

Adult Bias and Bullying in Education: Coping with Both an Epidemic and a Pandemic

Pamela R. Rockwood
Western Illinois University

This paper explains the role of female bias in the rise of adult bullying in workplaces, including those in education. The 2014 and 2017 Workplace Bullying Institute surveys show growth nationally in this phenomena with respondents becoming more aware of its occurrence (Namie, 2014; Namie, 2017). The paper specifically reviews and examines the findings in literature pertaining to females and their roles in perpetrating and perpetuating adult bullying while also including the unpublished statistical results of a 2016 non-experimental quantitative study done in all 850 Illinois public school districts (excluding charter and private schools) for which the results are still relevant today. Via an online survey Illinois superintendents and board members were asked to provide their perceptions of any adult bullying that might be occurring in their districts, who they perceived to be the perpetrators and targets, their perceptions as to the most used tactics and the resulting effects on victims. Data was disaggregated by age groupings, role, and gender; however, the study results discussed in this paper are those relating to females. These results make a noteworthy contribution to the literature on female adult bullies in K-12 educational institutions because: 1) They provide an understanding of the potential and reality of female adult bullying in public school districts; 2) the study results pertaining to females concur with the results from other surveys and research; and 3) Sorrell (2017) found that there was a significant relationship between adult workplace bullying in schools and student bullying in schools. Sorrell's findings (2017) and this study's findings underline the need for further studies on this topic to ascertain what bullying behaviors are being role modeled for students from a gender perspective and the impact of those behaviors on school effectiveness.

Keywords: *adult bullying in K-12 education, female bullying, bias, bullying effects*

In medicine and popular culture, the word “*epidemic*” is used to describe the rapid spread or increase in the occurrence of something (e.g. disease), while the term “*pandemic*” is usually reserved for medicine and describes an epidemic disease that has spread over a large geographic area such as an entire country (Kelly, n.d.). An epidemic that is growing in the American workplace is that of adult bullying (Kelly, 2006) and it is becoming more and more apparent in educational settings (Mayhew and McCarthy, 2005), even in these pandemic times.

This paper specifically reviews the findings in literature pertaining to bias and its relationship to adult bullying with a focused examination of females and their roles in perpetrating and perpetuating it. It includes the unpublished statistical results of a non-experimental quantitative study done in all 850 Illinois school districts in 2016 that asked superintendents and board members for their perceptions as to their awareness of any adult bullying that was taking place in their district. Study findings will focus on the female roles and actions in any perceptions of adult bullying and the results shared will note any alignment between those findings and other research findings.

The outcomes of this study are important to share because there is limited research about perceived adult bullying in the specific workplace setting of K-12 school districts, and particularly about that which is focused on females and their involvement in those settings. This is essential information to determine because according to the U. S. Department of Education, there is growing evidence that all bullying has a persistent and pervasive effect on the learning environment of a school and its climate (Isaac, 2015), and that climate impacts that school’s effectiveness (Tubbs & Garner, 2008). This paper concludes by providing some suggested actions that can occur both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Review of the Related Literature

The Origins of Bias and How They Lead to Bullying

A bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect people’s understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner that causes them to have feelings, beliefs, and prejudice towards or against someone or something due to their particular attributes, characteristics, and behaviors that might include skin color, gender, ethnicity, and age (Staats, Capatosto, Kenney, & Mamo, 2017). These stereotypical associations develop over the course of an individual’s lifetime beginning at a very early age through exposure to direct and indirect messages, from direct personal experience, from other people, via the media (Understanding Unconscious Bias, 2015), or for children from biased nonverbal signals demonstrated by adults (Skinner, Meltzoff, & Olson, 2017).

There are many stereotypes that already exist in the society into which people are born. For example, American children, by way of the literature to which they are exposed during their K-12 education, receive mixed messages that contribute towards the strengthening of stereotypes about females. In some pieces of literature, the female’s role in society has been stereotyped as a nurturer such as the “Mother Hubbard” character who is concerned about keeping her children fed even though her cupboards were bare. In other literature pieces, it literally portrays the female as a witch seeking power such as the “Wicked Witch of the West” who wanted the power of the ruby slippers (Baum, 1900).

Even today, American society continues to perpetuate the stereotypes and inequalities linked to gender, race, class, religion, ethnicity, and other "differences" (Kerbo, 2000). One

inequality and stereotype is easily seen through the continuation of a patriarchal culture in which men have held and continue to hold powerful roles in political, economic, and social institutions as a result of using “control and domination” as a way of ensuring one’s own safety (Kerbo, 2000). This societal bias towards a patriarchal society certainly may be a factor in the way in which females observe the world, as well as in their quest for power. The obtainment of power over others is one reason that females seek to bully other females (Wiedmer, 2011). The power sought may be social, intellectual, financial, or physical (Brunner & Lewis, 2015).

