A Social Ecology of Bias-Based Bullying of Sexual and Gender Minority Youth: Toward a Conceptualization of Conversion Bullying

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Abstract

Homophobic bullying is pervasive and deleterious, and a source of extensive health and mental health disparities affecting sexual and gender minority youth (SGMY). Investigations conducted over the past two decades across the social ecology of SGMY indicate individual (e.g., gender), microsystem (e.g., schools), and exosystem level (e.g., community norms) factors associated with homophobic bullying. Emerging evidence at the macrosystem level demonstrates the powerful influence of laws, policies, and ideologies on the population health of sexual minority adults. Based on social ecological theory and emerging evidence at the macrosystem level, we advance a conceptualization of the religious social ecology of homophobic bullying and articulate the construct of conversion bullying, a form of bias-based bullying that may be unique to SGMY. Conversion bullying is manifested in the invocation of religious rhetoric and rationalizations in repeated acts of peer aggression against SGMY that cause harm, based on the premise that same-sex attractions and behaviors are immoral or unnatural and with implicit or explicit communication that one should change one's sexuality to conform to heteronormative ideals. We describe implications of conversion bullying for social work practice, education, social policy, and research.

KEYWORDS: bullying, sexual minority, social ecology, religion, homophobia, antigay bias

INTRODUCTION

Bias-based bullying against sexual and gender minority youth (SGMY) is pervasive and damaging. A spate of media coverage of the tragic suicides of SGMY as a result of bullying and supportive Internet campaigns notwithstanding, SGMY experience higher levels of bullying and related harms than heterosexual youth (Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman, & Austin, 2010; Friedman et al., 2011; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006). The extreme prevalence of verbal (90%) and physical abuse (40%) in schools specifically targeting sexual and gender minority children and adolescents in North America (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010) may appropriately be termed an epidemic of homophobic bullying.

Extensive evidence indicates that SGMY who experience homophobic bullying are at elevated risk for depression (Burton, Marshal, Chisolm, Sucato, & Friedman, 2013; Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011), sexual risk behaviors (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; Li, DiStefano, Mouttapa, & Gill, 2014; Robinson & Espelage, 2013; Russell et al., 2011), substance use (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; Talley, Hughes, Aranda, Birkett, & Marshal, 2014), and suicidality (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; Burton et al., 2013; Russell et al., 2011) compared to heterosexual youth and SGMY who experience lower levels of peer victimization.
Epidemiologic approaches that document the prevalence of bullying against SGMY and its negative sequelae help to reveal the pervasiveness of the problem and resulting health disparities. They serve as a corrective to approaches that address homophobic bullying as a series of isolated individual-level phenomena or tragic one-off events documented in sporadic media coverage. Nevertheless, while bias-based bullying against SGMY is believed to be a function of sexual stigma (i.e., “society's shared belief system through which homosexuality is denigrated, discredited, and constructed as invalid related to heterosexuality” [Herek, 2004; Herek, Chopp, & Strohl, 2007, p. 171]), gender-nonconformity stigma (i.e., due to “the expression of characteristics that are socially and culturally associated with the opposite gender” [Logie, Newman, Chakrapani, & Shunmugam, 2012; Sandfort, Melendez, & Diaz, 2007, p.182], and structural factors, such as institutionalized discrimination, until recently much of the data have demonstrated associations at the individual level between bullying and various negative health outcomes. Across many areas of population health, including that of sexual and gender minority populations, it has proven difficult to generate empirical evidence of the impact of structural-level factors on individual and community health (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014).

The purpose of this critical review is to apply relevant theory and emerging empirical evidence to advance a new conceptualization of what may be unique components and mechanisms of bias-based bullying against SGMY. We first review the evidence in support of a social-ecological approach to understanding bias-based bullying against SGMY, with a focus on recent evidence of macrosocial influences on sexual minority health. We then turn to particular manifestations of macrosocial factors in religious discourses and institutional practices that assert that nonheterosexual attractions and behaviors are immoral and/or abnormal; must be hidden, contained, or otherwise controlled; and furthermore, that urge and often intimidate SGMY to “change” or “cure” their sexual orientation to align with heterosexist norms, which we term “conversion bullying.”

