A Qualitative Investigation of Bullying of Individuals with Disabilities on a College Campus

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand how individuals with disabilities experience bullying at a large university. This research consisted of a pilot study of two participants and the main study of seven participants. Each person participated in three semi-structured interviews that lasted between 10-60 minutes. The results of the study found that each participant experienced bullying in elementary school or high school. Every participant experienced bullying in college, with five of the seven participants experiencing bullying directly related to their disabilities. Past and current experiences of bullying influenced participants' relationships with peers and interactions within the collegiate environment. Some of the participants reported that peers provided an important role in coping with bullying while attending college, and addressed a need to feel safe across different environments. The results of this study reinforced a need to understand how minorities, specifically people with disabilities, experience bullying on college campuses. Colleges need to begin to create and implement bullying prevention programs that clearly outline supports at their respective institutions. Finally, disability student support services need to collaborate to ensure students feel comfortable reporting bullying in a safe, anonymous manner that provides the victim with opportunities to cope with the aggressive events.

Keywords: Bullying, people with disabilities, college

They would talk about bullying and they would talk about how to behave really, but they did it through these really bad black and white foam board pictures that you passed around and these incredibly stupid stories that you would read in a standardized test…I knew about bullying, the term and great examples of larger boys in striped shirts pushing smaller children in the mud. That was my understanding of it because that's the cultural stereotype. So I really didn't understand it was happening to me or it was happening to my friends and I just interpreted it as people being mean which is what it was. But there's kind of another level to it and so I didn't like it, I didn't enjoy but I also didn't really understand it. (Participant in Study)

Bullying is a prevalent behavior in our school systems (U.S. Department of Education, 2015), and has been the subject of much research (Chapell et al., 2004; Chapell et al., 2006; Nansel et al., 2001). For this study, bullying is defined as occurrences between two or more individuals causing one person to be "exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions and the individual is perceived to have lower social status, or is viewed as inferior to others" (Olweus, 1993, p. 9). Over the past decade, researchers have challenged earlier definitions of bullying, described various types of bullying (e.g., physical, verbal, relational), and examined the psychological and social impacts of being the bully, victim, and bully-victim as it relates to individuals with disabilities (Nansel et al., 2001; Rose, Monda-Amaya, & Espelage, 2011). An emerging body of research is examining trends in bullying incidents that occur outside of school campuses and on the Internet (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014; Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2012). The latter form, commonly referred to as cyberbullying, involves verbal bullying through the use of computers, cell phones, tablets, and other electronic devices (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Kowalski & Limber 2013).

In light of research at the elementary and secondary levels (Rose, Espelage, & Monda-Amaya, 2009; Swearer, Wang, Maag, Siebecker, & Frerichs, 2012), there is growing interest and concern surrounding bullying of students with disabilities on college campuses. The increasing number of students with disabilities attending college (11.1% of college students have a disability), coupled with the general lack of

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research on this issue intensifies this attention (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). To better understand the prevalence and nature of bullying involving students with disabilities at college, a literature review was conducted.

Conceptual Framework for Literature Review and Analysis

The conceptual framework for this literature review was based upon Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory and Steinberg's (2007) neuro-scientific theory of peer influences on decision-making and risk-taking. Using social constructionism, Vygotsky's theory of social development was used to observe how higher psychological processes, such as social norms that evolve from college students, and how the culture of the college plays a role in the development of social skills and interactions. Through the use of communication tools, (e.g., smartphones, tablets, or computers), and identification of signs, that is, physical or observed behaviors that assist in navigating a culture (e.g., repeatedly posting an unflattering picture of a peer, Facebook groups providing information about campus activities), individuals learn how to communicate effectively with peers. As the students repeatedly observed and internalized certain behaviors that occurred in college, they begin to view said actions as cultural and social norms (Vygotsky, 1978). Tonkunaga (2010) argued through use of the lens of Vygotsky's theory that cyberspace reinforces maladaptive behaviors that are prevalent on blogs or forums. This provides the idea that common, observed behaviors on campuses are socially acceptable.

Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social development and higher processing and Steinberg's (2007) theory of understanding adolescent brain development help explain the influence of peers' words and actions on an individual's social development and decision-making in high-risk environments. Steinberg (2007) maintained that there are two major networks within the brain which influence the decision-making process: socio-emotional and cognitive-control. The socio-emotional network is stimulated when the environment triggers an impulsive social or emotional response from the individual. This network is more sensitive in the individual's teenage years (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005). As an individual matures closer to his or her mid-twenties, the cognitive-control network will more likely provide the primary response to the triggers in the environment. The researchers contend that the role of peers within the environment influences the severity of risk-related behaviors, particularly when controlling for age. The work of Vygotsky (1978) and Steinberg (2008) influenced the understanding of risk associat-

ed with various bullying behaviors, and the potential impact peers may have on social interactions. For example, an individual may learn from observations of interactions within various collegiate environments, that the only way to feel safe at college is to completely avoid places where he or she does not feel safe, or behaviors that are appropriate for different environments (e.g., social interactions in class versus at a fraternity). The individual can circumvent these hostile circumstances through the use of tools (e.g., smartphones) and signs (e.g., posts on Twitter), as defined by Vygotsky, to avoid environments where the aggressor may be present or where there may be a party. Finally, the individual will use his or her cognitive control networks to implement decision making skills to decide if it is safe to attend the activity, or cope with the event with peers.