While mild forms of bias, stereotyping, and prejudice can create uncomfortable and uncivil interactions, even avoidance, the more extreme forms of it lead to conflict, harassment, or aggression (Understanding Unconscious Bias, 2015). Bullying is an aggressive act that can occur almost anywhere with some of the most commonly reported locations being in schools, at the workplace, and at home (Ttofi & Farrington, 2010). It is when adults bully others because of their gender, race, ethnicity, or other factors, that a problem arises.

The Differences: Harassment, Bullying, and Mobbing

There is a distinct difference among harassment, bullying, and mobbing. The distinction between harassment and bullying is that when an aggressive bullying-type of behavior is directed at a target and the target is also a member of a protected class (race, color, religion, sex, age, disability, national origin, sexual orientation, citizenship status or any other federally protected class) that behavior is then defined as harassment.

Researchers began to discuss and explore the concept of bullying among adults in work settings in the early 1990’s (Leymann, 1990). Bullying is an individual’s repeated offensive escalating behavior towards another through vindictive, cruel or malicious attempts to humiliate, marginalize, or undermine an individual. It includes, but is not limited to psychological pressure, intimidation, threats, conspiracies, manipulation, extortion, coercion and hostile behavior which could impact the worth, dignity, and well-being of the individual (Steinman, 2003). Again, to constitute bullying, these actions must be escalating and occur repeatedly and regularly and over a period of time (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003).

Bullying and harassment are often confused as they are similar. Both are about an imbalance of power, control and power, actions that hurt or harm another person emotionally, mentally, or physically, and the target has difficulty stopping the actions directed towards them. Bullying can happen to anyone, but when it happens to a member of a protected class, it is harassment.

Mobbing then is group bullying through rumor, innuendo, discrediting, isolating, and intimidation (Elliott, 2003). It, too, is a repeated offensive escalating behavior over a period of time that is enacted by a group of individuals with the intent to hurt or harm someone emotionally, mentally, or physically.

Bullying and mobbing are forms of aggression against anyone, rather than specific discrimination or harassment against someone who is in a protected class. They are malicious attempts in-person or on-line to force someone out of the workplace. There is a deliberate intent and a power disparity that robs individuals of their reputation, professional integrity, and competence (Davenport et al., 2005). A victim of bullies is called “a target” and the bully or bullies are called “the perpetrator(s)”.

Research has indicated that there are at least 45 different bullying and mobbing behaviors that can be grouped into five different categories that include: 1) attacks on one’s self-expression and the way communication happens; 2) attacks on one’s social relations; 3) attacks on one’s

reputation; 4) attacks on the quality of one's professional and life situation; and 5) direct attacks on a person's health (Davenport et al., 2005).

Why Bullies Bully and Why Females Bully

Bullies bully because of bias, differences in values, and a lack of respect for diversity. They seek attention and power, often "pulling a power play". Bullies want to control others and often envy the superior competence or overachievement of an individual. A bully may: 1) appear to be outgoing, funny, and charming to gain private and personal information that they then can use to manipulate and threaten their targets; 2) be sarcastic, putting others down with negative humor, then say they were only kidding; 3) brag and convince others that they are smarter, know the right people, and have more knowledge and experience; 4) sabotage the work performance of others by giving incomplete or no information about a work assignment; 5) use divide and conquer techniques; and 6) give supervisors false information about their targets (Middelton-Moz & Zawadski, 2014).

There are many opinions specifically as to why women bully. These include low self-esteem and feelings of competition, jealousy, envy, and the quest for power (Barash, 2006; Holiday & Rosenberg, 2009). Dellasega (2005) offers that females bully because some never outgrow the relational aggression behaviors (i.e. negative gossip, using relationships to hurt another) they may have learned when they were in their early teens. She also offers that low esteem may propel a woman into an aggressive or a passive stance (Dellasega, 2005).

Who Bullies Who?

Research has demonstrated that there are certain reasons that people become workplace targets of adult bullies. Individuals who lack self-confidence or sufficient conflict management skills are most likely to be targets of workplace bullies. People who are characterized as overachievers also have more potential to fall prey to a workplace bully because the bully feels threatened by the target's competence. Bullying may occur due to the bully's need to boost his or her own worth and to undermine another as the result of feeling envious of the target's talents or work ethic (Georgakopoulos, Wilkin, & Kent, 2011).