MOVING UPSTREAM: A SOCIAL ECOLOGY OF HOMOPHOBIC BULLYING

Previous scholarship has productively applied a social-ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) to begin to characterize the multiple levels of influence of homophobic bullying (Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Hong & Garbarino, 2012). The significance of a social ecological analysis of bias-based bullying is that it moves beyond the disproportionate focus on proximal factors (e.g., individual-level characteristics of victims and perpetrators) to address progressively more distal features of children's and youth' environments (Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009). Absent analyses and interventions at the macrosocial level, arguably the overarching factors that produce and enable homophobic bullying will continue to exert a negative influence on the other systems. Thus, interventions at other system levels, while necessary, will theoretically be required in perpetuity if they do not address the macrosystem; the overarching structures and ideologies at the root of homophobic bullying will continue to shape the social ecology of SGMY.

Individual
Several investigations have demonstrated the significance of individual factors, including sex and sexual orientation, in the epidemiology of homophobic bullying (Barboza et al., 2009; Berlan et al., 2010; Espelage & Swearer, 2003). These findings build on studies that indicate the disproportionate rates of peer victimization targeting SGMY versus heterosexual youth, and the extensive impacts of that victimization on individual health.

**Microsystem**

Scholarship on bullying has also advanced the importance of understanding bullying as involving not only a perpetrator and a victim, but peers and the social context of the classroom (Atlas & Pepler, 1998). Several studies have addressed the microsystems (e.g., family, peers, schools) in which homophobic bullying occurs, with schools as a particular focus (Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Kosciw et al., 2009). As sites where the predominance of bullying occurs, schools also serve as focal venues for anti-bullying interventions (Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Kosciw et al., 2009). Interventions at the school level have involved inclusive resources for sexual minority students (e.g., gay-straight alliances), core curricula that incorporate education on sexual and gender diversity, and anti-bullying policy recommendations that deal exclusively with violence against SGMY (Dessel, 2010; Murray, 2011; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010; Wolff & Himes, 2010).

**Exosystem**

Less extensively studied are factors that may influence homophobic bullying at the exosystem level (e.g., community environment, mass media) (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Hong & Garbarino, 2012). A national survey of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) (Kosciw et al., 2009) demonstrates the impact of the exosystem, that is, factors beyond the school microsystem that explain variations in homophobic bullying. Differences at the community (exosystem) level were found to be associated with differential levels of hostile school climates for SGMY, while differences at the school district (microsystem) level explained relatively little of the variation in individual school climates. In particular, LGBT youth in rural communities with lower adult educational attainment were found to face more hostile school climates, as did youth in the South and Midwest versus the Northeastern United States (Kosciw et al., 2009). Previous research similarly identified an association between higher levels of education at the community level and lower levels of peer victimization of LGBT students (Moore & Ovadia, 2006). In addition to the community environment, the media is an exosystem that may foster bullying against SGMY or alternately promote greater tolerance of sexual diversity (Mishna, Newman, Daley, & Solomon, 2009). Thus, while schools are important sites for anti-bullying interventions, these studies at the exosystem level suggest that interventions may need to evolve and expand to more effectively counter homophobic bullying at the school microsystem level by addressing more distal (i.e., community-level) factors that contribute to school environments that are less conducive to homophobic bullying.

**Macrosystem**

Finally, Bronfenbrenner (1977) described the macrosystem as “differ(ing) in a fundamental way” from the other levels. The macrosystem constitutes “overarching institutional patterns of the
culture or subculture” of which the other systems are the “concrete mechanisms” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The macrosystem includes both explicit manifestations, in laws and social policies, and more implicit manifestations “as carriers of information and ideology,” which include societal norms (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). All levels of a child's social ecology are posited as important to healthy development and thereby constitute valuable domains for research (Bronfenbrenner, 1977); however, only recently have empirical investigations documented the impact of factors at the macrosystem level on the health of SGMY.

Based on social ecological theory, we would posit that state and community-level laws, policies, and social and religious norms that are more discriminatory against sexual minority populations would be associated with higher levels of homophobic bullying. We are aware of no published empirical investigations that have assessed macrosystem influences on homophobic bullying. However, several well-designed recent investigations have overcome the many challenges in empirically investigating the influence of macrosocial factors on population health, in part enabled by increasing practices of collecting data in national surveys that indicate sexual orientation and gender identity. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that overarching institutional practices and policies regarding sexual minorities, including laws, policies, societal norms, and religious climate, exert significant influences on the health of SGMY.