Figure 1 provides insight to the conceptual framework. The center of this figure exhibits the communication between the individual's socioemotional network and cognitive network while interacting with people at college. These networks can be activated through peer activities, such as school clubs, social functions, and classes. Observation and interaction within these environments can assist the individual in understanding social norms of each environment. Students at college can begin to make meaning of social expectations, peer interactions, and perceived norms within the college environment as a person with a disability.

Findings from the Literature

Recent, life-threatening events have raised interest in research regarding the prevalence and occurrences of bullying on college campuses. For example, a Rutgers University student committed suicide after his roommate videotaped him with another man and posted the link on Twitter (Ashburn, 2010). Bullying in this setting frequently occurs online, as evidenced by the proliferation of blogs and websites dedicated to anonymous postings about students on various campuses (e.g., http://thedirty.com, http://campusgossip.com, http://collegeconvo.com). To more fully understand the extent of bullying on college campuses, a literature review was conducted to examine its prevalence, the forms it takes (e.g., cyberbullying), and the potential impacts collegiate bullying can have on the social, academic, and emotional development of students, including those with disabilities. The first section of the literature review analyzes research relating to bullying on U.S. college campuses; the second section focuses on cyberbullying occurring on college campuses.

Traditional Bullying

Within the past ten years, researchers have begun to investigate the prevalence of bullying at college campuses. Chapell et al. (2004) surveyed 1,025 undergraduate students at a northeastern university in the United States to determine whether the college students had observed peers bullying peers, had been victims of the bullying by peers, had witnessed teachers bullying students, had been bullied by a teacher, and had been bullied themselves. Using an adapted version of *Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire*, the researchers discovered that of the 1,025 students who responded, 18.5% reported being a victim of bullying by a peer more than once, 5% of the participants stated they occasionally experienced being the victims of bullying, and 1.1% reported that they frequently experienced bullying at college by peers. Furthermore, 29.4% of the participants observed a teacher bullying a student and 14.5% noted that they were victims of bullying by a teacher.

Chapell et al. (2006) conducted another study to examine the relationship between bullying in elementary school and high school, and the participation of bullying on a college campus. The researchers surveyed 119 undergraduate students. While bullying decreased as the participants aged, the researchers discovered that individuals who experienced bullying in elementary school were likely to experience bullying in high school. Furthermore, individuals who reported that they participated in bullying in high school were likely to participate in bullying in college.

Cyberbullying on College Campuses

Although there is a paucity of research regarding cyberbullying at two- and four-year college campuses, researchers are beginning to investigate and understand the foundation of cyberbullying in these settings. Koata, Schoohs, Benson, and Moreno (2014) interviewed 42 students from a Midwestern university who participated in six focus groups. The participants agreed that there is a difference between traditional bullying and cyberbullying on campus. However, they had a difficult time defining cyberbullying because the intent to harm is much clearer in traditional bullying. Crosslin and Golman (2014) echoed the difficulty of defining cyberbullying, noting that the definitions used at colleges are outdated, and that cyberbullying activities vary from campus to campus based on the culture of the schools. These findings corroborate previous research conducted by Brewer, Cave, Massey, Vurdelja, and Freeman (2012), who reported that18 females participated in 3 focus group sessions and had a difficult time defining cyberbullying because it varied among people, peer groups, and age groups. Seventeen of the participants agreed that cyberbullying was perceived as a new term and therefore, it was difficult to arrive at a clear definition that accounted for factors such as age and race. Research by Koata et al. (2014), however, indicated that there were distinctions between high school cyberbullying and college cyberbullying. College students involved in this study noted that cyberbullying at college involved hacking social media profiles, discussing personal information that may damage another's reputation on social media, and public shaming.

Gauging the prevalence of cyberbullying on college campuses remains challenging. In a 2011 survey of 170 U.S. undergraduate students, ages 18-24, 54% of the participants knew a peer who was cyberbullied by another individual at college, and 11% of the participants reported being the victim of cyberbullying (Walker, Sockman, & Koehn, 2011). Selkie, Kota, Chan, and Moreno (2015) surveyed 265 female college students and found that 27.2% reported participating in cyberbullying. The variation in results of these two studies reflect the differences in survey instruments, and the range of ways in which researchers and participants defined cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying of individuals with disabilities. Only one study addressed cyberbullying of individuals with disabilities on a college campus. Kowalski, Morgan, Drake-Lavelle, and Allison (2016) surveyed 205 participants about bullying and cyberbullying on a college campus. Approximately 40% of the participants were students with disabilities; 60% of respondents were students with no known disability. Students with disabilities reported being the victim of bullying twice as often as students without disabilities (28% v. 12.2%). They were also more likely to be the victim of cyberbullying when compared to peers without disabilities. Individuals with visible disabilities were more likely to be involved in cyberbullying as both the bully and victim. Individuals with disabilities also reported higher rates of depression, lower self-esteem, greater self-reports of ostracism, and physical responses to bullying and cyberbullying.