The most recent Workplace Bullying Institute national survey was done in 2017 and its results showed that respondents perceived males as bullying females at 65%, which was an increase of 8% from the 2014 Workplace Bullying Institute national survey, and males bullying males at 35%, which was a decrease of 8% from the 2014 survey (Namie, 2014; Namie, 2017). That same 2017 survey showed that respondents perceived females as bullying females at 67%, which was down 1% from the 2014 survey and bullying males at 33% which was an increase of 1% from the 2014 survey (Namie, 2014; Namie, 2017). Interestingly, 51.5% of the respondents to the survey were female with 48.5% being male.

The Bully Toolkit and Female Tactics for Bullying

Cassito et al. (2003) have identified some of the tactics that bullies use and they include: exclusion, slander, gossiping, rumors, humiliation, turning co-workers against the target, intrusions into private life, isolation, provocation, ridicule (especially in the presence of others), taking away key areas of the target's responsibilities, threats of violence, verbal abuse, repeated criticism and

blame, physical abuse, assignment of meaningless tasks, assignment of new duties without training, excessive monitoring of the person, forced inactivity, unjustified evaluation ratings, unjustified transfers or disciplinary actions, intentionally underrating or ignoring proposals, and mandating a work overload with impossible deadlines.

Barnes (2012) identified additional behaviors in the “bully’s toolkit” and they consist of: Glaring, staring, showing hostility, flaunting status, ignoring the target or his/her contributions, failing to respond to calls or memos, the silent treatment, shouting, throwing tantrums, starting or spreading gossip, consistently stealing credit for the target’s work, blaming the target for mistakes made by others, excluding the target from important activities and/or meetings, swearing, making obscene or offensive gestures, playing mean pranks, and moving the target’s desk or office to a remote area to humiliate the target.

Research has found that female bullying tactics tend to focus on: 1) verbal threats or aggressiveness which include behaviors intended to dominate, manipulate, intimidate, or coerce; 2) words/gossip meant to undermine a target’s self-esteem or sense of self or make him or her feel invisible; 3) words/gossip intended to question the target’s credibility, authority, image, or reputation; 4) limited access to particular roles, assignments, meetings, positions, important information, supervisors; 5) being lied to, ostracized, demeaned, or socially excluded; and 6) blaming the target for errors, being disrespectful, and taking credit for others’ work (Dellasega, 2005; Holiday & Rosenberg, 2009).

The Toll of Adult Bullying and Specifically on Females

Targets (victims) of adult bullying suffer emotionally, mentally, and physically. They experience varying symptoms that include: 1) increasing distress; 2) physical and or mental illness; 3) problems sleeping and fatigue; 4) lack of concentration; 5) weight gain or loss; 6) drug/alcohol abuse; 7) isolation/social misery; 8) avoidance of the workplace; 9) uncharacteristic fearfulness; 10) crying for no apparent reason; 11) depression; 12) panic attacks; 13) forgetfulness; 14) being extremely accident prone; 15) violence directed at self or others; and 16) attempted/successful suicide. Many victims suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder which is an injury that results from an overwhelming assault on the mind and emotions and with some, death may occur (Davenport et al., 2005).

In 2018, Misawa, Andrews, and Jenkins performed a content analysis specifically examining women’s experiences with adult workplace bullying and they began with research that started in 2000. They found that bullying in the workplace affects women’s mental and physical health, as well as their work environment and their social and work relationships (Misawa, Andrews, and Jenkins, 2018).

The K-12 Adult Bullying Study

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine K-12 superintendent and board members’ perceptions as to if and how adult bullying was taking place in their school district. It also explored their perspectives as to who bullied who, how often, and the perceived effect that the bullying had on victims.

Theoretical Framework for the Study

The theoretical framework that was used for this study was conflict theory because it encompasses the concepts of inequality, imbalance of power, and instances of oppression, all of which relate to bullying. It can be used on a large or small scale to study the imbalance of power as well as how that affects human behavior (Hutchinson, 2011). Conflict theory raises issues of status when considering human diversity and that, in turn, not only relates back to bullying, but it also relates back to the mission of social justice (Isaac, 2015).

Study Questions

This study had five questions that it sought to answer. These questions were:

1. In Illinois public school districts, based on gender, who perceived the occurrence of adult bullying more often?
2. In Illinois public school districts, were males or females perceived to be the bully more often?
3. In Illinois public school districts, were males or females perceived to be the target of adult bullying more often?
4. In Illinois public school districts, what bullying tactics did each gender use most often?
5. In Illinois public school districts, what effects of bullying were most experienced by each gender?

