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Gender Policing in Schools and Mental Health: The Importance of Inclusive Non-Discrimination Ordinances

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Gender Policing in Schools and Mental Health: The Importance of Inclusive Non-Discrimination Ordinances

Objectives: High schools increasingly include sexual orientation, and to a lesser extent gender identity, in non-discrimination policies (GLSEN, 2012). These policies, however, often exclude gender-specific discrimination seen as unrelated to these identities, such as the policing of masculinity or femininity. Such policing may involve peers targeting individuals who are seen as not feminine or masculine “enough.” The current study examined the role of gender-specific discrimination in predicting symptoms of psychological distress.

Methods: Participants were 681 UM students, including 63 LGB-identified individuals, who took part in an online study that examined correlates among different dimensions of identities, stigma, and mental health. Participants were asked if they experienced various forms of discrimination in high school, including being hit or teased by peers or teachers, because they were not seen as masculine or feminine enough. A hierarchical regression was calculated to examine the additive impact of gender-specific discrimination in predicting symptoms of psychological distress, while controlling for global experiences of victimization, as well as ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation.

Results: Gender-specific harassment predicted symptoms of psychological distress above and beyond a model that accounts for age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender non-specific victimization ($\Delta R^2 = .069$, $p < .001$), contributing to an overall model that predicted 18.3% of the variance in psychological distress scores.

Conclusion: Individuals targeted on the basis of their gender expression in schools are especially psychologically impacted. Gender-based discrimination that occurred at school accounted for nearly twice as much variance in psychological distress, relative to global experiences of victimization. These findings suggest that gender inclusive education, and policy changes, are needed in school settings.