Macrosocial factors including statutes on same-sex marriage, employment non-discrimination, same-sex adoption, LGBT-specific hate crimes and bias-based bullying of SGMY, religious climate, and LGBT policy attitudes have been shown to exert a significant impact on health outcomes among sexual minority populations. In an analysis of data from a nationally representative U.S. sample, sexual minorities living in communities with high rates of structural stigma, measured as antigay discrimination and negative social attitudes, had a shorter life expectancy of approximately 12 years compared with those living in communities with low levels of structural stigma (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014). Suicide, violence/homicide, and cardiovascular diseases were significantly more prevalent among sexual minority adults living in high-prejudice versus low-prejudice communities (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014).

A few studies specifically demonstrate macrosystem influences on the health of SGMY. In an investigation conducted among sexual minority young men (ages 18 to 25) across four U.S. regions, higher rates of smoking and alcohol use were identified among those who lived in communities with more discriminatory legislative policies and more negative attitudes toward sexual minorities (Pachankis, Hatzenbuehler, & Starks, 2014). Results further demonstrated a statistically significant interaction between structural stigma and individual-level stigma on substance use outcomes (Pachankis et al., 2014), an outcome posited by social-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). In a study conducted in Massachusetts, SMY living in neighborhoods with higher rates of LGBT assault hate crimes had significantly higher rates of reported suicidal ideation and suicide attempts than those living in neighborhoods with lower assault hate crime rates—a finding that was not replicated among heterosexual youth (Duncan & Hatzenbuehler, 2014). Nor were suicidal ideation and attempts among sexual minority youth linked to other types of neighborhood-level crime (Duncan & Hatzenbuehler, 2014).
Finally, in a population-based sample of 31,852 high school students (including 1,413 LGB students) in Oregon, a more negative religious climate surrounding LGB youth was a significant determinant of elevated health risk behaviors, including alcohol abuse, higher number of sexual partners (Hatzenbuehler, Pachankis, & Wolff, 2012), and suicide attempts (Hatzenbuehler, 2011). Religious climate was measured by the proportion of adherents in a community to each of 85 different religious groups in Oregon, based on the group's support for homosexuality. Living in more supportive religious climates was associated with fewer health risk behaviors among all youth, with a stronger effect among LGB than heterosexual youth. Thus religious climate evidenced both negative as well as salutary effects on the health of SGMY.

**THE RELIGIOUS SOCIAL ECOLOGY OF HOMOPHOBIC BULLYING**

The role of religion in sexual stigma against SGMY has been explored at the individual, microsystem, and exosystem levels.

**Individual**

On an individual level, it is important to apply an intersectional perspective, since religion and sexual orientation are not mutually exclusive. In fact, SGMY who are religiously affiliated may struggle with health and mental health risks as a consequence of trying to resolve their religious and sexual or gender identities. Engagement in religious institutions that cast rejecting or discriminatory messages may lead to internalized homophobia (Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005), depression and low self-esteem (Page, Lindahl, & Malik, 2013), anxiety (Hamblin & Gross, 2013), and feelings of shame and guilt (Sherry, Adelman, Whilde, & Quick, 2010) for SGMY.

Religious sanction of violence, in particular, is associated with higher levels of aggression and rationalizations for violence. In an experiment conducted with university students, Bushman, Ridge, Das, Key, and Busath (2007) demonstrate that sanction of violence by God is associated with greater aggression. Students read a narrative about violent retaliation for a murder and were informed that it was either a verse from the Book of Judges in the Old Testament or from an ancient scroll. Half the participants read that God commanded a violent retaliation for the murder and, for the other half, this section was omitted and retaliation occurs without God's commandment. Immediately after participants read the narrative, the investigators implemented a reliable measure to assess aggressive behavior. Among both believers and nonbelievers in God and the bible, aggression was greater when the participant thought the text derived from a scriptural passage and when informed the violence was sanctioned by God. This suggests a mechanism whereby religion as a macrosystem may exert an influence on individual aggressive behavior and rationalization of violence.

