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# Bullying in Graduate School: Its Nature and Effects

Rachel H. Gentry

*Ball State University*, [rhgentry@bsu.edu](mailto:rhgentry@bsu.edu)

Bernard E. Whitley Jr.

*Ball State University*

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## Bullying in Graduate School: Its Nature and Effects

### **Abstract**

Does bullying exist in graduate school? If so, what does it look like? Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 graduate students from various departments at a medium-sized, Midwestern U.S. university. Grounded Theory methodology (Glaser, 1978) was utilized to gain insight into the terms and behaviors students used to define bullying in the graduate school context. Through constant comparative analysis (Stern, 1980), categories emerged that provided an understanding of the different perspectives inherent in a bully system, and the meanings attached to bullying behaviors. These findings can provide administrators and counselors with the information necessary to conduct preventative training to help students interact in a more professional, inclusive manner.

### **Keywords**

Bullying, Graduate School, Qualitative Research

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## Bullying in Graduate School: Its Nature and Effects

Rachel H. Gentry and Bernard E. Whitley, Jr.  
 Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana, USA

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*Does bullying exist in graduate school? If so, what does it look like? Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 graduate students from various departments at a medium-sized, Midwestern U.S. university. Grounded theory methodology (Glaser, 1978) was utilized to gain insight into the terms and behaviors students used to define bullying in the graduate school context. Through constant comparative analysis (Stern, 1980), categories emerged that provided an understanding of the different perspectives inherent in a bully system, and the meanings attached to bullying behaviors. These findings can provide administrators and counselors with the information necessary to conduct preventative training to help students interact in a more professional, inclusive manner. Keywords: Bullying, Graduate School, Qualitative Research*

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Bullying is a pervasive problem in elementary schools, high schools, colleges, and workplaces (American Educational Research Association [AERA], 2013; Cooper, Einarsen, Hoel, & Zapf, 2003) worldwide. Depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and overall poor psychosocial adjustment are some of the negative outcomes of being either a bully or a victim (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Flaspohler, Elfstrom, Vanderzee, & Sink, 2009; Nansel et al., 2001). These deleterious effects of bullying can negatively affect interpersonal and work relationships both in the short term and later in life (Craig & Pepler, 2007).

Although researchers have proposed a number of definitions of bullying based on the environment in which the behavior occurs and the age of the people involved (Craig & Pepler, 2007), these definitions overlap considerably. For example, school-aged bullying involves the intentional, repetitive targeting of an individual who has less power or control than the perpetrator (Olweus, 1993). In research on bullying in college, the definition specifically includes verbal and physical attacks, obscene gestures, and ostracism (Chapell et al., 2004). In the workplace, bullying is often termed *mobbing* or *workplace victimization*, and involves an individual using position power to gain an advantage over another person through purposeful, repetitive coercive tactics (Vredenburg & Brender, 1998).

Instead of redefining bullying for each age range or environment, some researchers (e.g., Faris & Felmlee, 2011) suggest using the more general, inclusive term of *aggression*, or behaviors directed toward a person or group of people for the purpose of inflicting physical or emotional harm (Kinney, 2007). In addition to these more overt forms of aggression, Sue (2010) has proposed the concept of *microaggressions*, which consist of frequent verbal and behavioral communications, intentional or unintentional, that are hostile or derogatory to a target person. Although microaggression research has generally focused on the experiences of minority populations defined by gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, microaggressions may occur more generally. For example, Cortina, Magley, Williams and Langhout (2001) found that 23% of a sample of employees had experienced at least one form of microaggression (not including sexual harassment) in the workplace during the five years prior to the research. A general definition of bullying, therefore, would encompass behaviors that are overtly or covertly aggressive, purposeful, repetitive, and involve an abuse of power.

Although one might expect adults to be more psychologically resilient than children and therefore more resistant to the effects of bullying, research shows that such is not the case. For example, victims of college and workplace bullying experience increases in stress (Newman, Holden, & Delville, 2011) and health problems (Dehue, Bolman, Völlink, Trijnje, & Poulwelse, 2012; Lee & Brotheridge, 2006) and decreases in overall psychological well-being (Dehue et al., 2012; O’Driscoll et al., 2011). Behaviorally, bullied individuals exhibit an increase in absenteeism (Dehue et al., 2012) and a decrease in the quality of their work performance (O’Driscoll et al., 2011). Finally, adults who are bullied are at risk for becoming bullies themselves (Lee & Brotheridge, 2006).

In addition to the workplace, another area of adult endeavor is graduate school. Although graduate school often serves as a bridge between undergraduate education and the workplace, the experiences in the two educational settings differ greatly. Undergraduate education provides a baseline breadth of knowledge and skills, largely accrued through textbooks and lectures. In graduate school, students are expected to handle more intellectually challenging coursework while adding new responsibilities such as assisting with faculty research, teaching courses to meet assistantship requirements, and beginning to develop their own research (Wisker, Robinson, Trafford, Warnes, & Creighton, 2003). Graduate studies can therefore be separated into two fundamental sets of tasks. The first set involves concrete tasks that students are familiar with from their undergraduate experience, such as mastering content specific to their chosen field; the second set of tasks consists of research and professional practice. For example, students are expected to complete a thesis or dissertation, which is abstract, vague, and initially unfamiliar to most graduate students (Lovitts, 2004). Often while working on their research, graduate students are also expected to take part in an internship working in their field of study alongside seasoned professionals. Although interns have extra supervision due to their student status, they are otherwise treated like and are expected to function as professionals. It is clear, then, that the graduate school environment is vastly different from that of students’ undergraduate years; consequently, bullying behaviors may also take different forms. However, there appears to be no existing research on bullying in graduate school.

