

Contextual and Moderating Effects of the Peer Group Climate on Use of Homophobic Epithets

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Abstract. The current investigation examined how homophobic and aggressive social climates of adolescent peer groups accounted for students' use of homophobic epithets and engagement in homophobic banter using multilevel modeling. Results indicated that aggressive peer group social climates accounted for increased use of epithets, over and above individuals' own reported bullying behavior. Furthermore, the homophobic social climate moderated individuals' engagement in homophobic banter, such that being called a homophobic epithet had a stronger predictive effect of calling other students these epithets for individuals in more homophobic peer groups. Findings support the need for research to study the way in which individuals' homophobic behavior can be accounted for based on their interactions with friends and the social processes occurring within their immediate environment.

Homophobia among adolescents remains an understudied yet prominent social issue relevant to several interrelated areas of research within schools. Homophobia includes negative attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors toward nonheterosexual individuals and behavior (Herek, 1988; Wright, Adams, & Bernat, 1999). Specific to homophobic behavior, this can include verbal, physical, and relational aggression that contains homophobic themes or references, such as the use of pejoratives and homophobic epithets, toward other students. These behaviors have been increasingly examined in relation to general aggressive behavior and more serious violent behavior occurring within schools (Kimmel & Mahler,

2003; Poteat & Espelage, 2005; Rivers, 2001), and in research examining the enforcement of gender-normative behavior and sexual harassment (Epstein, 2001; Fineran, 2002; Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003; Plummer, 2001). Studies have also documented the psychological and social consequences resulting from being the target of homophobic epithets and other forms of homophobic behavior (D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002; Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Rivers, 2001). Although information on the prevalence and consequences of expressed homophobic attitudes and epithets among students has been documented more frequently, limited research has examined the way in which the broader

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social context of individuals' peer groups accounts for their engagement in this behavior. Therefore, the current investigation builds upon the empirical literature by testing the extent to which the broader group context accounts for the use of homophobic epithets.

During adolescence, individuals' peer groups become increasingly important and provide a primary source of social interaction and support (Berndt, 2004; Eder & Nenga, 2003). Although this can provide an opportunity to successfully master a number of developmental tasks and promote prosocial development, peer groups can also perpetuate disruptive and unhealthy norms and behavior such as aggression, antisocial behavior, and smoking (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999; Dodge, Price, & Coie, 1990; Ennett & Bauman, 1994). Specific to research on aggression, findings have consistently documented the significance of the group context in accounting for individuals' bullying attitudes and behavior (Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003; Ojala & Nesdale, 2004; Pepler & Craig, 1995; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004; Sutton & Smith, 1999). These findings indicate that bullying generally occurs within a larger group context with multiple individuals involved (Pepler & Craig, 1995; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996; Sutton & Smith, 1999), and that the social context of the group significantly accounts for and influences individuals' bullying attitudes and behaviors (Espelage et al., 2003; Henry et al., 2000; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). Contributing to a broader theoretical base, this research has also offered empirical support for the homophily hypothesis (Kandel, 1978) that individuals within friendship groups are similar on various attitudinal and behavioral characteristics. Based on this proposition, individuals within the same peer group might also engage in similar levels of homophobic banter and use of homophobic epithets toward other students. Given the strong association between aggression and various forms of homophobic behavior at the individual level, it is possible that social processes identified within the general aggression literature might also account

for individuals' use of homophobic epithets and engagement in homophobic banter.

