Who Engages in Gender Bullying? The Role of Homophobic Name-Calling, Gender Pressure, and Gender Conformity

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This study examines whether bullies' gender conformity, pressure to conform to gender norms (felt pressure), and experiences of homophobic name-calling are associated with a tendency to bully gender conforming victims (GCV) and gender non-conforming victims (GNCV). Longitudinal changes were analyzed on all peer interactions in an entire 6th-grade cohort over two-time points during the academic year (152 girls and 128 boys). Experiencing homophobic name-calling at Time 1 predicted perpetrating bullying against GNCV at Time 2. Only for boys, one's own gender conformity predicted bullying GNCV at Time 2. No significant associations with bullying GCV at Time 2 were found. Bullying GNCV may represent a defensive reaction to demonstrate bullies' own gender conformity. Particularly among male bullies, one's own gender conformity can affect the selection of victims based on their gender conformity. This study has important implications for the development of interventions to reduce aggressive behaviors against GNCV in middle school.

Keywords: adolescence; ANOVA/MANOVA; bullying; early adolescence; gay/lesbian studies; gender conformity; gender identity; gender studies; homophobic name-calling; longitudinal studies; middle schools; peer interaction/friendship; regression analyses; statistics; violence

Despite the preponderance of research on youth who engage in aggressive and bullying behaviors (e.g., Juvonen & Graham, 2014), we know surprisingly little about gender-based bullying, that is, bullying involving peers who do not conform to the stereotypical gender norms of masculinity or femininity. Yet research demonstrates that compared to victims of general bullying, victims of gender-based bullying have greater odds of experiencing serious negative mental health outcomes including depression, suicidality, traumatic stress, and alcohol and substance use (Collier, Bos, & Sandfort, 2013; Collier, van Beusekom, et al., 2013; DeLay et al., 2017; Poteat et al., 2014; Russell et al., 2012). Given how little is known about gender-based bullying, considering different gender identity aspects of bullying perpetrators in relation to their bullying behaviors could offer a nuanced understanding of perpetrators' motives to victimize other peers (Navarro et al., 2016). Moreover, it could be particularly crucial for the design and implementation of prevention efforts. To our best knowledge, this is the first longitudinal study to focus on youth perpetrators of gender-based bullying. Here we consider whether bullies who perceive pressure to conform to gender norms, experience homophobic name-calling, and are gender nonconforming are more likely to bully gender-nonconforming adolescents relative to gender-conforming adolescents.

Some scholars argued that the gender socialization process is at the heart of bullying behaviors directed toward gender-nonconforming students (Navarro e tal., 2011; Navarro et al., 2016; Poteat et al., 2012). Gender socialization is one mechanism through which youth learn about and come to adopt norms regarding stereotypic masculine or feminine behaviors (Martin & Ruble, 2010). During the adolescent years, a more personal and sophisticated gender identity develops as youth evaluate their traits, interests, and appearance as compared to the traits, interests, and appearance of other same- and other-gender peer group members (Egan & Perry, 2001; Martin et al., 2017). As

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they do this, youth may begin to perceive themselves as more or less gender conforming or gender nonconforming.

As a consequence of societal norms about gender and of socialization experiences and regardless of their conformity, most adolescents feel a strong pressure to conform to gender-conforming characteristics (Galambos, 2013; Nielson et al., 2020). In fact, gender socialization often acts through peer rewards for gender-conforming behaviors and peer punishments for gender-nonconforming behaviors (Zosuls et al., 2016). As an example of a peer reward, gender-conforming adolescents may be more accepted and integrated with their peers than gender-nonconforming adolescents (Galambos, 2013). In contrast, gender-nonconforming youth are exposed to peer bullying and, more often, to homophobic bullying (Ioverno & Russell, 2020; Zosuls et al., 2016), a specific form of bullying directed at students who are sexual minorities or who are perceived as such because of the way they express their gender (e.g., through clothing, hairstyles, mannerism; Martin-Storey & August, 2016). In fact, a robust body of research has now documented that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning students are disproportionally at risk of bullying and victimization because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2018).

Because of its potential influence in defining social relationships, gender conformity has received empirical attention in research on bullying, and most of the attention has been on self-attributed masculine and feminine traits among bullies (Gini & Pozzoli, 2006; Navarro et al., 2016; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016). Consistently, there is evidence that the endorsement of stereotyped masculine traits like self-assertion, self-expansion, and dominance is significantly associated with bullying behaviors (Gini & Pozzoli, 2006; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016). The evidence for feminine behaviors is more mixed: Stereotyped feminine traits like self-sacrifice or concern for others have been related to less aggressive behaviors (Navarro et al., 2011; Silva et al., 2013; Swart & Bredekamp, 2009), but feminine traits and bullying perpetration have been linked in one study (Andrews et al., 2016).