Causes and effects of participation in cyberbullying behaviors. In studying the prevalence of cyberbullying on college campuses, some researchers are also attempting to understand why individuals engage in such behavior. Crosslin and Golman (2014) conducted six focus groups consisting of 54 total participants to understand the occurrence of cyberbullying on a Southern university campus. All of the participants disclosed that they had experienced cyberbullying. When questioned about the causes of cyberbullying behaviors, the participants said it was a way to "sabotage" another person's reputation (p.

16). This sentiment of causing harm to another's reputation was echoed in Koata et al.'s (2014) study in which one participant commented that cyberbullying gives the bully a different sense of power to ruin the bullied person's reputation at the college. Juvonen and Gross (2008) noted that the anonymity of cyberbullying potentially creates an added layer of stress in the bullying event.

Recent research has examined some of the underlying social and emotional roots and consequences of cyberbullying behaviors. Brewer et al. (2012) conducted focus groups with 18 females at a Pacific Northwest university. Eleven of the 18 participants admitted to having lower self-esteem after the cyberbullying incident. Five of the participants who experienced cyberbullying tried to "roll with the punches" (p. 46), but admitted to feeling alone. In a survey of undergraduate students, individuals who disclosed they cyberbullied others had higher rates of depression, anxiety, paranoia, depression-like symptoms, and emotional sensitivity. Additionally, they were more likely to respond with anger, revenge, and/or jealousy toward peers. Finally, the cyberbullies were more likely to participate in illegal behaviors as means to cope when compared to their peers who did not engage in cyberbullying behaviors (Schenk, Fremouw, & Keelan, 2013).

Research by Selkie et al. (2015) yielded similar results on depression-like symptoms observed in female college students who participated in cyberbullying. Selkie et al. conducted a study on 265 college females from 32 Midwest and Western universities in the United States. The participants were given cyberbullying questions, the Patient Health Questionnaire, and the Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test. While there was no specific cyberbullying survey provided, three participants identified as cyberbullies, 45 as cyber victims, and 19 as cyberbully-victims. The three individuals who identified as cyberbullies were four times more likely to be diagnosed with depression than the participants who have not experienced cyberbullying in any way. Although there was no significant relationship between cyber victims and depression when compared to the other participants, cyber victims were more likely to have problems with alcohol.

Students who participated in research on bullying have recommended the need to address cyberbullying on college campuses, especially at the administrative level (Brewer et al., 2012; Crosslin & Golman, 2014). Undergraduates have also communicated a need to bring awareness and support for those who experienced cyberbullying (Crosslin & Golman, 2014). Students have also identified social acceptability as a barrier to combatting bullying. For example, Brewer et al. (2012) found that the majority of the participants in their study would not speak to anyone on campus about cyberbullying because the student body perceived such behavior as socially acceptable. The purpose of this study is to better understand the bullying-related experiences of individuals with disabilities and the consequences of bullying and cyberbullying at a college campus.

Methodology

Participant Selection

Participants attended a large, metropolitan university campus and were selected using purposeful sampling. An inquiry was sent through the university's Disability Support Services (DSS) listserv. The students who were interested responded to the director of DSS. After the researcher obtained the emails of interested students, a follow-up email was sent to those students inviting them to a one-on-one meeting with the researcher to review the goals of the study. After the initial meetings, nine respondents expressed interest. The first two respondents were used for the pilot study, and both participants recommended changing the wording of a question due to confusion. The remaining seven students participated in the qualitative research study; this study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

Following Seidman's (2006) recommendation of a three-interview process, each participant was interviewed three times over the course of five weeks, with each interview lasting between 15 and 60 minutes. The first interview explored each individual's history of bullying, disability diagnosis, and any previous interactions between the former and the latter. The second interview examined present experiences of bullying at college and how those experiences were influenced by previous bullying episodes. The third interview provided participants with opportunities to reflect on their previous and present experiences with bullying, with a specific focus on social media and college peers.

Data Analysis

Each interview was recorded by the researcher and transcribed. To prevent potential bias of the data obtained from interviews, targeted steps to ensure trustworthiness were implemented throughout the study. The researcher triangulated data obtained from the following methods: allowing participants to review and correct interviews through member checks, conducting interrater reliability interviews, and practicing reflexivity after each interview to be cognizant of the interpretation as a person with a dis-

ability. Using Vygotsky's (1978) social processing theory, patterns across the various forms of data were observed for initial coding, and a second time for analytical coding to explain the participants' experiences (Merriam, 2009). A deductive mode of analysis was also used when comparing the reflections in the participants' interviews to experiences iterated in the literature on bullying and people with disabilities, and on bullying on college campuses.