The Social Context of Homophobic Behavior and Victimization

Recent research has to a certain extent commented on the interpersonal and social nature of homophobia among adolescents. Findings suggest that homophobic behavior is one way in which males assert and prove their masculinity and heterosexuality to their peers (Mandel & Shakeshaft, 2000; Phoenix et al., 2003). Young adult males have shared that the expression of homophobic attitudes and epithets is common within the social context of their friendship groups (Plummer, 2001). In relation to this, verbal forms of homophobic aggression, such as the use of homophobic epithets, have generally been the most frequent forms of victimization experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals and by some heterosexual males from their peers (Kosciw, 2004; Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995; Plummer, 2001; Rivers, 2001). Use of homophobic epithets toward other students has been reported as common (American Association of University Women, 2001; Rivers, 2001) and has been stated to be more profane compared to other reported epithets used by students (Thurlow, 2001). Additional research that has compared the use of homophobic epithets among males and females suggests that although males engage in this behavior more frequently than females, it is significantly associated with multiple forms of aggression for both sexes (Poteat & Espelage, 2005). The interpersonal nature of homophobic behavior has also been described by LGBT youth, who have stated that various forms of homophobic behavior are often perpetrated by groups of students, rather than by single individuals (Rivers, 2001). This parallels findings in the general aggression literature highlighting the role of the group context and the involvement of multiple peers through the adoption of different roles in bullying episodes (Pepler & Craig, 1995; Salmivalli et al., 1996). A current limitation in the literature, however, is that al-

though extant research has documented high rates of victimization of LGBT students, research has less frequently commented on the broader social context of these incidents or how characteristics or processes within various peer groups might account for or moderate the use of homophobic epithets or engagement in homophobic banter.

Extant research has documented a number of psychological and social consequences reported by students who have experienced homophobic victimization from peers, which has most frequently included being called homophobic epithets (Kosciw, 2004; Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995). Psychological consequences experienced by lesbian and gay students have included higher self-reported levels of depressed mood, anxiety, and distress (D'Augelli et al., 2002; Rivers, 2001). Research also suggests that heterosexual students experience similar psychological and social consequences from being called homophobic epithets, including higher self-reported withdrawal, depressed mood, and personal distress (Phoenix et al., 2003; Poteat & Espelage, 2007). In a recent study among middle school students, Poteat and Espelage (2007) found that being the target of homophobic epithets significantly predicted various psychological and social concerns even after controlling for individuals' previously reported levels of these concerns over the past year. As such, although the expression of homophobic epithets can be common in many schools and administrators are likely not to intervene (Henning-Stout, James, & Macintosh, 2000; O'Connor, 1993), this form of victimization is associated with negative psychological and social consequences. Recently, Chesir-Teran (2003) argued for the need to examine these behaviors at the school level and to document differences across schools. Attention to the proximal peer group environment and differences across peer groups could also provide additional information from a social perspective to inform an understanding of this behavior and how students are victimized.

As part of the study of homophobic behavior within a social context, research must specifically explore the engagement in homo-

phobic banter among students. Whereas some students might primarily be perpetrators in directing these epithets toward students, other students might call and be called these epithets. In comparison, this distinction is similar to the one made in the aggression literature between bullies (i.e., students who are primarily perpetrators of aggression) and bully-victims (i.e., students who are both perpetrators and targets of aggressive behavior). Preliminary findings indicate that being the target of homophobic epithets is significantly associated with calling other students homophobic epithets, suggesting the occurrence of homophobic banter (Poteat & Espelage, 2005). However, it is unclear whether this is consistently experienced among students. Continued examination would be beneficial to determine under what social conditions homophobic banter occurs, and whether certain students are more likely to engage in banter than other students. Examination of the peer group social context could assist in distinguishing these students.

The extant literature offers initial support for the argument that use of homophobic epithets occurs as part of aggressive episodes among peers. Furthermore, the homophily hypothesis suggests that peer group members would be similar in the frequency with which they call other students homophobic epithets. From interviews, males have generally characterized their peer groups as somewhat homophobic and to regularly engage in homophobic behavior and banter, yet the degree of similarity within groups remains unclear. Current findings are also limited in that although peers have been suggested to contribute to the engagement in homophobic behavior, research has not directly identified specific characteristics or indicators of the group climate that operate in relation to this process. Therefore, the study of homophobic behavior and banter among students warrants continued research, especially from a broader social framework. In addition to examining individual differences in behavior, attention to the social context of individuals' peer groups could significantly enhance the current understanding of homophobic behavior.