Method

Sample

This study used total population purposive sampling with all superintendents and board members in the 850 Illinois public school districts (excluding charter and private schools) being invited to participate. Purposive sampling is often referred to as judgmental or expert sampling and this sampling method was appropriate as superintendents and board members share the common characteristic of working with educators in the same school district. The researcher wanted to generate the participants' perceptions and experiences as to if any adult bullying was taking place in their school district.

Survey Instrument

Via an online Google survey respondents were asked to respond to demographic questions, categorical response questions, and one open-ended question. Some of the survey questions were similar, but not exact, to those asked in the 2014 national Workplace Bullying Institute survey (Namie, 2014). Within the pool of survey questions, respondents were asked to provide their perceptions of any adult bullying that might be occurring in their districts, who they perceived to be the perpetrators and targets, their perceptions as to the bullying tactics most used, and the resulting effects on targets.

Design

This study used a non-experimental quantitative design. Descriptive data was reviewed and it was disaggregated by age groupings, role, and gender. For the purpose of this paper, it is predominantly the gender results that will be shared.

Results

Response Rates

The completed sample size for the online survey used was 240 respondents and these respondents represented 20% of all Illinois public school districts. They also represented a variety of school configurations (elementary, high school, and unit K-12 districts) because Illinois is one of the few states in the United States that has what is known as a “duo district” configuration for their school districts. This means that communities throughout time have been allowed to choose how their school district will be arranged. For example, one community may have chosen to have a separate K-8 school district and an additional separate 9-12 school district. Yet another community may have chosen to organize its school district, into what is known as a unit school district, which is one that contains all grades K-12.

The majority of survey respondents (92.1%) were between the ages of 30 and 64 years old. Females comprised 44.58% of the respondent group and males comprised 55.42%. Within the total respondent group there were 33.8% superintendents; 66.2% board members; 25.35% male superintendents; 28.11% male board members; 9.68% female superintendents; and 36.86 female board members. One reason that the percentages may be lower in terms of overall female respondents and female superintendents is due to the lower number of females in leadership roles. While females remain in the majority of classrooms, there is still a gender gap in terms of who sits in the chair in the superintendent’s office, and one reason for this may be because school board members are still predominantly 56% male (Kilpatrick, 2019).

Findings for Question One

The first question in this study asked for superintendent and board member perceptions as to the occurrence of adult bullying in their districts. The results of the study indicated that males (60.90%) more often perceived the occurrence of adult bullying/mobbing taking place in the educational workplace than females did. Within the total respondent group, a total of 64.2% shared that they had seen bullying or mobbing happen to others and 26.3% said that they had heard it happened to others. The total group also said that they that they had personally experienced bullying or mobbing in their educational workplace (67.1%) and a small percentage (15.4%) even shared that they “may have” bullied another while at their educational workplace.

Findings for Question Two

The second question in this study asked who was perceived to be the bully more often—males or females. The study found that females were perceived to be the most frequent perpetrators of adult bullying/mobbing (52.5%). With regards to this finding Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen (2010) share that the findings from one study done in one setting may not necessarily be generalized to

other geographical and cultural settings because the cultural values present may affect the overall prevalence of workplace bullying. That said, this study's finding is consistent with the findings from other studies that have found a significantly higher perpetrator rate for women (Giorgi, Ando, Arenas, Shoss and Leon-Perez, 2013; Namie, 2014).

Findings for Question Three

The third question in this study asked respondents who they perceived to be bullied most often. They said that both males (53.5%) and females (82.5%) were perceived to bully females more frequently rather than males. This may be because when growing up, boys and girls are punished and rewarded for different behaviors; thus, as men and woman they continue to exhibit those behaviors that they believe to be appropriate to their gender. For example, expressing anger may heighten a man's status in some professional settings while women who do this in that same setting are seen as being emotional, less competent and perhaps even aggressive (Brescoll and Uhlmann, 2008).

Findings for Question Four

Question four in this study asked respondents about their perception as to the types of bullying tactics each gender used most often. The study found that the tactic most used by females was slander (25.8%), followed closely by verbal abuse and attacks (25%). With regards to female tactics, these results compliment the findings of Björkqvist, Österman and Lagerspetz (1994) who determined that women tended to rely more on social manipulation tactics such as rumors, backbiting, insulting comments about someone's private life, and social exclusion.

Findings for Question Five

The final question in this study asked respondents about their perceptions as to what were the most experienced effects for any targets who had been bullied. Their perception was that the main effect for adult bullied females was chronic stress, which is a stress that won't "go away". As noted earlier in this paper, workplace bullying has been shown to have severe consequences for employee health and well-being with some researchers reporting that women experience stronger symptoms such as anxiety and depression (Einarsen and Hetland, 2016). Rodríguez-Muñoz, Moreno-Jiménez, Sanz Vergel and Garrosa Hernández (2010) found that there was a strong association between bullying and symptoms of post-traumatic stress among women.