Results

The identities of all nine respondents were protected by the application of pseudonyms. As noted above, a pilot study was conducted with the first two respondents of the DSS inquiry for the study. Sunny, an individual with epilepsy, and Michael, an individual who is hard of hearing, provided general insight into higher education, social media, and cyberbullying. Sunny stated that she does not see much bullying on campus, and although she does witness peers being mean to each other on social media, she does not view that as cyberbullying. She added that social media allowed girls in her dorm to be covertly mean to one another without any direct mention of a peer's name. Sunny stated that without this explicit mention, it was more difficult to identify cyberbullying compared to traditional bullying, because it was harder to prove and easier to deny responsibility when the victims' names were not associated with the post.

Michael made similar claims regarding the difficulty of identifying bullying and cyberbullying. He mentioned that at college, especially an institution that is known for diversity and academically competitive student body, bullying is "smarter." He added that bullying is not simply being called a "slut" or "fat." It is targeted towards the reputation of the individual as a student, causing them to feel intellectually inferior and leaving conversations thinking, "Wait, is he calling me stupid?" The pilot study provided insight as to how two participants viewed bullying at college, and how bullying behaviors in such settings are may manifest differently than in other environments (e.g., high school).

The following section will address the participants in the research study—specifically, their construction of bullying and how they personally experienced bullying and cyberbullying. Table 1 provides information on the participants who were interviewed for this study.
Construction of Bullying
Past and present experiences shaped how each participant defined bullying. All encountered bullying directly relating to their disabilities in elementary and/or secondary school. Additionally, they all had experiences with bullying at the collegiate level, as the bully, victim, or bully-victim. Each participant stated that bullying was a negative behavior with the end goal of causing another person physical or emotional harm. The aggressive behavior only needed to occur once to be considered a bullying event. A majority of the participants stated that bullying actions are purposeful, and typically have some underlying factor (e.g., a distinguishing characteristic in the victim).

Participants also identified cyberbullying as a prominent type of bullying in their collegiate settings. All participants acknowledged that, for most of their lives, social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) played a large role in communicating with their peers. Phillip stated that there were positive and negative outcomes that occur from using the Internet, but the negative consequences do not prevent people from using social media. Four participants mentioned that cyberbullying was more severe than face-to-face bullying because of anonymity and the inability to see how the bully hurt the victim.

Participant definition of cyberbullying. All of the participants were active, daily users of social media. The most common social media outlets used by all participants were Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Yelp. All participants stated that in order for cyberbullying to occur, the ability to cause harm to another person through computers and/or cell phones had to exist. Amelia acknowledged that cyberbullying can be used to write things about an individual that would never be said in a face-to-face environment. Elizabeth claimed that the cyberbullying does not stop at written messages; it can also include photographs. Sarah noted that there is a power in cyberbullying, because it is harder to stop once the aggressive messages start.

Power of cyberbullying. Three participants mentioned the sense of power that cyberbullies have over their victims. Chris noted how public cyberbullying may be: "It can be direct or not direct, it can be private or it can be not private… It can be up to 100 people reading it." Amelia stated that many people can read threads or comment history that contain malicious comments or images. Chris also stated that there was an emotional component to social media. He mentioned that he was able to see who defriended him because of comments he made in the past. This caused him to consider defriending a different form of social exclusion, and recalled thinking, "Okay, I guess we don't exist to each other anymore."

The participants further noted that anonymity is an important aspect of cyberbullying power. Sarah stated that cyberbullying is worse than face-to-face

bullying because "the person that's bullying can hide behind the computer." Phillip echoed this notion of hiding, stating that it allows a person to make more harmful remarks than he or she would in person, and to avoid the victim's reaction. He further stated that computers allow a faster form of retaliation, where a person may be less apt to think about the consequences of immediately commenting online.

Making Meaning of Bullying

> When a university takes a pervasive "this is your world" perspective – which I don't think is necessarily wrong – students will understand that and respond. They will say, "Okay, this is our world. This is how we have fun in it," or "This is how we create our culture within it." And it can be too limiting. And the college bubble can be fun, but then it's also pretty dangerous. (Participant in the study)

Witnesses of bullying experiences. Five participants stated that they were bystanders to a bullying event that occurred on campus. Matt said although he witnessed bullying on campus, he did not want to discuss it. Sarah mentioned that since she did not observe bullying that occurred and only saw the effects of the social exclusion, she did not feel comfortable discussing the details that occurred within her sorority. Chris explained a bullying event with his fraternity stating, "Whenever you force someone to drink, it crosses a line. Many lines are crossed when you pressure someone." Amelia witnessed how gossip in her dormitory triggered social exclusion, causing her friend to be the victim of verbal bullying.

Victims of bullying at college. All participants experienced bullying at college as victims. They disclosed that bullies were peers, roommates, or professors. Five of the participants experienced bullying directly relating to their disabilities. Two participants did not experience bullying because of their disabilities, but both had non-visible disabilities. Matt, an individual with a learning disability, had his dorm room destroyed by a former roommate. He reported that he followed the college protocol to report the incident, but said disclosing the destruction made the bullying worse from peers. Elizabeth, an individual who is hard of hearing, was also bullied after she told her roommate that she was sexually assaulted. The roommate then began to inform Elizabeth that she "deserved it" and that she "didn't fight hard enough." After experiencing this, Elizabeth removed herself from that environment.