Purpose of Current Investigation

The current investigation used multi-level modeling to examine how group-level factors account for individuals' use of homophobic epithets and engagement in homophobic banter over and above their own personal attitudes and behavior. In this investigation, the aggressive and homophobic social climates of peer groups were tested as contextual factors that could account for individuals' more frequent use of homophobic epithets. It was hypothesized that the aggressive and homophobic social context of individuals' peer groups would account for use of homophobic epithets over and above their own bullying behavior and homophobic attitudes. This would suggest that in addition to an individual's own bullying behavior and homophobic attitudes predicting their use of homophobic epithets, being a member of an aggressive and homophobic social group also accounts for increased use of homophobic epithets. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that the aggressive and homophobic social climate of the peer group would moderate the effect of being the target of homophobic epithets predicting an individual calling other students homophobic epithets (i.e., engaging in homophobic banter). It was hypothesized that this association would be less significant for individuals within peer groups expressing overall lower levels of homophobic attitudes and aggressive behavior, and that being a target of these epithets would have a stronger effect for individuals who were members of peer groups that expressed higher homophobic attitudes and more frequently engaged in aggressive behavior. This moderating effect would suggest that homophobic banter is more likely to occur in homophobic and aggressive peer groups than in peer groups that exhibit lower levels of aggression and homophobia.

Method

Participants

Participants included 108 females and 105 males enrolled in Grades 7–11 in a Central Illinois public high school that uses com-

petitive enrollment for entering students, and represented 91% of the total student population. Of the participating students, 61% self-identified as White, 23.9% as Asian American, 7% as biracial, 1.9% as Latino/a, 1.9% as African American, and 0.5% as Native American; 3.8% reported various other self-identified group memberships, including Eastern European, Middle Eastern, Arab, Israeli, Indian, and Pakistani. The representation of Asian American students was slightly higher relative to the county in which the school was located. Participants ranged in age from 12 through 17 years ($M = 14.36$, $SD = 1.24$).

Procedure

Early during the spring semester, parental permission forms were sent to all registered students in the included grades ($n = 233$). Parents were asked to sign and return the consent form only if they did not want their child to participate in the study; assent was also obtained from the participating students. This procedure was approved by the participating school and the university institutional review board. Six students were denied parental consent to participate and 14 students were absent on the date of data collection. All students who were present and given parental consent elected to participate.

Participants completed the survey during 40-min free periods, and were spaced evenly apart to ensure the confidentiality of their responses. They were informed that the purpose of the survey was to learn more about their perspectives on certain social issues and their activities at school. Students were also told that their individual answers would not be seen by their parents, teachers, or other students and that their confidentiality would be maintained. Survey proctors were present in each class to ensure confidentiality of responses, answer questions, and assess for random answering.

Measures

Bullying. The University of Illinois Bully Scale (Bullying; Espelage & Holt, 2001) was used to assess various types of bullying

behavior (e.g., verbal, physical, and relational aggression). Students were asked to report how often they engaged in each behavior over the past 30 days on 9 items (e.g., “I teased other students” and “I started arguments or conflicts”). Response options include *Never, 1 or 2 times, 3 or 4 times, 5 or 6 times, and 7 or more times*. Higher scores indicated more frequent engagement in bullying behavior. Past research has demonstrated the scale to converge with both peer- and self-nomination reports of bullying (Espelage et al., 2003). The coefficient alpha reliability estimate for the current study was .80.

Homophobic attitudes. Negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians were assessed using the 20-item Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men scale (ATLG; Herek, 1988). The 10-item Attitudes toward Lesbians (e.g., “Female homosexuality is a sin”) and 10-item Attitudes toward Gay Men (e.g., “I think male homosexuals are disgusting”) subscales comprise the total measure. Response options on a five-point Likert-type scale range from 1 (*strongly disagree*) through 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores reflect more negative attitudes. The coefficient alpha reliability estimate of the ATLG for the current study was .96.