In addition to self-perceived gender conformity, the pressure adolescents feel from others to be gender conforming (i.e., "felt pressure") has been demonstrated to predispose youth toward gender-typed social behaviors such as aggression for boys and subservience for girls (Navarro et al., 2016). Especially among youth experiencing high felt pressure for gender conformity, those who perceive that their gender conformity is threatened are more likely to display aggressive attitudes toward others (Glick et al., 2007; Salvati, Pistella, Ioverno, et al., 2018). One example of a gender conformity threat could be personally experiencing homophobic name-calling (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). As a reaction to this threat, some evidence shows that adolescents are likely to respond using homophobic name-calling of their own to mock and belittle others (Birkett & Espelage, 2015).

Taken together, bullying research suggests a relation between gender conformity and the roles of both bullies and victims. Homophobic behaviors (e.g., calling others names) are often a reaction to violations of traditional gender norms (Glick et al., 2007). Thus, some scholars suggested that homophobic aggressive behaviors are aimed at target groups who are stereotyped as having gender-nonconforming traits that aggressors wish to deny in themselves (Glick et al., 2007; Meyer, 2003). To date, scholars have examined gender conformity of bullies separate from that of victims. In the current study, we hypothesize that gender identity is relevant for both bullies and victims and may influence the way perpetrators identify their victims. Furthermore, we hypothesize that perpetrators who are concerned about their own gender conformity may be more prone to victimize gender-nonconforming victims (GNCVs). Indeed, this type of victimization may reflect a way perpetrators distance themselves from gender nonconformity and demonstrate and bolster their own gender conformity by their enforcement of gender norms in peers.

Gender Differences in Bullying Against Gender-Nonconforming Peers

Bullying perpetration based on gender identity tends to operate differently for boys and girls. Bullying behaviors against sexual minority or gender-nonconforming peers are disproportionately deployed by boys (Reigeluth & Addis, 2016). Gender development theories have highlighted the important role that gender socialization plays in contributing to this sex difference (Pascoe, 2007; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016; Toomey et al., 2012). For example, some qualitative evidence suggests that boys engage in bullying behaviors against gender-nonconforming peers as a way to regulate gendered behaviors and enforce traditional gender norms (Reigeluth & Addis, 2016). By overtly victimizing gender-nonconforming peers, boys are likely to elevate their status by engaging in gender norm enforcement and demonstrating their masculinity (Reigeluth & Addis, 2016). Consistent with these findings, most of the research on homophobic behaviors indicated that men are more hostile than women toward gay men (Davies, 2004) and that there is a correlation between masculinity and homophobia in heterosexual men (Wilkinson, 2004). In fact, men demonstrate and defend masculinity by asserting gender conformity and derogating gender nonconformity through negative attitudes toward other men who violate traditional gender norms (i.e., gay men; Glick et al., 2007; Salvati, Ioverno, Giacomantonio, & Baiocco, 2016; Salvati, Pistella, Ioverno, et al., 2018). In consideration of the social pressure experienced by boys to defend and demonstrate their masculinity (Galambos, 2013), bullying gender-nonconforming peers often operates as a fear-based reaction, especially for boys (Reigeluth & Addis, 2016). In response to experiencing threats about their gender conformity (e.g., receiving homophobic name-calling), boys are more likely than girls to victimize peers and regulate their own behaviors to demonstrate their masculinity and avoid gender-based victimization (Birkett & Espelage, 2015).

Although gender norms are more rigidly prescribed for boys compared to girls (Galambos, 2013; Martin & Ruble, 2010), there is some evidence that gender conformity among women may also influence their attitudes toward gender-nonconforming behaviors (Salvati, Pistella, Giacomantonio, & Baiocco, 2018). Salvati, Pistella, Giacomantonio, and Baiocco (2018) examined a sample of lesbian women and found that

gender-nonconforming lesbian respondents had more negative attitudes toward gender-nonconforming gay men when compared to gender-conforming lesbian respondents. This study was replicated in a sample of lesbian and gay men and showed that gender-nonconforming gay men and lesbians provoked negative reactions among both gay and lesbian respondents (Salvati, Pistella, Ioverno, et al., 2018).