**Microsystem**

On a microsystem level, investigations in the fields of psychology and social work indicate how places of worship (Bowers, Minichiello, & Plummer, 2010), fundamentalist sects (Barton, 2010; Woodford, Levy, & Walls, 2013) and faith-based educational institutions (Maher, 2013) promote rejection and discrimination against SGMY and adults. These studies invoke “spirit-crushing
experiences of isolation, abuse, and self-loathing” (Barton, 2010, p. 477) that may require a “lifelong process of posttraumatic recovery” (Bowers et al., 2010, p. 70). A study of SGMY at Catholic high schools and Christian colleges identified widespread fears of suspension, discrimination, and physical violence, with “a disturbingly high percentage of males in Catholic schools express[ing] that violence against GLBTQ persons was acceptable” (Maher, 2013, p. 271).

**Exosystem**

Evidence for the role of religion at the exosystem level in stigma and discrimination against SGMY is documented in a study conducted across multiple contexts in Washington (Higa et al., 2014). Negative experiences among SGMY were identified across multiple contexts, including schools, religious institutions, families, communities, and neighborhoods. SGMY were targeted at the community level in their being excluded from religious services across multiple places of worship and in being subjected to pervasive negative messages from religious communities “that they are sinners, abominations, or that God hates them and they will go to hell for being LGBTQ” (Higa et al., 2014, p. 677).

**Macrosystem**

Recent evidence that demonstrates the pervasive impact of macrosystem factors on the population health of SGMY suggests it is critical to build on studies at individual, microsystem, and exosystem levels to advance our understanding of the role of religion at the macrosystem level in homophobic bullying. The religious macrosystem is constituted by institutional cultures and discourses that are superordinate to the microsystem level of particular community religious institutions. Religion precisely serves as “a carrier of information and ideology,” a defining feature of a macrosystem-level phenomenon (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

At the macrosystem level, religiously based homophobia is not only prevalent in particular religious organizations, places of worship, and faith-based educational institutions; religious language, including that which denounces and attacks homosexuality as an “abomination,” permeates secular discourse (Chonody, Woodford, Smith, & Silverschanz, 2013; Sanabria, 2012; Swigonski, 2001). Religious constructs of homophobia are embedded in secular public discourse and are adopted to sanction abusive behaviors against sexual minorities, “as the justification for name-calling, for acts of psychological, spiritual, and physical violence, and for hate crimes” (Swigonski, 2001, p. 35). The behavior and actions of religious adherents toward those who are perceived as violating a biblical morality may be influenced by religious texts that tolerate physically, verbally, or emotionally violent behavior through the sanction of God (Bushman et al., 2007).

Antigay teachings that stem from religious institutions and scriptural language are disseminated in public settings by religious leaders and conservative community members (Higa et al., 2014). Religiously based antigay values infiltrate public life, and are used to contest protections for basic human rights, including same-sex sexual behavior and marriage, as well as adoption among sexual minorities (Miller & Chamberlain, 2013).
Religiously based homophobia is also embedded in public educational institutions. A key finding of investigations of homophobic bullying in schools is the role of religion in stifling action by responsible adults. Fear of religious backlash and conflict from religious parents and families, along with concerns over career demotions or dismissals (Flores, 2014; Goldstein, Collins, & Halder, 2007), often render teachers, principals, and school administrators inactive or impotent in confronting religious expressions of sexual stigma (Dessel, 2010; Murray, 2011). The primacy of such religiously based homophobia thus undermines the rights of SGMY to attend school without fear of violence, abuse, and discrimination.

Religious condemnation of same-sex behavior and attraction is often reframed and reconstructed not as a form of harassment or bullying, but an expression of personal and deeply held religious beliefs or ideology (Rodriguez-Seijas, 2014). Educators, who would arguably not tolerate, for example, racist messages in schools redolent of the pre-civil rights era, may nevertheless excuse antigay messages and epithets. Sexual prejudice is thereby cloaked under the mantle of religious freedom rather than addressed clearly as a mechanism of abuse. An intersectional perspective further reveals the particular challenges faced by SGMY who are also ethnic minorities, some of whom express compounded anxieties in not being able to discern the reason for being targeted by bullies (Daley, Solomon, Newman, & Mishna, 2008). A study conducted among graduate students in the Northeastern United States specifically indicates the difficulty in responding to religious prejudice: “these student teachers lacked the confidence and language to confront religious-based [sic] homophobia that was deeply embedded in many of the schools” (Zack, Mannheim, & Alfano, 2010, p. 105).