### **Theoretical Rationale**

The current study was conducted as a first step toward filling that research gap, using socio-ecological theory as a framework. Seen through this lens, bullying is a system that involves not only the victim and the perpetrator(s) but also the observers of bullying. Within the larger context, bullying engenders fear and decreases overall performance in observers of bullying as well as in its victims (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010). The research used a qualitative methodology—semi-structured interviewing—to investigate two broad areas:

- a) the existence, characteristics of, and terms used for defining bullying in graduate school as compared to other environments and
- b) the different perceptions of bullying terms and behaviors as a function of the perceiver’s role of victim, perpetrator, or observer.

The first author’s interest in graduate student bullying was piqued several years ago when a student withdrew from the program without telling either faculty or fellow students. It was later discovered that this student had been the target of peer social exclusion, verbal and relational aggression. The first author’s research in this area was driven by a need to better

understand these bullying behaviors among graduate students with the hope that future incidences could be prevented.

## Method

### Participants

Before conducting this research I received approval from the university's Institutional Review Board to carry out this study. To be eligible for participation, individuals had to be enrolled either part-time or fulltime as a graduate student at the institution. I sent graduate students enrolled in all departments with graduate programs at a mid-sized, Midwestern university a confidential email asking if they were interested in participating in a study of relational aggression and exclusion in graduate school. Seventeen participants were recruited in this manner and an additional five participants were obtained through a quasi-snowball technique in which students who had taken part in the research talked with other graduate students, who then contacted the researcher for an interview. A total of 22 students (20 female, 2 male) between the ages of 23 and 43 participated; of these, 20 identified as Caucasian, one identified as Asian-Pacific Islander, and one as Hispanic. Fourteen were in master's programs and eight were in doctoral programs. Departments represented included Anthropology, Communication Studies, Counseling Psychology, Educational Leadership, Educational Psychology, English, Geography, History, Journalism, and Natural Resources and Environmental Management. One student was non-degree seeking.

### Materials

Interview questions focused on determining whether bullying exists in graduate school, and if so, whether it takes the same forms as in other settings. Because the environment and expectations in graduate school are very different from prior schooling (Wisker et al., 2003), I included questions aimed at gaining an understanding of whether these contextual differences affected the ways in which the students interacted with one another. When asking students whether they have been bullied or seen others get bullied in graduate school, I provided a definition of bullying based on three main characteristics of school bullying (Olweus, 1993). A follow-up question restated these criteria, and asked students if there were other criteria or terms that better fit their experiences. Although I felt the need to provide a definition of bullying to provide a context for my questions, I also wanted to provide an opportunity for the participants to share their own perspectives. Thus, the second question in the interview asked "Most of us are familiar with the existence of bullying. These acts involve an abuse of power, are repetitive, purposeful, and target a specified individual. Bullying occurs in grade school, junior high, high school and college. Have you seen or experienced any of these acts during your time here at [this university]?" and the third question asked "when you think about the abuse of power and the repetitive, purposeful targeting of another individual, are there other terms you would use in place of "bullying" for this graduate population?" Additional interview questions asked about other aspects of graduate school, but only these two specifically focused on the behaviors, criteria, and terms used for bullying experiences.

## Procedure

All data collection and analysis was conducted by the first author<sup>1</sup>. Interviews were scheduled based on mutual availability and took place in the interviewer's office on campus. Interviewees were offered the option of being interviewed at a different location to ensure confidentiality, but none requested an alternate location. Each interview took approximately one hour. To ensure confidentiality, the interviews were not recorded. Instead, I took detailed notes during the interview and immediately transcribed them following each meeting.

## Data Analysis

Dey (1993) posits that “we break down data in order to classify it, and the concepts we create or employ in classifying the data, and the connections we make between these concepts, provide the basis of a fresh description” (p. 30). After completing the interviews, I used grounded theory (Glaser, 1978) techniques to analyze the data. I first broke the data down into substantive codes, then analyzed the transcripts line by line, looking for similarities and differences within each interview as well as across interviews and questions. I used the process of constant comparative analysis by rereading all of the transcripts and making notes concerning possible relationships among codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Patton, 1990), to discover and develop some overarching theoretical ideas. Throughout this analysis process, I remained open to new themes that emerged. I wrote memos to track thoughts and ideas throughout the analysis to ensure rigor in the process. I continuously compared codes, developing themes, and the original responses of the graduate students to safeguard against incorporating anything other than the voices of the interviewees into the analysis. Although no other researchers took part in the interviewing or coding, I took great care to remain sensitive to the process of constant comparison, allowing the categories and theoretical ideas to emerge (Glaser, 1978). What follows are the categorized perspectives of the graduate student participants in this study on the terms and behaviors that comprise bullying in graduate school. Names have been changed for confidentiality.