Two participants experienced bullying from professors after disclosing their disabilities. Phillip, an individual with dysgraphia, described interactions with his professor when he met with her for tutoring. He said that she would "allude to it [dysgraphia] impacting like my education and my grades and my intelligence." Elizabeth stated that she felt uncomfortable saying that a professor would bully a student, but mentioned that she "received a weird backlash almost or just people downplaying it" from "faculty and TAs" causing her to feel isolated in class. When asked if she perceived isolation as bullying, she chose to not answer that question.

Amelia, Erin, Sarah, and Chris all experienced bullying from peers. Amelia, an individual with radial aplasia, was born with only four fingers. She recalled being in conversations that made her feel very vulnerable because peers would interrupt her and say, "Wait, do you have like four fingers? I only count four" causing people to look and try to touch her fingers. Erin, an individual with ocular motor dysfunction, has difficulty with discriminating different shapes and was asked to read aloud. She misspoke causing a peer to continuously bring up the incident and mock her in both private and public settings. Sarah reinforced the negative feelings associated with having individuals discuss her personal information in public settings. She provided an example: when her peers disclosed at parties that Sarah takes medication, they would announce that it was time for her to leave so she could take her prescription. Chris's experience of bullying occurred after he was involved in an illegal incident while experiencing a manic state. The peer response to this incident caused Chris to be ostracized from social media, parties, and friendships. He stated his added frustration by saying, "I can't come out and say, 'Look, I'm bipolar and I didn't do that, but I did this.' You can't do that, right? That's still like too much public shaming."

Reporting bullying. The participants stated that bullying situations should be handled on a case-by-case basis. Phillip described how complex the reporting is at college by stating, "it depends on the behavior, and it depends on the situation. It depends on the office that they would be going through." Erin stated that she would only report bullying if she felt physically harmed by another individual, and that it was easier to ignore an incident without the physical scars. Elizabeth echoed this and said she would consider calling the campus police if she experienced anything physically damaging.

Matt and Elizabeth stated that they would be hesitant to report any bullying to the college because it is easy to be misunderstood. Matt mentioned that he would refrain from disclosing any bullying behaviors, because he does not want to "turn a non-situ-

ation into a worse situation." Elizabeth echoed this stating that the majority of her friends are men and their jokes can be perceived as mean, but their intent is not malicious.

Sarah and Amelia both shared that they would not report bullying. Sarah mentioned that if she were to report, "so much could have gone wrong," and Amelia stated she was afraid of how her peers would feel if she were to report instances of bullying. In contrast, Chris was the only participant who said that he would report bullying to the college.

Consequences of reporting. Although participants acknowledged that bullying should be reported on a case-by-case basis, they varied in their opinions on whether they felt there was a consequence to reporting bullying. Elizabeth was the only participant who stated that she did not feel that there was a consequence to reporting an incident or situation to college personnel and/or staff. Matt and Sarah stated that there were social consequences to reporting bullying: either isolation or increased bullying. Similarly, Amelia mentioned that reporting bullying could negatively affect her reputation and potentially cause the loss of friends. Phillip stated that reporting depended on one's social group: you could be labeled as "a snitch or drama queen" or as "the person that took the action and leadership" necessary to end a bullying situation.

Chris and Erin focused on the consequences of reporting bullying when active in sororities or fraternities. Chris reflected on an instance when a brother reported hazing and, once Greek Life Office discovered this, the fraternity wanted the young man out of Greek Life. In fact, the brother who reported the incident "had some of the worse experiences with that" since the brother wanted to stay in the fraternity. Erin echoed this statement, saying that she witnessed girls being ostracized if they reported any aggressive behaviors. She further stated that there is an unspoken expectation that certain bullying behaviors were allowed in Greek life organizations.

Coping with bullying. Participants employed different behaviors to cope with bullying at college. Six participants used avoidance techniques to remove themselves from aggressive environments. They defined avoidance as actions that prevented the hostile individual from associating or interacting with them, either in person or on the Internet. Erin disclosed that she is hyper-aware of aggressive behaviors due to her past experiences with bullying, and that as soon as she feels people are being mean, she goes home. Sarah and Phillip both mentioned that they avoid places with people who were known to bully. Sarah used Facebook to stay abreast of the location of certain bullying people. Phillip said he could not completely avoid the bul-

lying teacher, but he was able to control the amount of interactions he had with her, and refrained from scheduling any future classes with her.

Elizabeth and Chris also used avoidance behaviors to cope with the bullying, choosing to move to safer living environments. Elizabeth stated that she no longer felt safe in her dorm room, so she slept on friends' couches until her roommate moved out. Chris stated that the constant social exclusion increased his social anxiety to a point where he chose to remove himself from the college environment completely. Matt, on the other hand, coped with his bullying by pretending it never happened. He avoided talking about it with peers saying, "if I spent time thinking about it, it wasn't really gonna help."