Hypotheses

In this study, we investigated whether, among perpetrators of peer bullying, perceived pressure to conform to gender norms, experiences of homophobic name-calling, and gender conformity may affect the bully's selection of victims; specifically, we contend that these factors will relate to whether they are more likely to target gender-nonconforming adolescents relative to gender-conforming adolescents. In doing so, we capitalized on the opportunity to analyze longitudinal data on all peer interactions in an entire sixth-grade cohort across the first academic year of middle school. This age-group is especially important to analyze, because during the transition from elementary to middle school, it has been hypothesized that peer pressure increases toward conformity to traditional gender norms (Galambos, 2013). Furthermore, peer expectations of gender conformity may redefine social relationships after a school transition (Galambos, 2013) and be associated with peer victimization.

Overall, based on the literature, we tested the following hypotheses:

- **Hypothesis 1:** Bullying GNCVs may be a way to defend and demonstrate gender conformity (Glick et al., 2007; Salvati et al., 2016; Salvati, Pistella, Ioverno, et al., 2018). Thus, students who experience perceived pressure to conform to gender norms, those who experience homophobic name-calling, and those who describe themselves as gender conforming are more likely to perpetrate bullying against GNCVs over time, compared to gender-conforming victims (GCVs).
- **Hypothesis 2:** Gender norms are more rigidly prescribed for boys compared to girls (Galambos, 2013; Martin & Ruble, 2010). Thus, the effects of perceived pressure to conform to gender norms, homophobic name-calling, and gender nonconformity on the tendency to bully gender-nonconforming peers would be stronger for boys compared to girls.

Method

Participants

The analytical sample comprised 280 students from a metropolitan area in the Southwestern United States. Students were in their first year of middle school (54.3% girls, mean age at Time 1= 11.12 years, $SD = .48$). These students represented a variety of ethnic backgrounds (43.78% Hispanic, 1.61% Asian American, 7.63% African American, 20.48% European American, 10.04% Native American, 16.47% Multiracial). The majority of the students (76.43%) received free or reduced-price lunch.

Of the original sample of 299 students, 19 were excluded because they did not complete questionnaire data on key constructs at either time point. At the second time point, 39 students attrited from the study. We found no significant differences between students who attrited from the study and those who stayed on all variables.

Procedures

This project was designed as a community collaboration between university and schools. The research team was engaged in a collaborative partnership with the participating school to achieve the mutual goal of supporting students' successful transition into middle school. All 6th-grade students (i.e., those making the transition from elementary to middle school) in the school were invited to participate.

Information packets and consent letters were sent to parents two weeks prior to data collection to allow parents time to ask questions about the study and/or to opt out of the study. Students were also asked to provide written assent. Time 1 data were collected in the Fall (October 2014) semester and Time 2 data were collected again in the following Spring (March 2015) semester. At each assessment, researchers administered a survey to participants during a 45-minute classroom period. These surveys included measures of participants' gender identity and peer relationships. Adolescents also provided peer nominations to identify bully-victim dyads. In each classroom, three to four research assistants proctored the assessment. This study was approved by the Arizona State University Institutional Review Board.

Measures: Gender-Related Variables

Perceived pressure to conform to gender norms. A 12-item adapted version of the Gender Felt Pressure Scale (Egan & Perry, 2001) was used at Time 1 to measure the degree to which participants felt pressure to conform to their own gender ($\alpha = .82$). This version included simpler wording and used a 5-point scale ranging from *not much* to *a lot*. Higher scores indicated higher negative reactions from self, peers, and parents when engaging in gender-nonconforming activities. Examples of items are "I would be upset if I acted like a [girls/boys]" or "My parents would be upset if I liked [girls/boys]'s activities."

Homophobic name-calling. At Time 1, students indicated how often in the previous month they received homophobic name-calling using an item adapted from the Homophobic Content Agent Target Scale (Poteat & Espelage, 2005). Specifically, the item, "Some kids call each other names such as gay, homo, or lesbian; how many times in the last month did anyone call you these names?" was rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *never or almost never*; 2 = *1 or 2 times*; 3 = *3 or 4 times*; 4 = *5 or 6 times*; 5 = *7 or more times*).