## Results

Two interviewees stated that they did not believe bullying existed in graduate school and none of the interviewees used the term *bullying*. However, all 22 students described at least one experience that met the criteria for bullying, based on the tri-part definition most frequently used in educational research (Olweus, 1993). The accounts they gave shed light on the ways in which graduate students characterize bullying and the behaviors they observed in graduate school. Using their own words, students explained their experiences, how they understood these experiences, and why they thought the term *bullying* was not a good fit for behaviors occurring in graduate school. During data analysis, it became clear to me through the iterative process of constant comparison that the stories, perspectives, and even terms the students used were largely defined by the roles they played in the scenarios they described. These roles were that of victim, observer, and perpetrator.

## The Vocabulary of Bullying in Graduate School

Interviewees Ruth and Carol were victimized by bullies, while interviewee Lynn observed others being victimized. None characterized the behaviors they observed as bullying.

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<sup>1</sup> The second author, Bernard E. Whitley, Jr., assisted with writing and editing the manuscript.

For example, for Ruth, *bullying* connoted physical violence or gestures that usually occur outside the classroom. In contrast, what she observed and experienced was much more subtle, could include rejection, exclusion, or relational aggression, and could happen in any situation. Carol said that bullying sounded like a “kiddie term.” She said that in elementary school, children taunt and verbally insult others publicly, usually about outward characteristics, such as appearance. However, in graduate school, the attacks are more subtle, targeting inner characteristics, such as one’s knowledge base or career interests. These subtly aggressive behaviors include both contemptuous responses to discussion points in class, such as eye-rolling, and a failure to respond that would cause a discussion to stop abruptly with a humiliatingly awkward silence. Lynn agreed that both aggression and exclusion were prevalent but that most of these behaviors were covert. She also noted that “Some [people] are actively excluded because they are difficult to work with or hard to be around.” Terms and behaviors concerning bullying may differ depending on perspective, as in Carol’s case, or they may differ depending on age and situation.

### **Perspectives on Bullying**

The codes that emerged from the interviews revealed a pattern based on the role (victim, observer, perpetrator) played by each participant. Thus, participants who were victims identified the overt aggression and/or exclusion they experienced as predatory whereas participants who were observers or perpetrators identified these behaviors as reactionary to the victims’ behavior. The following accounts are therefore organized from the perspective of the victim, observer, and perpetrator. Specific experiences that the participants related were used to code their roles. For instance, victim role experiences included being called names, being talked about, and being separated from the group.

#### **The victim’s perspective**

Victims of bullying focused on being singled out, not necessarily because of their personal characteristics, but because the perpetrators felt a need to assert their power or status. Students talked about having their ideas and professional interests mocked and being laughed at or ignored in class. Ruth, a master’s student, related one of her experiences:

*There is a girl in one of my mandatory classes. She intimidates me daily. The other day we were talking about ESL students and writing skills. I turned to one of my friends who is an international student who speaks English as her second language. I asked her what she thought. The girl who bullies me said “Oh, yeah, because SHE can account for ALL ESL students. Duh.” Then she had a side conversation with her friend, and I could hear her saying negative things about me how dumb I am. I don’t know why she has chosen me to pick on. She does it daily. She doesn’t have power over me, but she does have power over how other people feel about me.*

Ruth’s experiences of bullying took the form of indirect verbal aggression, being talked about negatively within earshot. Ruth did not interpret her experience as bullying, however, saying that bullying is a harsh word, one that implies physical contact. She said that what she experienced is more subtle. As a result of being frequently targeted in class, she dreads going and sometimes skipped class.

Barbara, a master’s student, experiences exclusion as a reflection of the status hierarchy in her program:

*Aggression. That's the term that turned me on to your study. If you asked about bullying, I wouldn't have answered. Sounds overt, like picking on someone until they break. This is emotional, subtle. Exclusion, for sure. Bullying as a term? Well, students may be excluded but wouldn't want to admit being bullied. They may think "I'm stronger than that. I'm a grad student." Also, bullying can include victim blaming. It may signify that if I am bullied, I am weak, and that's why I am bullied. I am not weak. But I do feel alone.*

Barbara talked extensively about feeling alone in her program, evidence of the exclusion she felt as a victim. She noted that there is a definite status hierarchy in her program and that students strive to maintain that hierarchy:

*In my master's program we were treated like second class citizens by the doctoral students. Docs look down on MAs. I've heard doc students say to each other "don't be a dumb MA student." As a master's student, I wasn't always invited to stuff. When I decided to go to doctoral school, the other doc students said "now you are one of us." It was positive, but elitist. Honestly, [after that] my whole life changed.*

Barbara had a best friend in the master's program who was often demeaned in her presence. She said that because she and her friend were in different levels of the program hierarchy, maintaining the friendship was very difficult. She knew that if she came forward to defend her friend, she will be victimized. When she feels unable to stand up for her friend, she remains silent and excludes herself.