Discussion

The Importance of the Study

The results from this study make a noteworthy contribution to the literature on adult bullying in K-12 educational settings. They provide an understanding of the potential and reality of adult bullying taking place in school districts and illustrate a stark contrast from the female as a nurturer to the female as an aggressor. Many of the outcomes from this study concur with other conclusions in the research literature about females as perpetrators and perpetuators of adult bullying, while offering some explanation about why that may be and how bias and conflict theory contribute to

it. The study findings also strengthen the need for further research in terms of the what, why, and how of gender-based bullying behaviors in educational settings. It is essential to determine what behaviors are being role modeled for students because they do mimic what they see and educators at all levels should serve as positive role models for them.

This study is also important in another way. It could be considered a pilot study, a first of its kind, if you will. When originally searching the literature for a study like this to replicate, none could be found. With this study having had a respondent return rate that represented 20% of all Illinois public school districts, using it as a pilot study provides an opportunity to alleviate any potential or found problems (e.g. question wording, strategies for obtaining a higher return rate, etc.) before replicating it in a larger regional study (Andrews, Nonnecke, & Preece, 2003).

Implications for Practice

If educational leaders truly want to improve school culture and effectiveness, they must work to eliminate bias and adult bullying. As a result of the literature review in this paper and the findings resulting from the K-12 adult bullying study, there are many suggestions as to the implications for practice that include: 1) having a good relationship with your unions/associations; 2) providing professional development to everyone on bias and adult bullying; 3) creating, communicating, and upholding an adult bullying in the workplace policy or negotiating language that addresses it in any collective bargaining agreement; 4) creating an accountability system for investigating any reported complaints immediately and acting accordingly; 5) taking the necessary steps to create a safe and bully-free workplace; 6) evaluating climate and conducting periodic surveys of working conditions; 7) establishing an employee hotline; and 8) lobbying and supporting state and federal legislation pertaining to a “bully-free” workplace law.

There is one more implication for practice that can have a tremendous impact on improving school culture and its effectiveness, while working to eliminate bias and adult bullying. That implication consists of creating and implementing an adult social and emotional learning program.

Montgomery and Rupp (2005) have reported that the social emotional competence level and well-being of educators, all educators, is key to influencing student outcomes. Some of the most important social emotional learning that students receive begins with the interactions that they have with the adults at school given the amount of time that students interact with them.

At least four states (Rhode Island, Tennessee, Washington, and Wisconsin) have worked with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning to create a competency-based adult social and emotional learning framework that outlines what adult social and emotional learning looks like in five core social and emotional areas that include: 1) self-awareness (understanding one’s emotions and thoughts and how they influence behavior); 2) self-management (being able to regulate one’s emotions and behaviors in different situations and to set and work toward goals); 3) responsible decision-making (being able to make positive choices and take responsibility for positive and negative outcomes); 4) social awareness (being able to take the perspective of and empathize with others); and 5) relationship skills (being able to establish and maintain healthy and meaningful relationships with others) (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, Core SEL Competencies Section, n.d.).

Conclusion

Workplace bullying is not discriminatory as to where it occurs. Wherever it takes place and for whatever reason, one thing is certain, it contributes to the creation or continuance of a toxic workplace culture, impeding that organization's effectiveness and making any improvement within that organization next to nearly impossible. Workplace bullying legal expert David Yamada (2010) maintains that workplace bullying is the most neglected form of serious worker mistreatment in American employment law.

This paper explored the nature and involvement of adult female bullying in the educational workplace. The findings from the Illinois study that are shared in this paper are still important today due to the current social unrest as well as the anxiety resulting from the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Falcone (2020) believes that with the heightened anxiety caused by the coronavirus crisis and increasing co-worker disagreements on such things as wearing face masks and social distancing, bullying is poised to rise in the face-to-face workplace. It is also important to note that due to the pandemic, many workplaces have transitioned to full or part-time online work and the potential still exists for adult bullying through messaging apps and social media. Meidav (2020) suggests that as a result of this technologically-based super-connectedness, personal time has been blurred and people continue to interact with their colleagues off hours and sometimes this interaction takes a negative turn.

When educational institutions begin to return to whatever their "new normal" workplace becomes, heightened anxiety, the use of social media, and female bias and bullying will still be there. Adult bullying in the workplace was a national epidemic in the United States well before the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic began, it continues on during the pandemic, and it will certainly endure post-pandemic if something is not definitively done by the educational leaders in school districts, state governments, and the federal government.

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