Gender nonconformity. We used a scale of perceived similarity to other-gender peers created by Martin et al. (2017) to assess adolescents' perceived gender nonconformity at both Times 1

(α = .78) and 2 (α = .87). Specifically, participants answered questions about the perceived similarity to girls and to boys (i.e., "How similar do you feel to [girls/boys]"; "act like [girls/boys]"). Using a 5-point Likert scale from *not much* (1) to *a lot* (5), items were coded to reflect other-gender conformity, with higher scores indicating higher gender nonconformity. Given that the gender nonconformity scale was highly skewed, we dichotomized this variable as high or low. In doing so, we considered that boys tend to report lower scores on gender nonconformity compared to girls as they evaluate their experienced similarity to the other gender more conservatively (Martin & Ruble, 2010). Thus, we used a differentiated median for boys and girls to identify students with high or low gender nonconformity (scores were coded as nonconforming if they were above 1 for boys and above 2 for girls). Using the same median for boys and girls would have drastically reduced the variation in gender conformity with one of the gender groups and would have limited the statistical power to find a significant association between this construct and the outcomes. In fact, only about 6% to 9% of boys reported a score above 2 and only 15% to 16% of girls reported a score of 1.

Measures: Bullying-Related Variables

Bully-victim peer network nominations. At both Time 1 and Time 2, students completed an unlimited peer nominations protocol of the peers "who like to bully other kids around (they push them, hit them, say mean things to them, call them names, tell lies about them, or get other kids not to play with them)." A roster of sixth-grade peer names was provided in case students did not remember a first or last name. First, participants were asked to nominate a peer who first came to mind as a bully. Second, participants were asked to nominate the peers whom that bully liked to victimize the most. After naming a bully and the victims whom the bully most victimized, participants could nominate another bully along with the associated victims. The number of nominations of bullies and victims they could make was unlimited. Nonparticipants did not provide nominations, but they were eligible to be nominated.

Bullying of gender-conforming and gender-nonconforming peers. To identify the bullies of gender-conforming and gender-nonconforming peers, information from the peer network nominations and gender nonconformity scale were integrated. First, the victims who were identified through the peer network nominations were classified as high or low in their gender nonconformity using the already described perceived similarity to other-gender peers scale. Second, based on the gender nonconformity of the victim, each bully-victim dyad was classified as "bullying of gender-conforming peer" or "bullying of gender-nonconforming peer." Finally, two count numbers of GNCVs and GCVs were associated with each bully identified through the peer network nominations.

Plan of Analysis

A series of count regression models (i.e., Poisson, negative binomial, and zero-inflated models) were used to predict the count number of nominations for being a bully of a gender-nonconforming or a gender-conforming peer (Aiken et al., 2015; Coxe et al., 2009). We first checked for normality and multicollinearity of the predictors, and no serious violation was found except for gender nonconformity, which was highly skewed. As discussed above, this variable was dichotomized as high or low using a different median for boys and girls. To then choose the most appropriate model, we used the natural log of the overdispersion coefficient, α, to examine the equidispersion assumption of the Poisson model on the dependent variable and the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) to cross-validate the different solutions. Smaller BIC values suggest a better fit. The count distributions for this study met the assumption of overdispersion for the number of GNCVs ($\alpha = 4.84$; $p < .001$), and GCVs ($\alpha = 2.52$; $p < .001$) supporting the use of the negative binomial model over the Poisson model. The BIC comparison test provided very strong evidence for preferring the negative binomial regression over a zero-inflated negative binomial regression in predicting the count of GNCVs (negative binomial: BIC = 344.466; zero-inflated negative binomial: BIC = 368.929) and GCVs (negative binomial: BIC = 362.951; zero-inflated negative binomial: BIC = 391.814).

Based on these tests, we used negative binomial models to examine potential predictors of the number of bullying behaviors against GNCVs and GCVs. First, we assessed the number of bullying behaviors against gender-nonconforming victims at Time 2 as the dependent variable, after controlling for the initial levels of the outcome measure and experience of victimization at Time 1. Regressions included perceived pressure to conform to gender norms, homophobic name-calling, gender nonconformity, and sex (Model 1).

Then, we tested if participants' sex may moderate the effect of perceived pressure to conform to gender norms (Model 2), homophobic name-calling (Model 3), and gender nonconformity (Model 4) on the bullies' preference to victimize gender-nonconforming peers. We tested the three interactions separately to avoid collinearity associated with cross-product terms in nonsignificant interactions and to examine whether the single interactions are independently significant. We tested the same procedure using GCVs as an outcome to test the hypothesis that perceived pressure to conform to gender norms, homophobic name-calling, and gender nonconformity are significantly associated with bullying gender-nonconforming peers but not gender-conforming peers.