Ellen, a master's student, talked at great length about how the graduate school experience is different from the undergraduate experience. In graduate school, grades are based largely on team work: team teaching, group projects, and in-class discussions:

*Exclusion is my favorite term for this. It's maintaining the pecking order. Domination. Exclusion, rejection, or relational aggression. Sometimes we team teach. So, two of us teach the rest of the class. We are graded not only on our teaching but on how much class discussion and interaction we create. We NEED to help each other. So, the class is discussing something. You can add to the discussion by continuing the thread of the discussion while validating the person who said something before you, like "yes, I agree with so and so, and also," or you can drop the thread and start with something else. Dropping the thread is a subtle way of saying "That was stupid." And it's clear to EVERYONE.*

Ellen stated that although working together is emphasized by professors, the culture in the classroom is full of judgment, posturing, and competition. Grades are very important and personal: One letter defines not only one's intellect but also one's power.

Carol, a doctoral student, had a similar experience in her program:

*Bullying is a kiddie term. I was excluded. They dominated. It's a kind of hegemony. It was clear they [the alpha female clique] ruled. The professor never did anything to stop it. When anyone in that group talked in class, they would add to each other's ideas or points of view. I tried to talk in class and it was crickets and tumbleweed, you know? So, I decided not to talk.*



Carol disclosed that she had been bullied in elementary school. She said that the subjective experience was similar in both contexts, but that the behaviors were very different. As a child, she was bullied about her appearance. Her tormentors verbally taunted her at recess and between classes. As a graduate student, the attack was focused on her knowledge and career. She said she was a target because she studied subjects the others knew little about and that, because of her different interests, she was ostracized and excluded. The members of the in-group had similar interests and goals and dominated class discussions as a result. They would roll their eyes, sigh loudly, and make comments to each other about the insignificance of Carol's professional goals. Carol explained that she feels so uncomfortable in class as a result of the ostracism she experiences that she sometimes skips class. She knows she needs to attend to do well, but she feels that it is not worth the constant scrutiny.

Marlene, a master's student, is in a department that houses several programs. Her program is much smaller than some of the others. Marlene reports that she experiences victimization and exclusion based on her choice of program, because the largest program has the power of being the majority:

*The students in the other programs are hard to be around. They discount our [the people in her program's] opinions. When we did class presentations, half of them fell asleep or just didn't pay attention... We got eye rolls. There is definitely power in the majority. And as a result, I don't want to go to that class. To be honest, I don't have the motivation to go. It's not conducive to learning. Now, I don't talk in class. Sometimes I don't even go. And we get points for attendance! But I don't care.*

Janet, a doctoral student, attributed the exclusion she experienced largely to disclosing that she had been home-schooled during a majority of her elementary and junior high school years. She mentioned this to her cohort early in her first semester. Janet explained that because she did not have the same educational experiences as others in her cohort, she has been made fun of. She has felt excluded and targeted by both her peers and faculty:

*It's purposeful targeting. Threatening in a real covert way. Resulting in exclusion. It's like when someone makes a general statement and then says "if someone isn't ok with this, then they are crazy or stupid." They're assuming everyone has had the same experiences. Or when our professor says something about everyone having two parents who were intelligent and pushed them growing up. They think we are homogenous. I get offended, but I don't say anything. No way. I'm not going to get picked on again.*

As a result of being excluded by her peers and faculty, Janet no longer interacts with her peers, and only as needed with her faculty advisor. She further explained her relationship philosophy:

*I pick my relationships where I will be successful... if I'm not accepted here, I have other places. To get through graduate school you have to be professional. You need to work with these people that you spend all this time with. But you don't have to like them.*

Sam, a master's student, saw exclusion as being purposeful and based on one's perceived intellect:

*The perception of knowledge is how we label each other. And the exclusion occurs in group projects or study groups. Sometimes they [other students further along in the program] berate us [the lower-level students] for not knowing an answer—and that is in front of everyone. Also, if someone asks a lot of questions, and as a result are perceived as not being as smart, that person would be excluded... It's the adult version of not being chosen for kickball teams because of your ability to kick.*

These graduate students perceived the aggressive and exclusive behaviors they experienced to be the result of other students' wanting to assert their more powerful position within their class, program, or department and to denigrate minority members' intellectual positions. Both the aggressive and exclusionary behaviors seemed to lead to the same outcome: making the targeted victim feel judged and excluded.

### **The observer's perspective**

Sam, who talked about his own victimization, had the experience of observing a peer being victimized as well:

*There is a nontraditional student who is much older than the rest of us. He asks a lot of questions. The TAs shut him down. Now he doesn't ask anymore. It's really sad. He's been bullied by kids less than half his age.*

Sam said that he no longer asks questions in any group setting, but waits to talk to his peers in private. He modified his behavior based on seeing another student bullied to the point of complete disengagement. He stated that maintaining a positive social standing among his peer group is of utmost importance. Those that don't do so are bullied and unsuccessful in graduate school. According to Sam, these social interactions can make or break a graduate student: "There is a power dynamic. The dynamic extends itself [from class] to other social networks. When [you] falter in [any one] setting, it negatively impacts you everywhere else."