Beyond the school microsystem, antigay religious teachings and the attitudes and opinions of religious community leaders provide justification for the negative reactions of families to SGMY. Theistic triangulation describes a general process of “turning a human dyad into a divine triad (God-self-other)” whereby “God and religion/spirituality may be overtly called upon by one or both parties to back up their own position and coerce the partner to change” (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2009, p. 291). Theistic triangulation within families is associated with the “use of toxic and argumentative conflict resolution strategies (e.g., yelling, name calling, insults)” (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2009, p. 300). In particular, conservatively religious families may use religious tools, consisting of scripture and religious doctrine, and the invocation of God to convey disapproval and condemnation of same-sex attraction and behavior (Etengoff & Daiute, 2014). In a study of coming out among gay male participants from religiously observant families, the majority reported theistic triangulation to be the primary source of familial conflict and pain during this process (Etengoff & Daiute, 2014).

Importantly, religious belief in God and scripture has played a fundamental role in the development and establishment of sexual reorientation therapy, commonly referred to as “conversion therapy” (Maccio, 2010; Panozzo, 2013). Even amidst localities and states that are beginning to ban what has been discredited for decades as harmful and unethical practice by major professional bodies, including the American Psychological Association (APA) and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the confluence of media campaigns and coercive messages from family and community members creates an environment in which
SGMY may be “pressured to seek reparative or conversion therapies, which cannot and will not change sexual orientation… [and] can lead to severe emotional damage” (National Committee on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Issues, 2000). Many religious organizations adhere to a framework that states or implies homosexuality can and should be cured and treated, whether through a formal conversion therapy organization or through informal religious engagement and spiritual/pastoral counseling.

SGMY may be pressured by their families to speak with religious counselors and leaders. These youth are conditioned to believe that their same-sex attractions and behaviors are sinful and can be changed through faith-based therapy and the act of prayer. In turn, homosexuality is perceived as a phase or a spirit that can be prevented, suppressed, and cured. In reality, this “love the sinner, hate the sin” approach is severely detrimental more so as it projects a false aura of acceptance; it is a means to brandish a weakly camouflaged homophobic ideology in which religious doctrine and religious language are employed as authoritative justification for the abuse of SGMY. Harmful intervention techniques include bible study, individual counseling, and prayer (Flentje, Heck, & Cochran, 2013), with the aim to control and change the individual's sexual attractions and behaviors. Individuals in sexual reorientation “therapy” describe detrimental consequences, including low self-esteem and internalized homophobia (Panozzo, 2013), depression, social withdrawal, and sexual dysfunction (Maccio, 2010). Sexual reorientation “therapy” is not a therapeutic technique; rather, it is a form of “religious abuse” that “occurs when a set of religious rules and doctrine are misused in a way to harm LGBT individuals” (Super & Jacobson, 2011). Religious leaders use their power to manipulate and intimidate sexual minorities, inciting and fomenting a maladaptive belief that their sexuality is abnormal and should be changed.

CONVERSION BULLYING

Based on empirical evidence of the impact of macrosystem-level factors on the population health of SGMY, extensive evidence of religiously based homophobia in the microsystems and exosystems of SGMY, and theory-driven conceptualization of a social ecology of homophobic bullying, we advance the construct of “conversion bullying.”