We estimated 21% of missing data in Stata 15 using multiple imputations with chained equations (Johnson & Young, 2011). Power analyses indicated that the sample size of the study provided ample statistical power (99%) to detect a 30% or greater increase of bullying behaviors against gender-conforming and gender-nonconforming peers (Erdfelder et al., 1996).

Results

Descriptives

Of all participants, 77.86% at Time 1 and 73.93% at Time 2 were never named as bullies. Thus, the remaining 22.14% of early adolescents at Time 1 and 26.07% at Time 2 were named as bullies at least once. Overall, at Time 2, perpetrators tended to bully a greater number of GNCVs, B = 0.49, incidence rate

Table 1
Pearson and Spearman Correlations Among Key Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	*M* (*SD*)
1. Gender nonconformity (dichotomous) T1	—								
2. Perceived gender pressure T1	−.16*	—							2.92 (1.21)
3. Homophobic name-calling T1	−.01	.13†	—						1.63 (1.07)
4. Victimization (dichotomous)	.05	−.12†	.06	—					
5. Frequency of bullying GNCVs T1	.02	.07	.07	.09	—				0.24 (0.81)
6. Frequency of bullying GNCVs T2	−.12*	−.05	.11†	.13*	.32**	—			0.39 (1.18)
7. Frequency of bullying GCVs T1	−.10	−.03	.04	.11†	.50**	.30**	—		0.26 (0.77)
8. Frequency of bullying GCVs T2	−.09	−.05	.08	.18*	.26**	.59**	.33**	—	0.42 (1.05)

Note. Means and standard deviations are not provided for dichotomous variables. GNCVs = gender-nonconforming victims; GCVs = gender-conforming victims; T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2.
†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .001$.

ratio [IRR] = 1.63, $p = .002$, and gender-conforming victims (GCVs), B = 0.47, IRR = 1.59, $p = .002$, compared to Time 1.

For descriptive purposes, Pearson and Spearman correlations among key variables are presented in Table 1. Descriptive statistics of key variables are provided separately for boys and girls in Table 2. As expected, boys reported more perceived pressure to conform to gender norms, more homophobic name-calling, and less gender nonconformity compared to girls. Our preliminary analyses showed that on the gender nonconformity scale ranging from 1(low gender nonconformity) to 5 (high gender nonconformity), 56.25% of boys scored a 1 and 48.53% of girls scored a 2 or less. Thus, to have a more accurate identification of bullying behaviors against GNCVs and GCVs, we used these two scores as thresholds to differentiate boys and girls with high or low gender nonconformity. Based on this dichotomization, no sex differences were found on the tendency to bully GNCVs or GCVs.

Predicting Bullying Behaviors Against Gender-Conforming and -Nonconforming Peers

We conducted a series of negative binomial regression models to test our hypothesis that perceived pressure to conform to gender norms, homophobic name-calling, and gender nonconformity at Time 1 may be associated with bullies' preference to victimize GNCVs at Time 2 versus GCVs at Time 2 (Tables 3 and 4). Models were adjusted for initial levels of the outcome measures and experiences of victimization at Time 1.

The first model including the main predictors was run (Model 1 in Table 3). The results demonstrate that sex and perceived pressure to conform to gender norms at the beginning of the school year were not significant predictors of the tendency to bully GNCVs at the end of the school year. Receiving homophobic name-calling at Time 1 was associated with an increased number of bullying behaviors against GNCVs at Time 2 (i.e., by 47%). Participants who classified as gender nonconforming at Time 1 had 76% fewer GNCVs at Time 2.

We then analyzed the same model using bullying GCVs at Time 2 as an outcome instead of bullying GNCVs while controlling for experiences of bullying victimization and initial levels of bullying perpetration against GCVs at Time 1 (Table 4). As expected, experiences of victimization and bullying perpetration against GCVs at the baseline were associated with bullying GCVs at Time 2 (Model 1 in Table 4). No other significant predictors of bullying GCVs were found.

Testing the Moderating Effect of Sex

Our second hypothesis was that the effects of perceived pressure to conform to gender norms, homophobic name-calling, and gender nonconformity at Time 1 on the tendency to bully GNCVs at Time 2 would be stronger for boys compared to girls. To test this hypothesis, we ran three further regression models (see Table 3), each one examining a different interaction effect of sex with the perceived pressure to conform to gender norms (Model 2), homophobic name-calling (Model 3), and gender nonconformity (Model 4).