Many students (8 out of 22) echoed Sam's comments, using a shared term for a student who does not successfully navigate the social world of graduate school: *that kid*. "That kid" is perceived by his or her peers as rude, socially awkward, and annoying. During the interview, the participants would give me a knowing look, assuming that she would recognize the description, which was sometimes no more specific than *that kid*. There was a marked contrast between these comments and those of the victims quoted earlier: Without fail, observers attributed the bullying to the victim's characteristics—to his or her actions or attitudes. According to these respondents, the aggressive or exclusionary responses to *that kid* were not predatory, but were merely ways of dealing with his or her unusual or obnoxious behaviors, ironically with the intent of sparing his or her feelings.

Kristine, a doctoral student, talked about a student in her program who was seen as insufferable and impervious to social cues. She asserted that his behavior invited others to be mean to or exclude him.

*We have one student in our cohort—he's really socially awkward. Drives us crazy. He's the one—every year has THAT person. I tried to hang out with him. I tried to give him the benefit of the doubt. But he was really annoying. [Another person] in our cohort tries behaviorism with him—shaping him. It's kind of a joke amongst all of us.*

Kristine then said something very telling, showing that she has some insight into the part she played in the dynamics of the bullying system and that no one is safe from becoming a target. Laughing nervously, she said, “Sometimes I worry that if he wasn’t here, I’d be him [the victim].”

Lauren, a master’s student, saw her peers exclude another member of their cohort almost daily:

*We have one student in particular. She answers every question, even the rhetorical ones! In every class. Now, no one asks her to do stuff with the rest of us. Sometimes when she answers questions in class you can see the eye rolls and hear the sighs. I don’t think she gets it. She’s just annoying. It’s the majority against her—the minority. But she put herself there. [Her attempt at] domination causes [our] behavior, but like I said, she is super annoying and doesn’t get social cues.*

Natalie said that her cohort has *that kid*, too, but according to her, “no one would say they bully her, and she wouldn’t say it, either.” She thought that, while this person is seen as obnoxious and frequently frustrates others, the worst anyone does is to cut her off when she talks.

Sonja, a master’s student, is an African-American woman who also believes that in every cohort year, there’s “that kid.” Twice she has tried to befriend such individuals. She has had varied success, and has also experienced victimization as a result.

*This one guy—he doesn’t get asked to do stuff with the rest of us. So, I didn’t want him to feel hurt or left out, so I asked him to do stuff with us. He started asking me questions about race, about the N word, and then he continued by cutting down women. Really? I tried to listen to him. He’s a jerk. I try to be nice but he blows it. I know he’s a victim of bullying, but he’s a jerk.*

She then described an experience with a new graduate student.

*There’s a new girl. She was immediately pegged as competitive. Then I got to know her. I said to everyone, “Please don’t make fun of her.” Now, they roll their eyes at me, too. I just stopped talking with all of them. I don’t hang out with them anymore.*

Sonja tried to be kind to the ostracized individuals and also tried to avoid the students who were being mean. As a result of her standing up for another student, she was ostracized and excluded as well.

Allison, a master’s student, did not use the term *that kid* to identify the victims she has observed, but she did state that she sees them as socially awkward, offensive, and rude. Although she feels bad that these individuals are excluded, she believes that they bring it upon themselves through their actions and attitudes. In contrast to the other interviewees, Allison was concerned about what would happen if these individuals were included instead of being excluded.

*It’s like he irritates others, and then those others exclude him as a result. If no one excluded these people, what would happen? If everybody was together, it actually might make everyone less happy because of the awkwardness and annoyance that would happen.*

Allison said that she often felt torn. She pities these individuals, but does not want them around. Allison later stated that she had been a victim of bullying just a few years earlier. This experience may explain the seemingly incongruent sentiments of feeling sympathetic toward the victims she discussed while simultaneously intimating that the victims caused this maltreatment through their own actions.

What happens when students who are leaders, who are vocal, are confronted by these socially awkward, off-putting individuals? Following are some accounts of the perpetration of aggression and exclusion as viewed by the perpetrators.

### **The perpetrator's perspective**

Paul, a doctoral student, had a very different perspective than that of the participants described in the previous section. He explained what it is like to be in the majority and to deal with a peer whom he deems to be obnoxious and not fitting in. He saw his behavior as an appropriate reaction to an irritating individual—not at all like bullying:

*Bullies are predators. Like going after someone relentlessly. This isn't it. We didn't want him to feel bad. We just didn't want him [around us]. I would call this purposeful exclusion. It seems like every cohort has one person that rubs the rest the wrong way. And that person is always excluded in social events. He is out of touch. He always talks down to others. With him, it's never a pleasant interaction. He's socially awkward, and rude.*

Paul explained that the reason he and his cohort excluded this other person was not to be mean, but to try to prevent themselves from saying something mean to him. Paul reasoned that by excluding the person they perceived as obnoxious, he and his cohort were preserving the person's self-esteem:

*Sometimes we sit around and talk about going out somewhere. Then, someone says something about inviting him. We laugh, because we know that no one is going to invite him. No one is saying that seriously. We have talked about someone sitting him down and telling him what he's doing that is so annoying. I just don't see what good could come from it. What can you tell him? He's awful? How do you tell someone that? So we exclude him so we aren't meaner to him.*