Conversion bullying involves the invocation of religious rhetoric and rationalizations in repeated acts of physical, verbal, or emotional aggression by individuals or groups of individuals, often more powerful or perceived to be more powerful, that are experienced as causing physical or mental anguish in another individual, defined as the victim. Conversion bullying is a form of peer victimization that is unique to bias-based bullying of SGMY or youth perceived to be sexual or gender minority. The religious rhetoric is most often based on the premise that same-sex attractions and behaviors are immoral and unnatural, and with the implicit or explicit communication that one should “cure” or change one's sexuality to conform to heteronormative standards. This definition of conversion bullying builds on foundational definitions and empirical research on general bullying, as articulated by Olweus (1993, 1994), Atlas and Pepler (1998), Ballard, Argus, and Remley (1999) and Greene (2000); although there remains some disagreement as to the precise definition of bullying itself (Griffin & Gross, 2004), our definition relies on the main commonly agreed upon criteria.
By specifically labeling a form of bias-based bullying characterized by religious rhetoric used to justify violence and harm, we promote a focus on the deleterious health and mental health risks of religiously based homophobia for SGMY, including an epidemic of homophobic bullying. Nevertheless, it is important conceptually to distinguish the promotion of homophobic and heterosexist religious ideologies, which, while it may be deemed hateful, is not bullying per se, from conversion bullying. In naming conversion bullying, we aim to draw explicit attention to the powerful role of the religious macrosystem as a root cause of bias-based bullying enacted in peer victimization of SGMY. Furthermore, we articulate a specific mechanism through which religiously based homophobia at the macrosystem level, grounded in religious teachings and scriptural language that condemn homosexuality, manifests at the exosystem, microsystem, and individual levels in bias-based bullying of children and youth. Sexual and gender minority stigma is in turn tolerated as a morally acceptable form of expression, as religious texts justify or are manipulated to justify and permit acts of prejudice and discrimination; these religious values imbue individual-level harms against sexual minority youth (Whitley, 2009).

**IMPLICATIONS OF CONVERSION BULLYING FOR SOCIAL WORK**

**Practice and Education**

The construct of conversion bullying is important to social work practitioners’ understanding of the health and mental health risks of religiously based homophobia toward SGMY. This construct aims to encourage social workers to be reflexive and cautious about imposing their own values and beliefs, remaining attuned to the ways in which heteronormative values and religious beliefs are indoctrinated. Results of a study conducted among Christian social work students indicated that religiosity and religious teachings were significantly associated with antigay bias (Chonody et al., 2013). Social work students who adhere to a religion that propagates negative messages about same-sex sexuality must consider the implications of these beliefs and monitor themselves in order to engage in ethical and evidence-informed practice.

Certain interventions and practices in therapy, perhaps unintended, may serve as informal manifestations of sexual reorientation “therapy”; ostensibly therapeutic practices can constitute micro-aggressions, re-traumatizing clients and evoking harmful messages that same-sex attractions and behavior are immoral and wrong. For instance, referring a SGMY client for pastoral or religious counseling, even at the behest of parents or teachers, to deal with psychosocial challenges in navigating his or her sexual orientation or gender identity, runs counter to acceptable and ethical professional practice if that counseling suggests or advocates changing one's sexual orientation. In fact, the imprimatur of a professional referral may facilitate further psychological damage at the hands of such “counseling,” which may contribute to the toxic social ecology of conversion bullying. Another form of malpractice involves a social worker's aligning with a SGMY's internalized stigma, which may be produced or exacerbated by conversion bullying, by suggesting that reported psychological distress is a function of the client's sexual orientation or gender identity. Such an approach may reflect the worker's own unchecked prejudices or internalized stigma. Rather, the worker should engage with the youth in critically exploring and addressing the multiplicity of factors that contribute to a social ecology of anti-LGBT prejudice and discrimination, help them to adaptively navigate the stigma-related
stress that may result (Hatzenbuehler, 2009), and make informed referrals to professionally facilitated and community groups with other SGMY to provide LGBT-affirmative social support.

On a familial level, conversion bullying may be intensified by theistic triangulation between parents and children—the maladaptive invocation of God or religious texts in familial conflicts that tends to worsen conflicts and truncate communication (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2009)—particularly during the coming-out process (Etengoff & Daiute, 2014). Research on theistic triangulation suggests the importance of social workers’ maintaining a check on their own personal religious beliefs so as to avoid inducement to engage in such triangles (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2009; Etengoff & Daiute, 2014). Rather, the worker’s skillful engagement with families may be used to facilitate their provision of social support, which might include a process—particularly for religious families—that is more akin to “theistic mediation,” enabling them to draw on their religious beliefs in positive and relationally adaptive ways (Etengoff & Daiute, 2014).