Homophobic epithets. The Homophobic Content Agent Target Scale (Poteat & Espelage, 2005) was used to assess the extent to which individuals called other students homophobic epithets (Agent; 5 items) and were called homophobic epithets by other students (Target; 5 items) during the past week. The Agent subscale is preceded with the stem, “Some kids call each other names or use phrases like ‘you’re so gay,’ ‘lesbo,’ or ‘homo,’ etc. How many times in the last week did you say these things to . . . ?” Questions differentiate between perpetrators and targets (e.g., “a friend” or “someone I did not like”) and perceived sexual orientation (e.g., “someone I thought was gay or lesbian”) of the individual. The Target subscale is preceded with the stem “How many times in the last week were you called these names by other

students. . . . ?” Response options on both subscales include *Never, 1 or 2 times, 3 or 4 times, 5 or 6 times, and 7 or more times*. Higher scores on the Agent subscale indicate more frequently calling other students homophobic epithets, and higher scores on the Target subscale indicate more frequently being called homophobic epithets by other students. The Agent subscale emerged as a distinct factor from the Target subscale in factor analysis, and convergent validity has been established (Poteat & Espelage, 2005). The coefficient alpha reliability estimates of the Agent and Target subscales for the current study were .77 and .70, respectively.

Friendship nominations. Students were requested to nominate up to eight individuals at their school whom they considered their friends and with whom they spent the most time, excluding siblings. Nominations were converted to the respective code number of the participating individual. Peer nomination procedures and social network analysis have been used extensively in previous research identifying and analyzing the effects of adolescent peer groups (e.g., Ennett & Bauman, 1994; Espelage et al., 2003; Ryan, 2001).

Multilevel Modeling

Hierarchical linear modeling (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) was used to construct and test the multilevel models. In contrast to traditional forms of analysis (e.g., analysis of variance, ordinary least squares regression), multilevel modeling accounts for the interdependence among individuals and partitions the variance in scores to variance within the peer group and variance between peer groups. As such, the extent to which factors at the individual and group levels account for differences in scores can be determined. Furthermore, multilevel modeling enables the testing of differences in the association between the independent variables and the dependent variable (i.e., heterogeneity in slopes) across peer groups and identifies group-level factors accounting for this variance.

Results

Identification of Peer Groups

Peer groups were identified through social network analysis of friendship nomination data using NEGOPY (Richards, 1995), a social network analysis program. Students were identified as members of groups, as liaisons, or isolates as a function of the pattern and strength of the friendship links. Group parameters and the identification of peer groups were based on nomination reciprocation and common friendships. Reciprocation indicates that a pair of students both nominated each other as friends, whereas common friendships indicate an indirect link between individuals through one or more individuals. Several confirmatory tests were computed by the NEGOPY program to verify an individual's group membership, after which individuals were categorized as clique members, liaisons, isolates, or dyads (i.e., groups of two individuals). Cliques are groups of three or more individuals who have most of their interactions with members of the same group and at least two links with other students in the same group. Liaisons are individuals who interact with several groups and are not distinct members of only one clique. Isolates are individuals who have no direct links or only one link to other students. Students with links to multiple groups were assigned to the peer group with the greatest number of friendship links. However, if the number of links to each group were the same, individuals were classified as liaisons.

