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The influence of group values and behavior on adolescent male perceptions of and use of homophobic language

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The pervasive and derogatory use of homophobic language is a threat to safe, respectful, and inclusive school environments. Group membership has been shown to influence how students use homophobic language. Previous qualitative studies have largely approached the use of this language from the theoretical framework of hegemonic masculinity. In contrast, the current study actively challenged all assumptions about the use of this language.

Method: This study was conducted in a public high school located in a rural conservative Christian community in the Intermountain West (USA). Using hermeneutic qualitative methodology to assess individual perceptions of homophobic language, 20 randomly selected 12th-grade male students (17–18 years of age) were individually interviewed.

Results: Three distinct groups emerged during our interviews: students on the debate team, students who strongly identified with a conservative religion, and students on popular athletic teams. Membership in specific peer groups influenced how students participated in or abstained from using homophobic language. Contrary to the prevailing research that pairs religiosity with negatively biased attitudes toward LGBTQIA, in this study, participants' religious beliefs appeared to be associated with respecting others' feelings and a decreased likelihood of using homophobic language.

Conclusions: After summarizing this study's findings, we conclude with implications for practice. To more effectively deter the use of homophobic language, we encourage school-based interventions that target specific groups of adolescents and consider the social context in which homophobic language occurs.

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1. Literature review

1.1. Homophobic language

Although there is no precise, generally accepted definition of homophobic language (McCormack, 2012, 2013), in this study we acknowledge that homophobic language is composed of sexually-themed language and/or denigrating comments that exclude, marginalize, stereotype, or negatively reflect on the appearance, gender expression, sexual identity, mannerisms, and behavior of individuals and groups identifying with the LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual) community. However, as reported by students, this language is not solely relegated to targeting LGBTQIA students. Homophobic language is also directed at those who do not identify as a sexual minority (McCormack, 2012). Most commonly, this type of language includes name-calling—homophobic epithets such as *gay*, *faggot*, *fag*, *dyke*, etc. (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2008, 2016; McCormack, 2011, 2013; Poteat, O'Dwyer, & Mereish, 2012). Additionally, adolescent males are much more likely to be perpetrators and victims of homophobic language (Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009; Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010).

1.2. Group influence on attitudes, language, and behavior

As we consider how and why adolescents use homophobic language, an important factor to consider is the social influence of peers and peer groups. Group membership shapes an individual's attitudes, language, and behavior (Paulus, 2015). Researchers Myers and Lamm (1975) identified this phenomenon as *group polarization*.

Among adolescents, peer groups are highly influential in forming and solidifying an individual's personal identity (Reitz, Zimmermann, Hutteman, Specht, & Neyer, 2014; van Hoorn, van Dijk, Meuwese, Rieffe, & Crone, 2016). Similarly, researchers who investigate homophobic language emphasize the powerful influence of a group's normative attitudes and behavioral expectations on individual group members' beliefs and their use of language (Birkett & Espelage, 2015; Fair, 2011; Merrin et al., 2018; Pascoe, 2011; Poteat, Rivers, & Vecho, 2015; Wilkinson, 2004).

Quantitative and qualitative studies have demonstrated that students who use homophobic language tend to have similar belief systems and behaviors (Oransky & Marecek, 2009; Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010). According to researchers, common belief systems associated with homophobic language include prejudiced sexual beliefs (Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010), hegemonic masculine beliefs (Oransky & Marecek, 2009; Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003; Rosenberg, Gates, Richmond, & Sinno, 2017), and exclusive religious beliefs (Moore & Ovidia, 2006; Pascoe, 2011). Behaviors commonly associated with this language include physical aggression and bullying (Poteat, Kimmel, & Wilchins, 2011; Poteat et al., 2012). Additionally, specific group factors, rather than individual factors, are more predictive of homophobic name-calling (Birkett & Espelage, 2015), particularly for adolescent males (Espelage, Basile, Leemis, Hipp, & Davis, 2018). Sadly, these group social dynamics may also influence individuals' behavior to progress beyond language, potentially escalating to physical aggression and violence toward individuals who are perceived as LGBTQ youth (Espelage, Basile, De La Rue, & Hamburger, 2015; Orue & Calvete, 2018; Poteat et al., 2015).

However, group factors may also decrease the use of homophobic language. For example, individuals who have close lesbian or gay friends are less tolerant of others' unfair treatment of individuals who identify as LGBTQIA (Heinze & Horn, 2009). Additionally, Poteat, DiGiovanni, and Scheer (2013) and Poteat and Vecho (2016) also found that having a gay or lesbian friend is negatively correlated with sexual prejudice and related bullying perpetration. Friends of LGBTQIA individuals were also more likely to actively step up and defend victims of homophobic bullying (Poteat & Vecho, 2016).

While quantitative studies, such as Espelage et al. (2015), have increased our general awareness of group influence on homophobic language, qualitative studies have zeroed in more specifically to demonstrate how this language is differentially used, contingent upon group membership (Poteat, 2007; Romeo, Chico, Darcangelo, Bellinger, & Horn, 2017). However, neither quantitative nor qualitative studies have sufficiently described and compared various adolescent groups' use of homophobic language, particularly among conservative Christian adolescents living in rural communities. Therefore, the existing body of research would benefit from further exploration that considers a more comprehensive understanding of how various groups use and encourage their members' use of this language. Potentially, a better understanding of adolescent peer and group dynamics will offer insights into identifying more effective interventions to reduce homophobic language (Espelage, 2016; Poteat, 2007; Poteat et al., 2015).

1.3. Purpose of current study

To date, numerous studies have explored correlates of homophobic language. Researchers have also described—with quantitative data—the effect of group influence on individuals' use of this language. Additionally, even though recent research has qualitatively and comparatively examined how different groups in high school use homophobic language, qualitative studies have not been conducted in schools that are located in religiously conservative rural communities.

To address this gap in the literature, this study was conducted in a rural high school located in a religiously conservative Intermountain West community. The current study examined homophobic language among male high school seniors. Males were selected because males, to a greater degree than females, perpetrate and are victimized by this type of language (Poteat et al., 2011). Furthermore, this age group was selected because this group of students live within the high school culture and are old enough to reflect on past years' experiences during their K–12 school years.

To guide our analysis, we posed the following two overarching research questions:

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