Charlene, a doctoral student, also talked about having socially awkward students in her program:

*In each cohort, I feel like there's one. In ours, she's very rude. Not tactful. Socially awkward. She didn't know she was doing it [being rude], but then when she was told, she didn't change. She isolated herself. Then we followed along. She ignores us, I mean, actively ignores us! We are in classes together and she won't look our way.*

*There's another guy in [a different year]- he's the same way. He's the weird one out. Some other people shoot nasty glances at these [excluded] people. I just try to look the other way. Our bullying isn't so much the intent- we aren't derogatory to [their] faces.*

Charlene believed that the social awkwardness of these individuals actually bonds the rest of the class more closely together. She said that they get together and talk about these students, but never directly to them: “Nothing is said to anyone’s face.” From Charlene’s perspective, not confronting the individual is important, a tactic that expresses caring and consideration.

Valerie, a doctoral student, knew of a few students who meet the *that kid* criteria of being perceived as rude, obnoxious, and socially unaware. She admits to snapping at one of these individuals in her program, although she usually tries to deal with her in a different way:

*We mostly try to ignore [their behavior]. Some shoot nasty glances at these people. Others purposefully shut their conversations down. If we saw [any of these people] we’d go the other way. It’s exclusion, but it’s also nasty remarks and looks.*

Although Valerie acknowledged that she and her peers behave aggressively toward and exclude these individuals, she did not see the behavior as inappropriate. She did state that she and her friends have been trying to be more inclusive, but they do not necessarily think this is a good idea: “We have been trying to invite that person out more. I hope she drops out or changes programs... but if we don’t exclude her, we will blow up at her.”

The graduate students depicted in this section admitted to excluding and occasionally behaving aggressively against *that kid*. In their explanations, they justified their behaviors as reactive rather than predatory, acting in response to the perceived irritating or off-putting attitudes and behaviors of the excluded individuals. The students interviewed stated that in addition to being generally socially awkward, the excluded individuals seemed to lack the interpersonal skills necessary to develop and maintain friendships. In essence, the interviewees blamed the victims for bringing about their own isolation.

## Discussion

The graduate students interviewed described a number of aggressive and exclusionary behaviors that previous researchers have classified as indicative of bullying (e.g. Olweus, 1993). However, the students themselves rejected the term *bullying* even while describing aggressive and exclusionary behaviors that reflect the core features of bullying. They said that the term *bullying* did not correctly describe their experiences. They explained that the behaviors they observed or experienced in graduate school differed from the bullying behaviors they were familiar with as children or adolescents. Graduate students’ behaviors were usually more covert and indirect than those found in grade school, junior high, or high school bullying. The behaviors described by the interviewees reflected the graduate school environment, focusing on factors that graduate students hold in high regard, such as grades, research interests, and perceived intelligence. Therefore, whereas the playground is the bullying environment of children and youth, classroom discussions, group projects, and seminars are the bullying environments of graduate school.

The graduate students interviewed explained that, for them, *bullying* evokes the image of a weak, childlike victim, an image they did not endorse as an adult quality or experience. In her interview, Barbara commented that while she agreed that she had been repeatedly excluded, she did not want to be seen by her peers or faculty as a victim of bullying. To her that would imply that she was weak, not competent or professional, and would reflect negatively on her as a graduate student. This rejection of the term *bullying* reinforces the recommendation made in a recent report from the American Educational Research Association (2013) that scholars studying bullying not limit their research by using only traditional definitions. One way to avoid the conflation of *bullying* with *childish* would be to use a term such as *victimization*.

The viewpoints of the interviewees were essential to understanding the behaviors they experienced. Perspectives on terms, behaviors, and rationales for behaviors varied largely as a function of the roles respondents played in the events they discussed. Victims and observers described the behaviors differently than the perpetrators. Some potential rationales for these bullying behaviors as well as outcomes of those behaviors emerged from their stories.

Victims and observers described the behaviors they experienced as predatory forms of aggression or exclusion rather than as bullying. The use of the term *predatory* assigns overall culpability to the perpetrator and was used by the respondents who either observed or were the victims of mistreatment. The behaviors reported by the interviewees include many that the workplace discrimination literature calls *incivilities* (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001). Incivilities include public verbal interruptions, overt ignoring, and condescension, behaviors similar to those Ruth, Sam, Ellen, Carol, and Marlene reported experiencing in their classes. Incorporating the use of workplace discrimination terms makes sense given to the institutional cultural factors that differentiate graduate school from lower level educational contexts.

Barbara, however, perceived her mistreatment quite differently. Barbara said that the exclusion and aggression she experienced were directly related to her program's degree status. She stated that she and the other master's students were demeaned by the doctoral students. Further support for the role of in-group/out-group hierarchy-based discrimination was provided when Barbara explained that as soon as she was accepted into the doctoral program, the doctoral students who once ridiculed her congratulated her for becoming one of them.