All participants mentioned that they were able to implement additional coping behaviors as they became more accustomed to the college environment. Matt observed how others react in different environments so he could prepare for "situations that you might get into." Sarah stated she was skilled in small talk, and exercises caution by being aware of the exits and the location of her friends if she "feels the person or environment is unsafe." Elizabeth mirrored this by saying if she felt unsafe, she would find someone she trusted for a sense of protection. Chris highlighted the important scanning his environment, since he needed to know how potential triggers could influence his bipolar behaviors. Phillip claimed his experience with bullying helped him communicate how he felt at all times to peers and adults to assist in understanding social interactions.

Presence of social support. Participants underscored the importance of social support, stating that it provided them, and students with disabilities in general, an extra layer of perceived protection to cope with bullying. They noted that at college, peers take on a more meaningful role than in high school. Erin reinforced this when she said that, at college, she was spending so much time with her peers that she was forced to bond with them in a deeper way than she had in the past. Four participants explained how peers helped to ameliorate the negative consequences of bullying. Elizabeth disclosed to her male friends that she was sexually assaulted, and stated that they quickly reassured her that, "this isn't your fault." She shared that hearing this from men allowed her to better accept what had happened to her. Matt claimed that his friends provided a sense of safety, acceptance of his interests, and encouraged him to adopt a healthier lifestyle. Amelia reported that she made a significant effort to make different type of friends and that these new relationships allowed her to become more confident. Sarah said her friends helped her process

bullying, noting that "I don't think in the moment you really learn by yourself how to cope with bullying." Conversely, Chris mentioned that he could not say peers supported his social life because he experienced such little support from them overall. He added that he has to be cautious of people with whom he interacts because he does not know how they might influence him or trigger his bipolar disorder.

Discussion

This was the first qualitative research study to examine how individuals with disabilities make meaning of bullying on a college campus. Pilot and research studies were conducted to inquire how individuals with disabilities construct bullying from past and present experiences, witness bullying at college, and experience the impact of bullying on their social interactions. Since attendance of individuals with disabilities in college is on the rise, understanding how these students experience bullying is of particular importance.

Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory provided insight as to how the participants used social media to communicate with peers and how specific behaviors were internalized and implemented across different environments. Tools such as Facebook, email, and Twitter were used by the participants to stay informed about activities on campus and to see what peers were doing. Social media sites, while informative, were also used to cyberbully peers, which supports past research (Maher, 2008). Michael, an individual who is hard of hearing, stated the anonymity of Tumblr allowed individuals to respond negatively to his posts about his relationships with his partner.

Data from participants' experiences with bullying yielded important information on how individuals with disabilities may respond to bullying or perceived aggressive environments, and whether they would participate in risk behaviors. Chris stated that alcohol was popular in fraternities and he was "forced to socially condemn" the brother who reported the fraternity for hazing. Therefore, Chris participated in risks that were related to underage drinking and in actions designed to prevent social exclusion of those who did not follow the internal code of Greek life. Comparatively, Erin and Sarah refrained from attending parties that promoted drinking, because they are not comfortable with the outcomes of students drinking alcohol. Erin and Sarah seemed to use the cognitive-control networks, as defined by Steinberg (2007), to scan the environment, weigh the pros and cons of possible outcomes, and make a decision based on their comfort levels. Triggering the cognitive-control networks

prevented them from participating in a perceived risk and unsafe environment (Steinberg, 2007).

Understanding College Bullying

College is a little more [like] trying to stick a knife in you. They try to say things. I don't know how to put it in terms, but it's much more complex. It's much more complicated. It's much more smart. It's much more piercing. It hurts…Yeah, but by now, we know calling someone a name is not gonna work. That's so childish. It's better to be like, "I heard you were failing this class." Something like that. Something really mean… it's no more calling a name, it's more so attacking a character or reputation…It's more complicated insults. (Participant in the study)

This study supported research by Chapell et al. (2006) and Curwen, McNichol, and Sharpe (2011), which found individuals who were bullied in college were likely to have been bullied in elementary and secondary schools. The participants were asked to construct a definition of bullying from past and present experiences. All of the participants had a different definition, ranging from bullying as playful banter between close friends to extreme hazing and social ostracism. This supports the work of Vaillancourt et al. (2008) who stated different definitions of bullying may shape how bullying is perceived.

When comparing perceived occurrences of bullying, participants mentioned the difference between earlier academic and current college environments. They noted that bullying does not occur as often in college as it does in elementary or secondary school settings, which supports past research (Chapell et al., 2006; Curwen et al., 2011). In this study, the research was conducted in a large metropolitan area, which may provide enhanced opportunities to make alternative friend groups. With fewer occurrences of bullying occurring at college, a pilot participant mentioned that she forgets bullying occurs. She said she only remembers that bullying is an issue at college when an extreme event occurs such as when people "kill themselves or they end up getting beaten." Interestingly, this participant provided many personal experiences of bullying to support her definition of bullying, but she did not qualify them as bullying because no one was physically hurt.