Participants nominated between 0 and 8 friends, for a total of 1,449 friendship nominations. At least one friend was nominated by 96.7% of participants, of which 11.6% were names of students not enrolled in the study. On average, individuals nominated 7 friends ($M = 6.77$, $SD = 1.94$). Results from the NEGOPY analysis identified 18 friendship groups, of which 16 groups were cliques ($n = 111$) and 2 were dyads ($n = 4$). Cliques were on average comprised of approximately 7 members ($M = 6.94$, $SD = 3.38$). The remaining students were identified as liaisons (25 males and 25 females) or isolates (29 males

and 19 females). A multivariate analysis of variance indicated no significant differences on the included measures as a function of individuals' broad group membership (i.e., group member, liaison, or isolate), Wilks's $\lambda = .95$, $F(8, 408) = 1.36$, $p > .05$. Only data from individuals categorized as members within a specific peer group were analyzed in the multilevel analyses testing for the contextual and moderating effects of group membership on individuals' use of homophobic epithets and homophobic banter.

The identified groups and dyads were sex specific, comprised of 10 female and 8 male groups. Eight peer groups were identified as racially diverse, 3 groups included only White students, 5 groups included over 75% of group members identifying as White, and 2 groups included over 75% of group members identifying as Asian American.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for each of the included measures and correlations among the measures are presented in Table 1. A multivariate analysis of variance was conducted to test for differences at the individual level based on sex and grade, with ATLG, Agent, Target, and Bullying scores as dependent variables. The multivariate analysis of variance was only significant for the main effect of sex, Wilks's $\lambda = .78$, $F(4, 199) = 13.67$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .22$. Univariate analyses indicated that males reported higher ATLG, $F(1, 202) = 31.78$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .14$; Agent, $F(1, 202) = 21.04$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .09$; Target, $F(1, 202) = 19.43$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .09$; and Bullying scores, $F(1, 202) = 4.70$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$, than females.

Multilevel Modeling of Contextual and Moderating Effects

Multilevel models were constructed to test whether the social climate of the peer group accounted for individuals' use of homophobic epithets over and above their own homophobic attitudes and bullying behavior, as well as to test whether group climates moderated the association between being called ho-

Table 1
Correlations Among and Descriptive Statistics for Included Measures at the Individual Level

Measure	Bullying	Agent	Target	ATLG	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Skewness	Kurtosis
Bullying	—				1.57 (0.51)	1.53	3.90
Agent	.57**	—			1.27 (0.53)	2.05	3.49
Target	.38**	.68**	—		1.21 (0.44)	2.57	6.51
ATLG	.11	.21**	.09	—	1.94 (0.85)	1.20	1.14

Note. Values in parentheses represent the standard deviation (*SD*) of scores on the included measures. Bullying = University of Illinois Bully Scale; Agent = use of homophobic epithets toward other students; Target = being called homophobic epithets by other students; ATLG = Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men scale.
 ** $p < .01$.

mophobic epithets and calling other students homophobic epithets. Before constructing the multilevel models, a fully unconditional model was constructed to partition the variance in scores to within the peer group and across peer groups. This was used to calculate the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC), representing the proportion of variance between groups relative to the total variance within and across peer groups. Variables were then included at the individual (Level 1) and group (Level 2) level to account for variance in scores.

The fully unconditional model was first constructed by including individuals' use of homophobic epithets toward other students (Agent scores) as the dependent variable. No independent variables were included in this initial equation, which is similar to a random-effects analysis of variance. Results from the model were used to determine the degree to which peer groups differed in their use of homophobic epithets. The model equation is:

$$\text{Agent}_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + r_{ij}$$

where β_{0j} represents the average Agent scores for students in peer group j , and r_{ij} represents the deviation of the Agent score for student i

from the mean of his or her peer group j . Peer groups were found to vary significantly on this behavior, $\chi^2(17, N = 115) = 63.01, p < .01$, with the intraclass correlation coefficient indicating that 31% of the variance in scores existed between peer groups.