Unexpectedly, the interactions in Models 2 and 3 were not significant, indicating that perceived pressure to conform to gender norms and homophobic name-calling at the beginning of the school year were not differently associated with an increased number of GNCVs at the end of the school year for boys and girls. Nevertheless, Model 4 demonstrated that students' sex significantly moderated the association between gender nonconformity at Time 1 and bullying GNCVs at Time 2. As shown in Figure 1, gender nonconformity at Time 1 was associated with an increased number of bullying behaviors against GNCVs over time, particularly for boys. Simple slope tests revealed that the increased number of GNCVs at Time 2 was 93% higher among male bullies with low gender nonconformity compared to male bullies with high gender nonconformity at Time 1, B = -2.46; *SE* = .75; IRR = 0.09; $p < .002$. In contrast, among female bullies, gender nonconformity at Time 1 was not significantly associated with an increased number of GNCVs Time 2, B = −0.46; *SE* = 0.34; IRR = 0.63; $p = .188$.

Using bullying GCVs at Time 2 as an outcome instead of bullying GNCVs, none of the interactions were significant, such that perceived pressure to conform to gender norms, homophobic name-calling, and gender nonconformity at Time 1 were not differently associated with an increased number of bullying behaviors against GCVs at Time 2 for boys and girls (see Models 2, 3, and 4 in Table 4).

Table 2
Sex Differences in Key Variables

Variable	Girls, *n* = 114 (51.35%)		Boys, *n* = 108 (48.65%)			
	n (%)/*M* (*SD*)	Range	*n* (%)/*M* (*SD*)	Range	t/χ^2	*p*
Gender-related variables						
Gender nonconformity (continuous) T1	2.10 (1.01)	1–5	1.34 (0.50)	1–3.33	7.22	<.001
Gender-nonconforming students (dichotomous) T1	70 (51.47%)		48 (42.86%)		1.83	.176
Perceived gender pressure T1	2.68 (1.22)	1–5	3.18 (1.14)	1–5	–3.16	<.001
Homophobic name-calling T1	1.52 (0.97)	1–5	1.77 (1.19)	1–5	–1.84	.033
Bullying-related variables						
Victimization (dichotomous)	46 (30.26%)		37 (28.91%)		0.06	.804
Frequency of bullying GNCVs T1	0.24 (0.80)	0–8	0.24 (0.81)	0–7	–0.05	.478
Frequency of bullying GNCVs T2	0.39 (1.08)	0–7	0.38 (1.29)	0–10	0.08	.466
Frequency of bullying GCVs T1	0.21 (0.63)	0–4	0.33 (0.91)	0–5	–1.28	.101
Frequency of bullying GCVs T2	0.38 (1.05)	0–7	0.47 (1.04)	0–6	–0.69	.244

Note. Negative binomial and Poisson regressions were used to examine differences on bullying-related variables. Gender nonconformity was dichotomized using a differentiated median for each boys (*Mdn* = 1) and girls (*Mdn* = 2). GNCVs = gender-nonconforming victims; GCVs = gender-conforming victims; T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2.

Table 3
Negative Binomial Regressions of Frequency of Bullying Gender-Nonconforming Victims at Time 2

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	B	*SE*	IRR	B	*SE*	IRR	B	*SE*	IRR	B	*SE*	IRR
Main effects												
Male (coded 1)	–0.17	0.37	0.84	–0.04	0.56	0.96	0.26	0.60	1.30	0.29	0.45	1.33
Perceived gender pressure T1	–0.14	0.16	0.87	–0.12	0.18	0.89	–0.12	0.14	0.89	–0.15	0.16	0.86
Homophobic name-calling T1	0.38	0.19	1.46*	0.37	0.19	1.44	0.51	0.20	1.67*	0.47	0.19	1.60*
Gender nonconformity T1	–1.28	0.42	0.28**	–1.26	0.39	0.28**	–1.30	0.41	0.27**	–0.75	0.46	0.47
Victimization T1	0.69	0.38	2.00	0.67	0.37	1.96	0.70	0.37	2.01	0.76	0.37	2.13
Frequency of bullying gender-nonconforming victims T1	0.64	0.23	1.89**	0.64	0.23	1.89**	0.66	0.23	1.94**	0.57	0.17	1.78**
Interactions												
Perceived gender pressure × Male				–0.05	0.19	0.95						
Homophobic name-calling × Male							–0.29	0.32	0.75			
Gender nonconformity × Male										–2.01	0.81	0.13*

Note. IRR = incidence rate ratio, which is the exponentiated unstandardized regression coefficient; T1 = Time 1.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Discussion