Past Experiences with Bullying

Past experiences of bullying influenced participants' experiences in their college environments. In a departure from their elementary and high school

settings, five participants described a level of normalcy since they did not have to publicly define themselves as having disabilities. Participants were able to develop positive self-perceptions as a result of institutional support. One participant stated that, at college, the DSS office allowed him to feel supported, something that he did not feel in his elementary and secondary schools. Sarah reinforced this sentiment, stating that she was dependent on teachers for academic performance and social safety in elementary and secondary schools, but, at college, she was forced to advocate for herself and learn to rely on peers for social support. She also noted the helpfulness of the support provided by the DSS office. More research is needed to understand how support in college enhances self-perception of individuals with disabilities, and if or how this assists in implementing positive coping behaviors in response to bullying events.

Limitations of the Study

There were four limitations to this research study. First, the study focused on the personal experiences of individuals with disabilities as victims, and not as the bullies. Second, since this is a qualitative study, the experiences of these particular participants cannot be generalized to the larger population of individuals with disabilities attending college. Third, the students interviewed for this study were all Caucasian, except in the pilot study where one individual was East Indian.

The fourth limitation, which emerged during meetings with potential participants, is that the researcher is an individual with a disability. All but two participants asked why individuals with disabilities were the focus of the study, and what the researcher's knowledge was of people with disabilities. Thus, the researcher disclosed that she had a disability. To prevent potential bias of the data obtained from the interviews, steps to ensure trustworthiness were addressed in the methodology through triangulation, member check, and reflexivity after each interview.

Recommendations for Future Research

Although this study provides a foundation for how individuals with disabilities experience bullying in college, its findings cannot be generalized to the greater body of students with disabilities. Further research is necessary to uncover the full depth and breadth of this issue.

Bullying research lacks agreement on a common definition of bullying. Definitions vary across different schools, environments, and people, all of which can influence how people differentiate between bullying and non-bullying behaviors. A shared definition would provide a better understanding of the prevalence of bullying across different environments within college settings. The use of a common definition in further research could help the field better understand how the prevalence of bullying differs across public, private, and two- and four-year colleges, and how individuals with disabilities perceive bullying in these environments. Related research on the impact of race, ethnicity, religion, and visible and nonvisible disabilities could also yield illuminating findings.

Disability is a subgroup that transcends different races, ethnicities, religions, and socioeconomic statuses. Chris, a participant who identified as bipolar and bisexual, mentioned that these subgroups create an intersectional identity that is overlooked on college campuses. Michael echoed this sentiment as an individual who is hard of hearing and is also a gay man. More research is needed to understand intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), and the potential role it may have related to bullying and identity influenced by a collegiate environment.

Mental health is becoming a prevalent issue on college campuses (Han et al., 2016). Chris reported his frustrations with having a mental health disability because people, in general, have a negative response to his disability. This bias caused Chris to feel as though he is not supported, and can understand why students do not disclose mental health disabilities to university personnel. More research is needed to understand targeted accommodations for individuals with mental health needs at college. This can assist DSS to make more individualized, meaningful accommodations at college. From this research, trainings for DSS can occur so that they are affectively able to disseminate data to professors and administration to understand, accommodate, and include people with mental health needs throughout campus activities.

Recommendation for Policy and Practice

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), through guidance or regulation, can facilitate the implementation and use of a common definition of bullying. With a definition recommended by the federal government, colleges and universities could implement bullying prevention policies to ensure that students feel safe on campus, and gather consistent data on bullying activities (Lund & Ross, 2016).

Given that the reporting of bullying incidents emerged as a challenge in this study, colleges and universities should consider support services partnerships (e.g. disability support services communicating with counseling services) to facilitate safe and confidential reporting practices that foster trust in anti-bullying

practices. Likewise, college administrators and bullying experts could develop more trustworthy protocols and train administrators to treat bullying with more urgency (Lund & Ross, 2016). If individuals communicate the experience to designated personnel, the field will be able to better understand the occurrence of bullying as well as effectiveness of appropriate coping skills at college (Crosslin & Golman, 2014).

Many states are recommending that schools at various levels implement anti-bullying policies and programs. Since many anti-bullying programs rely heavily on the ability of individuals to read social interactions accurately, perhaps DSS at the college level could provide peer-support groups to help develop or improve these skills in students with disabilities. Anti-bullying programming and related social skill development at the elementary and secondary levels is also critical: practices and skills on preventing and addressing inappropriate behaviors could translate to higher education environments.

This research study provided insight in ways individuals with disabilities experience bullying at college. There are two key topics of relevance for college personnel, specifically DSS, which recurred throughout this study. First, it is important to understand the ways social media is used at the university so that school personnel will be better informed as to how conversations may be interpreted by students. DSS could create a training session each year to review and reinforce appropriate online interactions to support students with disabilities at college. Second, there is a need to assess how individuals understand requesting assistance for matters that may not be perceived as related to their disabilities. Participants in the study reported experiencing more independence at college, and understood the responsibility to report bullying relied on their disclosure; however, the participants did not know where to go to disclose or report bullying events. The confusion may cause individuals with disabilities not to seek help. Since disability can be found as a subgroup across different minority classes, it is important that DSS have an open dialogue with the university's legal counsel to ensure that minority groups perceive the postsecondary environment as a safe opportunity to learn.