Perpetrators and observers appear to view their behaviors as reactionary forms of aggression or exclusion rather than as bullying. The term *reactionary* describes the behaviors of an aggressive or exclusionary perpetrator who is reacting to a fellow student whom the perpetrator perceives to be difficult or socially awkward, thus assigning blame for the bullying to the victim. Victim blaming accomplishes two goals. First, by assigning culpability to the victim, the observers and perpetrators can absolve themselves of any wrongdoing. Second, victim blaming implies that the victim's behavior caused the maltreatment and that the victim's actions led to predictable outcomes (Weiner, 1995). These participants attempted to justify their aggressive or exclusive responses by pointing to the perceived rude, socially awkward, or obnoxious behaviors of the individuals they identified as *that kid*. This belief that some people are bad, or act badly, and so deserve to be treated accordingly is called the *just world hypothesis*; that is, people deserve the outcomes they experience, so bad things happen to bad people (Lerner & Miller, 1978). Victims deserve to suffer because they caused the unfavorable situation in the first place. The interviewees who discussed their reactions to students categorized as *that kid* did not overtly acknowledge being aggressive toward or excluding them, even though their descriptions of their actions reflected those behaviors. These interviewees went to great lengths to express the negative qualities of the targeted individual and how frustrating it was to be in that person's company. Each of these participants explained that by setting *that kid* apart they would decrease the chance of anyone's being overtly mean to him or her, thus sparing his or her feelings and categorizing themselves as altruistic rather antagonistic.

Kristine seemed to have a more malleable view of the perpetrator-victim-observer system. As Kristine noted, she could very well have been *that kid* if her cohort had not already cast someone in that role, suggesting that no one is completely free from the *that kid* stigma. She astutely observed that while some students behave in ways that invite exclusion or aggression, no one is completely safe from becoming a victim. Kristine's observation is consistent with Sekaquaptewa and Thompson's (2003) finding that aggression and exclusionary behaviors are contextual in that anyone could be a victim in one situation and a perpetrator or observer in another.

The interviewees in this study who were victims or observers feared standing up for themselves or seeking help out of concern about how faculty and other students would view them. Janet was clear that she did not talk with anyone about the mistreatment she endured for fear the treatment would only worsen. She was concerned that she may appear difficult or uncooperative to her professor as well as to the other students. Leslie and Gelfand (2008) have reported that not wanting to appear difficult is also a common concern in many workplace environments. Individuals often become caught between not wanting the ridicule they are experiencing to stop but also wanting to avoid drawing added attention to themselves. Leslie and Gelfand stated that much of the reason individuals feel this way has to do with the overall organizational culture: victims wonder whether management will deal with complaints in a respectful manner. The onus is on management to put into place guidelines to allow for a safe, inclusive working environment. In graduate school, management duties fall to the faculty and administration. Individuals in authority positions need to engage respectfully and fairly with students. If students are being victimized, and are afraid to come forward for fear of ridicule by their peers, faculty, or administration, they are at risk for developing additional problems, both professionally and personally (Espelage & Swearer, 2003).

Regardless of the role a person may play in the bullying system, being in any way connected to the aggressive or exclusive incidents can be disadvantageous. Victims, observers, and perpetrators can all experience hostility and frustration, as well as a feeling of diminished personal and professional value (Shih & Young, 2013). Because these experiences are negative, dealing with them depletes cognitive resources, resulting in decreased overall productivity. Thus, for example, Marlene commented that because of the hostile environment caused by the aggression and exclusion, she found it difficult to learn.

Victims and observers of bullying often withdraw socially and absenteeism increases (Dehue et al., 2012). In the educational context, this decrease in involvement can lead to a decrease in test scores and overall grades (Cornell, Gregory, Huang, & Fan, 2013). The accounts of Sam, Janet, Carol, and Marlene all describe diminished interaction in class as a direct result of the aggression and exclusion they experienced or observed. Ruth and Marlene stated that even though their grades are partially based on attendance, they sometimes skipped classes to avoid being ostracized, resulting in lower grades as well as missing course content for which they are responsible. This process can establish a vicious cycle: Not only does not attending class have obvious negative academic effects in an environment in which evaluations are based on contributions to class discussions, but avoidance itself is associated with other negative outcomes, such as increases in stress (Newman et al., 2011), which can reinforce the avoidant response.

Regardless of the part they play in the bullying system, individuals can suffer a decrease in overall psychological well-being. Specific problems include higher rates of anxiety, depression, social maladjustment, and health problems (Flaspohler et al., 2009). These problems can make both the goals imposed by graduate school and personal goals, increasingly difficult to meet. To compound this problem, the negative consequences of bullying do not subside once the individual is out of the hostile environment. In fact, experiences with aggression or exclusion as a child, teen, or young adult can cause ongoing, pervasive physical, mental and emotional problems that continue throughout life (Craig & Pepler, 2007; Espelage, Low, & De La Rue, 2012).

### **Recommendations for Application**

Better understanding of the ways in which bullying is manifested in graduate school may suggest strategies that to both assist students in dealing with these situations and prevent bullying from occurring. Conceptualizing bullying experiences through the eyes of the victim,

observer, and perpetrator provides additional insight into the specific needs of students based on their role in the bullying system. Interventions to address these needs can take place at three levels: individual, group, and organizational (Heames & Harvey, 2006).