Our findings add to previous research in the bullying literature showing that perpetrators' perceived gender conformity may influence bullying behaviors against GNCVs. Specifically, those who reported extremely low levels of gender nonconformity—that is, gender-conforming adolescents—were more likely to victimize GNCVs but not GCVs. The interaction term in our model revealed that this association exists only for boys, not for girls. This result is in line with prior studies linking aggressive behaviors among boys with the social processes associated with the development of masculinity (Reigeluth & Addis, 2016). These studies have shown that boys face strong social pressure to defend and demonstrate their masculinity by adhering to stereotypical masculine roles. As a result, validating one's masculinity is particularly crucial for securing, preserving, and enhancing social approval in the peer group (Reigeluth & Addis, 2016). This may lead to the type of social hierarchy wherein gender-conforming boys are assigned to a higher status and gender-nonconforming peers to a lower status. Given that bullying involves a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim, considering the role that gender conformity plays in creating this imbalance is crucial, particularly for boys. In addition, according to the gender role enforcement theory (Parrott, 2009), boys who

Table 4
Negative Binomial Regressions of Frequency of Bullying Gender-Conforming Victims at Time 2

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
Variable	B	*SE*	IRR	B	*SE*	IRR	B	*SE*	IRR	B	*SE*	IRR
Main effects												
Male (coded 1)	0.26	0.31	1.30	0.40	0.46	1.49	0.68	0.48	1.98	0.38	0.41	1.47
Perceived gender pressure T1	−0.03	0.17	0.97	0.01	0.19	1.02	−0.02	0.17	0.98	−0.06	0.17	0.95
Homophobic name-calling T1	0.18	0.14	1.19	0.13	0.16	1.14	0.30	0.21	1.35	0.18	0.15	1.20
Gender nonconformity T1	−0.46	0.34	0.63	−0.48	0.33	0.62	−0.47	0.32	0.62	−0.33	0.42	0.72
Victimization T1	0.82	0.27	2.27**	0.84	0.26	2.31**	0.89	0.27	2.44**	0.83	0.27	2.29**
Frequency of bullying gender-conforming victims T1	0.55	0.11	1.73***	0.55	0.11	1.73***	0.56	0.11	1.75***	0.55	0.11	1.73***
Interactions												
Perceived gender pressure × Male				−0.06	0.17	0.94						
Homophobic name-calling × Male							−0.29	0.28	0.75			
Gender nonconformity × Male										−0.35	0.60	0.71

Note. IRR = incidence rate ratio, which is the exponentiated unstandardized regression coefficient; T1 = Time 1.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

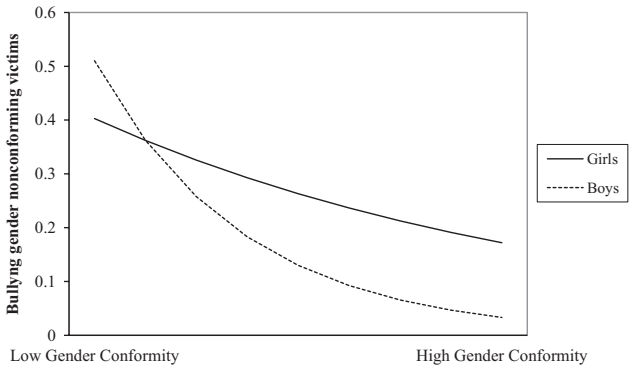

FIGURE 1. *Predictive margins for bullying gender-nonconforming victims based on the interaction between sex and gender nonconformity.*

emphasize their masculinity are more likely to experience discomfort with gender nonconformity and to distance themselves from gender-nonconforming behaviors using aggression. Thus, aggressive behaviors may serve to define boundaries that include themselves as masculine boys in the superior group and exclude the gender-nonconforming peers in the inferior group.