To construct the contextual model, individuals' adjusted ATLG, Target, and Bullying scores were included at the individual level (Level 1). Because significant differences were identified on the included measures based on sex, individuals' sex was also included at Level 1. Scores were adjusted through grand-mean centering, so that the coefficients for the Level 2 independent variables would then represent the added contextual effects of the peer group climate accounting for individuals' use of homophobic epithets. Group-level homophobic attitudes and bullying behavior were included at Level 2 to predict the intercept at Level 1 by forming aggregate scores of each variable for each peer group to reflect the social climate of the group. The model equation is:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Agent}_{ij} = & \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}(\text{Sex}_{ij}) + \beta_{2j}(\text{Bullying}_{ij}) \\ & + \beta_{3j}(\text{ATLG}_{ij}) + \beta_{4j}(\text{Target}_{ij}) + r_{ij} \end{aligned}$$

Table 2
Multilevel Contextual Model of Aggressive and Homophobic Social Climates Accounting for Use of Homophobic Epithets

	Effect	SE	t Test	Original variance (null model)	Residual variance (multilevel model)	Percent variance explained
Group contextual effects				.0797	.0001	99%
Bullying contextual effect (γ_{01})	.4377	.1647	2.66*			
Homophobia contextual effect (γ_{02})	.1453	.0847	1.72			
Cross-level moderating effects				.1809	.0597	67%
Bullying moderating effect (γ_{41})	.5669	.3171	1.79			
Homophobia moderating effect (γ_{42})	.7032	.1443	4.87**			

Note. Contextual effects represent the effect of aggressive and homophobic social climates accounting for use of homophobic epithets. Cross-level moderating effects represent the moderating effect of aggressive and homophobic social climates on the extent to which Target scores account for differences in Agent scores (i.e., engagement in homophobic banter). Original variance refers to the amount of variance under the null model without the inclusion of independent variables. Residual variance refers to the amount of unexplained variance after the inclusion of independent variables. Percentage variance explained refers to the percent of original unexplained variance accounted for after the inclusion of the independent variables in the multilevel models.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}(\text{Group Bullying})_j + \gamma_{02}(\text{Group ATLG})_j + u_{0j}$$

where the γ_{01} and γ_{02} coefficients represent the contextual effect of the peer group. The independent variables included at the individual level accounted for 40% of the variance at Level 1. Results for the variables included at the group level indicated a significant contextual effect for the aggressive social climate when simultaneously controlling for the homophobic social climate, but not for the homophobic social climate when simultaneously controlling for the aggressive social climate (Table 2). The model accounted for 99% of the variance between groups on use of homophobic epithets, with the remaining variance at Level 2 reduced to nonsignificance, $\chi^2(15, N = 115) = 15.93, p > .05$.

Finally, to test for the moderating effect of the aggressive and homophobic social cli-

mate on individuals' engagement in homophobic banter, an additional multilevel model was constructed and tested, building upon the first multilevel model. In this model, group-level homophobic attitudes and bullying behavior were included at Level 2 to predict the slope of Agent scores regressed on Target scores after controlling for individuals' sex, Bullying, and ATLG scores at Level 1. The model equation is:

$$\text{Agent}_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}(\text{Sex}_{ij}) + \beta_{2j}(\text{Bullying}_{ij}) + \beta_{3j}(\text{ATLG}_{ij}) + \beta_{4j}(\text{Target}_{ij}) + r_{ij}$$

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}(\text{Group Bullying})_j + \gamma_{02}(\text{Group ATLG})_j + u_{0j}$$

$$\beta_{4j} = \gamma_{40} + \gamma_{41}(\text{Group Bullying})_j + \gamma_{42}(\text{Group ATLG})_j + u_{4j}$$

The cross-level moderating effects represent the extent to which Level 2 indicators of the group climate, respectively characterized as aggressive (γ_{41}) and homophobic (γ_{42}), enhance or attenuate the strength of the association between individuals being called homophobic epithets and individuals calling other students homophobic epithets at Level 1. Results indicated that the homophobic social climate of the group was a significant cross-level moderator when simultaneously controlling for the aggressive social climate, but the aggressive climate of the group was not a significant moderator when simultaneously controlling for the homophobic social climate of the group (Table 2). The moderating effect accounted for 67% of the variance in slopes across groups. The results indicated that as the homophobic climate of the group increased, being the target of homophobic epithets had a stronger effect accounting for individuals' use of homophobic epithets toward other students (Figure 1). The inclusion of these factors re-

duced the variance in slopes to nonsignificance, $\chi^2(10, N = 114) = 13.06, p > .05$.