Conclusion

Bullying is a persistent and pervasive challenge plaguing our educational systems at the elementary, secondary, and collegiate levels (Chapell et al., 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Students with disabilities are participating in bullying events as the bully, bully-victim, and victim within the elementa-

ry and secondary school settings (Rose et al., 2009). Since individuals with disabilities are becoming a larger subgroup on college campuses (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), future research should understand how this specific minority population experiences bullying across different collegiate environments. The fields of bullying and higher education should more purposefully collaborate to ensure that individuals with and without disabilities are safe on college campuses. The more we learn about bullying on college campuses across various populations, the better prepared colleges can be to ensure students feel safe, and enjoy fruitful collegiate experiences.

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About the Author

Bridget Green received her Ed.D. in Special Education and Disability Studies with a foundation in neuroscience from The George Washington University. Her experience includes working with adolescents with disabilities transitioning into postsecondary activities including college, independent living, and employment. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Special Education at Duquesne University. Her research interests include vocational assessment of transitioning individuals, emotional and executive needs of collegiate students with disabilities, and preparedness of individuals with disabilities for employment opportunities. She can be reached by email at green.bridget@gmail.com.

Table 1

Participant Background Information

Name	Gender	Year	Ethnicity	Disability
Amelia	Female	Freshman	Caucasian	Radial Aplasia in right forearm
Chris	Male	Junior	Caucasian	Bipolar
Elizabeth	Female	Senior	Caucasian	Deaf in left ear
Erin	Female	Junior	Caucasian	Ocular Motor Dysfunction
Matt	Male	Senior	Caucasian	Learning Disability/ Mytonia
Phillip	Male	Junior	Caucasian	Dysgraphia
Sarah	Female	Freshman	Caucasian	ADD/Dyslexia

Note. Each of the participants chose a fictitious name for this study.

Social Constructionism occurs when we are embedded in a culture where we observe interactions to construct meaning (Crotty, 1998).

Vygotsky's theory of social development discusses the ways in which individuals learn a new culture by observing behaviors and interactions between people and the environment (Vygotsky, 1978).

Communication between the socioemotional network and the cognitive network provides an understanding of influence peers can have in regards to an individual performing in risk related behaviors (Steinberg, 2007).
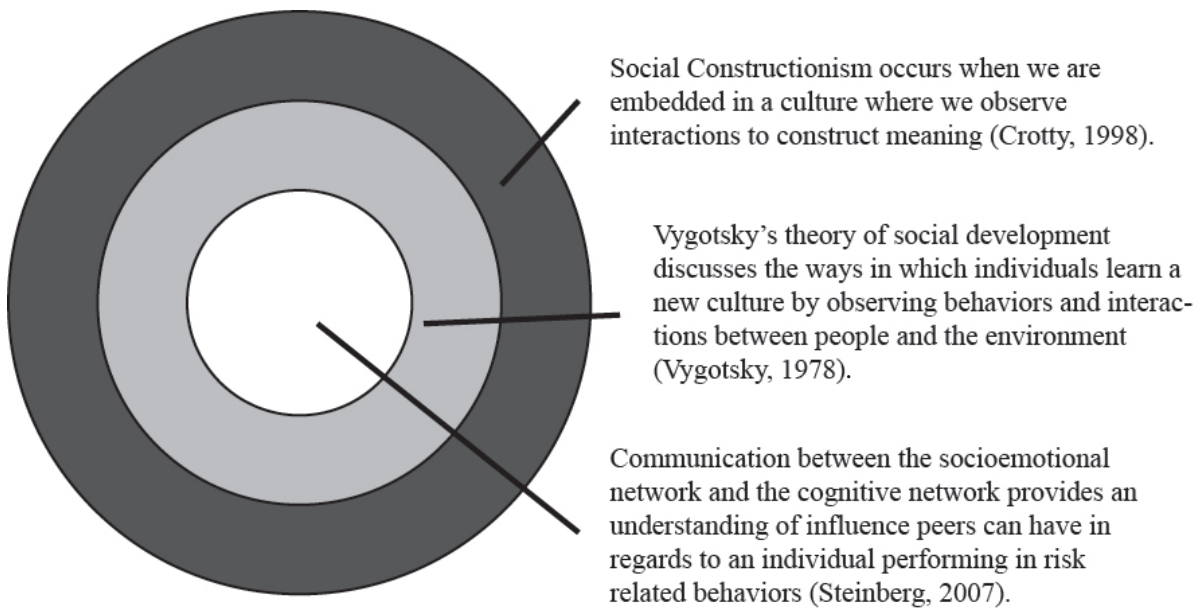
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework