefit from more targeted and representative sampling of doctoral students.

Though this study was not conducted to generalize findings to the greater population, it does strongly indicate that bullying behavior is present in doctoral programs and, at least in this

small sample, is a common experience. As this study goes forward, more rigorous methodologies will be needed to determine the magnitude and means of bullying, regarding this population. Findings from the current study indicate that future examination of bullying behavior may provide important data regarding the experience of doctoral students in higher education, particularly the correlation between bullying and failure to complete doctoral education benchmarks. Future studies might also determine if bullying factors into the large numbers of doctoral students who fail to complete programs. Additionally, studies might explore the impact of bullying behavior on the mental health of doctoral students as they cope with the stressful environment of higher education, including studies that compare and contrast the experiences of graduate students that have not reported experiencing bullying with those who report having been bullied. This could provide an interesting point of comparison, enabling a more complete picture of the manner, function, and effect of academic bullying.

Conclusion

The path from student to scholar is based upon critique and feedback. Academic freedom depends upon the free exchange of opinion without political restraints. Bullying behavior lies at the boundary between what is advisory and what is adversarial. The concept of bullying, as experienced by doctoral students, influences the academic life of these persons and creates anxiety about personal and professional progress. This is seen in the individual results of the survey, where participants reported being bullied or witnessing incidents of marginalization of others by administration, staff, tenured faculty, junior faculty, students, and others.

Experiences with advisors, administrators, and others varies widely. It is surmised that though most doctoral students experience strong critique, bullying is not a universal experience. When it does occur, bullying behavior in higher education moves beyond mere criticism. To dismiss bullying as interpersonal conflict disregards the needs of person and place, student and scholarship, and fails to consider the complex hierarchies present in academia. Bullying is, by nature, persistent, repetitive, and tenacious. It tears down individuals and erodes the integrity of the educational environments in which they practice. Piotrowski and King (2016) reminded that bullying and “incivility in academic settings can have onerous repercussions” (p. 300) for both the individual and the institution. Understanding more about the stinging phenomenon of bullying, as experienced by doctoral students, may help promote a more positive praxis within the university setting.

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