It is important that social work curricula address issues related to conversion bullying and how social-structural stigma is enacted in individual-level harm, particularly in intimidating SGMY to change, control, or “cure” their sexual orientation. It is likely inevitable that social work practitioners will work with SGMY, their parents, or sexual minority adults at some point, and it is in their best interests, and in the interests of their clients, to find ways in which to challenge and confront biases that can have unintended deleterious consequences for the health and mental health of their clients.

**Policy**

In 2008, the APA published “Just the Facts about Sexual Orientation and Youth: A Primer for Principals, Educators, and School Personnel” by Just the Facts Coalition (2008), a group made up of organizations including the APA, NASW, and the School Social Work Association of America. This booklet directly addresses issues regarding “reparative therapy” and the psychologically damaging efforts of religious ministries to change sexual orientation. It also provides relevant legal principles to prevent school staff members from stigmatizing SGMY and from “promoting, endorsing, or inhibiting religion or attempting to impose particular religious beliefs on students” (Just the Facts Coalition, 2008, p. 11). This primer is an important tool for proactively addressing religiously based stigma and discrimination against SGMY in public schools by helping to forge support for broad school policies. In framing their position, the organizations involved caution educators and administrators against promoting their own religious beliefs in classrooms or advocating the use and practice of conversion therapy. The detrimental impact of conversion therapy and the erroneous belief that sexual orientation can be cured or healed are highlighted.

The construct of conversion bullying suggests a further step based on this primer in adding a macrosystem analysis that examines how “reparative” therapy derives from powerful and pervasive religious contexts and practices that foster individual-level harms against SGMY. The construct of conversion bullying conceptualizes how religious rhetoric that condemns homosexuality, including the coercive practice of “reparative” therapy, serves as a mechanism to
perpetuate the pervasive and repeated physical, verbal, and emotional abuse perpetrated against SGMY in schools.

The conceptual model of conversion bullying has further implications for teachers and social workers, through the ways in which they can advocate for SGMY and intervene to prevent further victimization. Political action, such as implementation of school-based anti-homophobia policies, education, and behavioral discipline, is critical to support the safety and inclusivity of SGMY in our schools (Goldstein et al., 2007); conversion bullying further suggests the importance of interventions that address the religious social ecology as a critical context for bias-based bullying. Social workers, principals, teachers, and SGMY might engage in dialogue with religious and secular organizations, collaborating with those that promote acceptance and inclusivity for all youth, in part to critically examine and re-interpret scriptural language that has been manipulated to promote intolerance and hatred as well as to increase the presence of evidence-informed understandings of societal functioning. Policies need to address the ways in which religious values and religious language facilitate and tolerate the stigmatization of SGMY, and to insist that freedom of expression should not entail the right to peer victimization.

Research

Future research should focus on empirically documenting conversion bullying, including the mechanisms through which social-structural stigma from religious-motivated doctrine and scriptural language infuses and promotes homophobic bullying at microsystem, exosystem, and, particularly, macrosystem levels. The construct of conversion bullying suggests that religiously based homophobia is not simply a practice of religious expression; rather, it may have distinct negative health and mental health consequences for SGMY, including higher rates of substance use, depression, anxiety, and suicidality, and constraints on access to public education, compared to heterosexual youth. Future research should also mobilize and evaluate multilevel interventions constructed in conjunction with religious, spiritual, and secular leaders who promote an ethos of acceptance and celebration of all youth. At the macrosystem level, investigations that explore the associations between hostile religious climates and discourses, and homophobic bullying, may provide further evidence to support the conceptualization of conversion bullying as well as interventions to prevent harm.

CONCLUSION

The conceptualization of conversion bullying advances our understanding of the social-ecological spectrum of homophobic bullying by articulating the macrosystemic roots of religiously based homophobia as well as the distinct mechanism through which overarching homophobic religious ideologies support and produce bias-based bullying of SGMY. The articulation of a specific definition of biased-based bullying that is characterized by religiously based homophobia in conversion bullying may support targeted research and intervention practices to prevent structural-based harms and establish further recommendations for safe and inclusive educational and religious institutions for all youth.