Another particularly interesting finding is that perpetrators who receive homophobic name-calling are more likely to engage in bullying GNCVs but not GCVs. The interaction between students' sex and receiving homophobic name-calling was not significant, suggesting that this association is similar for male and female perpetrators. A similar outcome was found by a previous study (Birkett & Espelage, 2015) showing that youth increase their perpetration of homophobic name-calling in response to the homophobic name-calling that they experience. The present study adds to the existing research by suggesting that in response to homophobic name-calling, students are more likely to respond with victimization especially against GNCVs. The current findings further suggest that receiving homophobic name-calling may evoke defensive reactions of anger and aggression against gender-nonconforming behaviors (Glick et al., 2007; Salvati et al., 2016; Toomey et al., 2012). In fact, homophobic name-calling may bring into question one's own gender conformity by challenging one's sexual identity. Thus, youth who are called homophobic names may feel more pressure to prove their heterosexuality by distancing themselves from gender-nonconforming behaviors and by punishing others who express such nonconforming behaviors. Indeed, several studies conducted with adults revealed that men who are exposed to a threat to their masculine identities are more likely to express anger toward gender-nonconforming behaviors (Salvati et al., 2016; Salvati, Pistella, Ioverno, et al., 2018). Fewer studies exist on girls' and women's defensive reactions to the violation of traditional gender roles. The existing research is mostly focused on sexual minority adults. One study (Salvati, Pistella, Giacomantonio, & Baiocco, 2018) found that in a sample of lesbian women, those with lower self-perceived femininity had more negative attitudes toward gay men. A similar study showed that masculine behaviors among lesbian women provoked negative emotions among lesbian participants (Salvati, Pistella, Ioverno, et al., 2018).

At first, our finding seems counterintuitive in showing that among boys, gender-conforming bullies target GNCVs, and at the same time, victims of homophobic name-calling target GNCVs. Nevertheless, these two measures of gender conformity and homophobic name-calling may represent different perspectives on how adolescents manage their gender expression. On one hand, boys who reported extremely low levels of gender nonconformity were probably those who tended to emphasize their masculinity. Thus, they should be more motivated to distance themselves from gender-nonconforming behaviors by harassing GNCVs (Parrott, 2009). On the other hand, receiving homophobic name-calling could trigger adolescents' drive to prove their gender conformity, and bullying GNCVs may be one way to accomplish this goal. In this perspective, it is important to keep in mind that all students, regardless of their actual gender

expression, can display these defensive reactions as homophobic name-calling can be directed toward both gender-conforming and gender-nonconforming youth (DeLay et al., 2017).

Contrary to prior evidence (Navarro et al., 2016), perceived pressure to conform to gender norms was not associated with bullying behaviors. This may be because this study focused on the number of victims associated with each perpetrator, whereas previous findings focused on the frequency of bullying behaviors. Thus, perceived pressure to conform to gender norms may operate more on the repetition element of the bullying behaviors than the selection of the victims. Alternatively, we may have not seen any effect because we used a general construct of perceived pressure to conform to gender norms. There may be a distinction in the effects of different types of felt pressure (e.g., pressure coming from parents, peers, or self; Cook et al., 2019). Future studies should distinguish these effects by socialization sources in order to fully understand their influence on bullying behaviors.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

Among the strengths (e.g., the integrated use of self-report and peer nomination measures, and the opportunity to analyze interactions in an entire 6th-grade class), the use of a longitudinal design is one of the most important. Overall, there is a paucity of longitudinal research on factors related to bullying behaviors against gender-nonconforming students during the transition to middle school. This represents a sizeable limitation in the extant literature. Longitudinal data, even over the course of a single school year, provide a better understanding of factors that shape adolescent behaviors and clearer inferences on changes in the prevalence of bullying behaviors beyond a single instance in time. This is especially critical when analyzing the transition from elementary to middle school characterized by many biological, psychological, and social-emotional changes.

This study has a number of limitations. First, additional information is needed on the measurement of bullying behaviors, such as motivations, frequency, and forms of victimization, for a more nuanced understanding of the predictors of gender-based bullying perpetration. Second, because of the number of bully-victim dyads, the current study did not have the statistical power to examine cross-gender and same-gender bullying behaviors. Therefore, future research might collect similar data among larger samples in order to capture these nuances. Third, for experiences of homophobic name-calling, we relied on a single-item measure. This measure has clear face validity, yet future research could employ more robust measures of this construct. Finally, school practices, inclusive of sexual and gender identity issues, are other important moderators to consider because they may influence the incidence of bullying behaviors particularly against GNCVs (Day et al., 2019; Ioverno et al., 2016; Russell et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2018).

Conclusions

This study provides a significant contribution to the literature on the determinants of gender bullying as a function of the victim's and the bully's gender conformity. Our findings highlight the need for approaching the study of gender identity development in adolescence more broadly in relation to bullying behaviors based on bias motivation and the importance of identifying those factors related to gender identity that characterize aggressive behaviors against GNCVs. Overall, our results suggest that there is a need for antibias bullying policies and practices to place greater emphasis on gender-related processes within schools in order to prevent bullying based on gender identity.

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