At the individual level, it is apparent that graduate students would benefit from training on professionalism and interpersonal skills. Specifically, faculty or counselors could provide instruction and conduct role playing scenarios that would teach students how to navigate difficult or awkward social situations using appropriate, professional, inclusive techniques. This training could target the potentially socially awkward students as well as those who may be inclined to target others or to passively observe maladaptive interactions. Researchers have developed interventions at the elementary, junior high school, and high schools that provide students and faculty with training to prevent bullying and more generally to educate students and staff on healthy interpersonal relationships (e.g., Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999). Similar training could be adapted for the orientation meetings new graduate students already attend with minimal additional monetary or time investment.

Shih and Young (2013) recently suggested some new strategies to help individuals who have experienced or observed microaggressions in the context of intergroup discrimination. For example, they propose teaching the individuals how to separate who they are professionally from their overall identities. In this way, victims or observers of microaggressions would be able to redefine their identities apart from their current work groups, allowing them to view themselves and their experiences in a more positive manner. These techniques could be adapted to fit the experiences and responsibilities of the graduate student population.

Finally, individual-level interventions must focus not only on the development of positive coping strategies but also on discouraging negative strategies. For example, avoidance – even to the extent of not attending class – was one of the coping strategies most often mentioned by the interviewees, even to the extent of not attending class. As noted earlier, not only can this strategy have obvious negative academic effects, but avoidance itself is associated with additional negative outcomes, such as increases in stress (Newman et al., 2011).

At the group—or in this context, classroom—level, faculty members should be trained to identify the symptoms of bullying and to intervene effectively. They should also set clear rules for proper academic behavior and discourse, especially in regard to responding to intellectual positions with which students disagree. In addition, they should carefully monitor their own behavior to avoid acts that may be perceived as demeaning or exclusionary, such as Janet's experience with the professor who implicitly, although perhaps unintentionally, derogated her upbringing.

At the institutional level, management is responsible for developing and enforcing guidelines for employees' everyday interactions (Heames & Harvey, 2006). Like corporations, universities, colleges, and academic departments need to formulate and enforce guidelines that safeguard students and faculty from inappropriate treatment. Daily interactions within each department should reflect those guidelines. Only then will individuals feel safe to come forward if they observe or experience maltreatment. Organization-level responses to bullying that employees rate as effective include emphasizing respect among employees, establishing an anti-bullying policy, and creating grievance procedures for handling complaints about bullying (O'Driscoll et al., 2011). Finally, as noted earlier, universities can design and implement appropriate training programs for students and faculty.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size. Although all graduate students at the university were sent an email requesting their participation, only a few responded. There are several possible reasons for the low response rate. For example, the spam



filters in students' email clients may have classified the mass recruitment mailing as spam; consequently, some students may not have seen the request for participation. In addition, many students outside the social sciences are not familiar with qualitative research and may have found the interview technique unusual or assumed that it would be too time consuming a commitment. Adding another type of recruitment method, such as meeting with classes, explaining the study, and asking for participants to contact the researcher may be a way to increase participation. That being said, it should be noted that a sample of 22 participants is not necessarily small for a qualitative study.

Another limitation is the absence of doctoral students from any natural science programs. This limitation stems from the context of the research: The University at which it was conducted does not offer doctoral degrees in the natural sciences. Replicating this study at other universities that have master's and doctoral programs in areas other than those represented in the current study, including natural sciences, would also increase the generalizability of the findings.

### **Future Research**

Students in this study identified a number of factors within their departments that may play a part in cohort dynamics, including scarcity of resources, power differentials, mentoring, competition, and stress management. These variables need to be studied further to determine the extent to which any one of them, or a combination of them, could contribute to the prevalence of exclusion and aggression among graduate students.

Due to the preliminary nature of this study, additional research needs to be conducted to confirm its findings. Conducting studies at different universities, nationally and internationally, and including departments within a variety of disciplines would provide a more comprehensive picture of aggression and exclusion behaviors in graduate school.

### **Conclusions**

This study represents an initial step toward understanding the aggressive and exclusionary practices operating in graduate school. Talking directly with graduate students provided personal accounts of these practices from the perspectives of victims, observers, and perpetrators. These perspectives provided not only information pertaining to the bullying behaviors characteristic to this context, but also the meaning students attach to these events based on their roles in the scenarios they described. These interviews contribute to the bullying literature by providing a picture of what graduate students see and experience on a daily basis, as well as how these interactions affect their academic and social choices. The prevention of aggression and exclusion in graduate school clearly requires that training and education in social interaction, professionalism, and tolerance be implemented early in the graduate students' tenure. Information from the current research can be used along with existing bully prevention and healthy relationship workshops to tailor training agendas to the needs of students enrolled in graduate school. This training can help all students become more inclusive and can help students with limited social skills learn how to be more socially adept. Results from this study can also inform future research that will help graduate students get the most out of their master's and doctoral experiences and their professional careers.

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### Author Note

Rachel H. Gentry, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychological Science at Ball State University. She may be contacted at [rhgentry@bsu.edu](mailto:rhgentry@bsu.edu).  
Bernard E. Whitley, Ph.D., is Professor Emeritus at Ball State University.

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