



# Who intervenes against homophobic behavior? Attributes that distinguish active bystanders



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## ABSTRACT

Research on homophobic behavior has focused on students engaging in this behavior or students toward whom this behavior is directed. There has been little attention to the large segment of students who observe this behavior, including active bystanders who defend or support students when homophobic behavior occurs. Among 722 high school students (55% female, 87% white, 86% heterosexual), 66.8% had observed at least one instance of homophobic behavior in the past 30 days. Gender (in this case, girls more so than boys), leadership, courage, altruism, justice sensitivity, and number of LGBT friends were associated with engagement in more active bystander behavior in response to observing homophobic behavior. Further, gender, courage, altruism, and number of LGBT friends each made unique contributions in accounting for variability in students' defending behavior in a comprehensive regression model. Findings highlight qualities that interventionists should cultivate in students that could lead to more active bystander engagement against homophobic behavior.

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## 1. Introduction

Despite general advances in school-based anti-bullying programs and policies during the past decade (Karna, Voeten, Little, Poskiparta, Kaljonen, & Salmivalli, 2011; Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008; Nickerson, Cornell, Smith, & Furlong, 2013), homophobic behavior remains a widespread concern. This form of bias-based behavior can include actions such as physical harassment, exclusion, or rumor spreading based on a student's assumed sexual orientation, or use of homophobic epithets. Many sexual minority youth (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender youth; LGBT) experience homophobic victimization, hear homophobic language, or witness their peers being victimized in a homophobic manner (D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002; Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012; Rivers, 2001). Some heterosexual youth also report homophobic victimization and hear homophobic epithets used among their peers (Pascoe, 2007; Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008). Homophobic behavior thus represents a large-scale concern.

The literature on homophobic behavior has addressed this issue from two primary vantage points. First, expansive research continues to document the health and academic consequences faced by students who experience homophobic victimization (Birkett, Russell, & Corliss, 2014; Collier, Bos, & Sandfort, 2013; D'Augelli et al., 2002; Russell, Sinclair, Poteat, & Koenig, 2012). Second, other studies have identified factors that characterize students who engage in more homophobic behavior than others

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(Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1994; Poteat, DiGiovanni, & Scheer, 2013). These two areas of research have built an understanding of what prompts this behavior and its consequences.

Beyond a dyadic framework focused on students engaging in this behavior or students toward whom this behavior is directed, the bullying literature has underscored the nature of bullying within a broader context (Salmivalli, 2010). Similarly, sexual minority youth have described homophobic harassment as being highly visible and public (Rivers, 2001). Moreover, homophobic behavior often goes unchallenged by students or adults (Kosciw et al., 2012). There has been little attention to the large segment of students who witness homophobic behavior. Direct attention to bystanders is imperative, as these students have a critical role in reducing bullying (Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). It is important to distinguish students who intercede when homophobic behavior occurs. The current study tests several individual attributes that could distinguish students who engage in more responsive defending behavior when they observe instances of homophobic behavior.

## 2. Bystanders in the general bullying literature

Grounded in an ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), the general bullying research has shown that students are involved in multiple roles during bullying instances. The model proposed by Salmivalli and colleagues (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004) has received much empirical support for its classification of students beyond the traditional roles of “bully” or “victim” to further include students who reinforce or assist the primary bullying individual, students who actively defend the student being victimized, and others who are passively uninvolved or unaware of bullying. In particular, there has been expansive growth in research on bystanders and those who defend victimized peers (Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2008; Pozzoli, Gini, & Vieno, 2012; Pozzoli & Gini, 2013; Sandstrom, Makover, & Bartini, 2013; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). Active bystanders, or defenders of victimized students, are those who take an active role in countering bullying when it occurs as opposed to passively observing it (Pozzoli, Gini et al., 2012; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010; Salmivalli et al., 1996). For example, they may intercede directly or indirectly (e.g., by trying to stop the behavior or by telling an adult) or they may support the student being victimized. The focus on bystanders has been driven by several factors. First, despite many students observing bullying, a smaller proportion of these students consistently intervene (Frisén, Hasselblad, & Holmqvist, 2012; O’Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999). Several researchers have framed this disconnection based on certain social psychological processes such as diffusion of responsibility when many students are present during bullying instances and de-individuation of the person being victimized (Pozzoli & Gini, 2013; Rivers, 2011). Second, there is consensus that bystanders have a major role in bullying prevention (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001; Salmivalli et al., 2011). It is therefore important to understand what factors characterize bystanders who are active, rather than passive, in supporting victimized youth.

Multiple factors are associated with defending behavior. Girls and younger students are more likely than boys and older students to act as defenders (Pozzoli & Gini, 2013; Pozzoli, Ang, & Gini, 2012; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013; Trach, Hymel, Waterhouse, & Neale, 2010). In addition, factors such as moral sensitivity, social self-efficacy, empathy, and anti-bullying attitudes are associated with active bystander involvement (Cappadocia, Pepler, Cummings, & Craig, 2012; Gini et al., 2008; Nickerson, Mele, & Princiotta, 2008; Obermann, 2011; Pozzoli & Gini, 2013; Pozzoli, Gini et al., 2012; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). Students who hold anti-bullying beliefs and who feel more responsible for intervening tend to intervene more often (Pozzoli & Gini, 2013; Pozzoli, Gini et al., 2012; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). Further, students who feel more capable of successfully intervening are more likely to take on defender roles (Cappadocia et al., 2012; Gini et al., 2008; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013).

## 3. Students who counter homophobic behavior

There are several reasons to focus specifically on bystanders in situations that reflect homophobic bias. Youth continue to report that homophobic behavior goes largely unaddressed (Kosciw et al., 2012). Also, homophobic behavior at times carries even greater health and academic risks than victimization absent of bias (Russell et al., 2012). Consequently, students who intercede in episodes of homophobic behavior may face even greater social risks for doing so compared to general bullying. It would be important to understand what factors lead some students to still act as defenders in these instances. Several factors are considered that could distinguish students who engage in more defending behavior: demographic factors, leadership, courage, altruism, justice sensitivity, and having LGBT friends.

Similar to general bullying, girls may engage in more defending behavior in response to homophobic behavior than boys. Sexual prejudice and homophobic behavior are connected to traditional masculinity norms that include a denigration of male homosexuality (Pleck et al., 1994; Poteat, Kimmel, & Wilchins, 2011). Masculinity norms are socialized and enforced throughout adolescence (Pleck et al., 1994). As such, a number of boys and young men may fear retaliation from peers for countering homophobic behavior when they observe it and others may be more condoning of this behavior because it aligns with their own masculinity beliefs.

There are competing arguments for whether sexual minority youth may engage in more or less defending behavior than heterosexual youth. Sexual minority youth who observe homophobic behavior may engage in less defending behavior because they are already in a marginalized position and may fear retaliatory victimization on top of any victimization they already experience as a sexual minority. Alternatively, sexual minority youth may engage in more defending behavior than heterosexual youth because they may be personally motivated to counter this oppressive behavior even when it is not directed at them.

Leadership traits may distinguish students who engage in more defending in response to homophobic behavior. Defenders often have a higher status among peers (Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2010). Students with high status or who are leaders

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