Discussion

The social context of adolescent peer groups has consistently been identified in various areas of research as important to the explanation of individuals' attitudes and behavior. Results of this investigation provided evidence indicating the social context to also be a significant factor accounting for individuals' use of homophobic epithets and engagement in homophobic banter. Initial findings supported the homophily hypothesis that individuals associate with others who express similar attitudes and behavior. In addition, the aggressive social climate of individuals' peer groups accounted for the increased use of epithets over and above individuals' own bullying behavior. Furthermore, the homophobic social climate of the peer group moderated the extent to which being called homophobic epithets

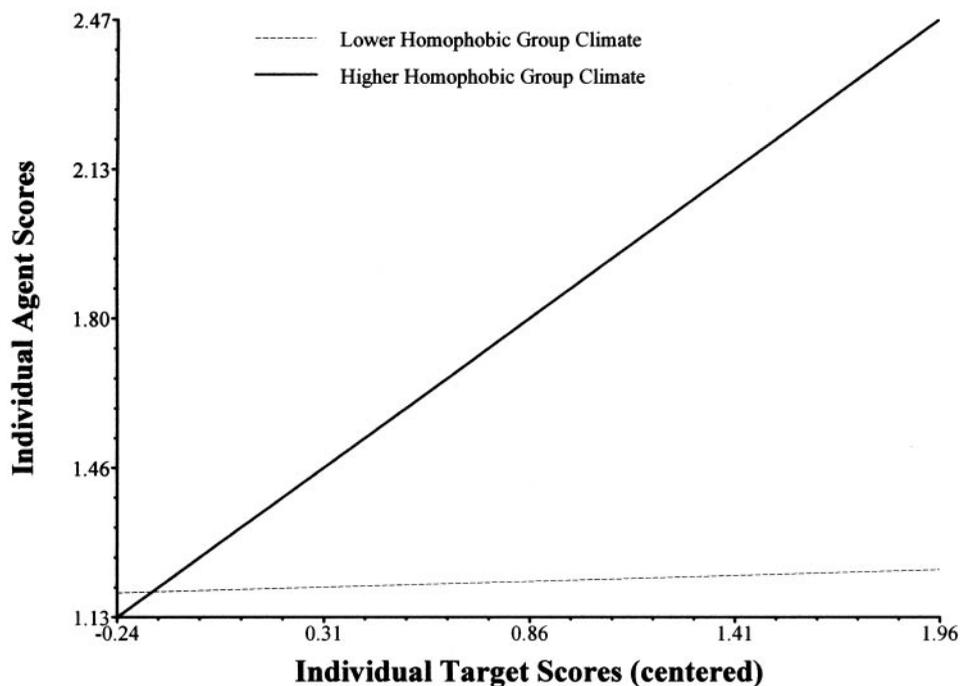


Figure 1. Moderating effect of the homophobic peer group climate on individuals' engagement in homophobic banter.

predicted calling other students homophobic epithets. These findings underscore the importance of directly attending to the social context in an effort to identify individuals who are more likely to engage in these behaviors and to understand how these behaviors are perpetuated.

Homophobic Epithets and Aggressive Social Climates

Similarity among peers regarding use of homophobic epithets has been suggested in previous studies (Phoenix et al., 2003; Plummer, 2001), and findings from this investigation add support to this assertion. The results also provide clarification as to the degree of similarity within groups and degree of difference across groups. The substantial proportion of total variation existing across peer groups indicated that different groups were notably distinct in their use of homophobic epithets. It is possible that specific peer groups could be responsible for much of the occurrence of homophobic aggression directed toward LGBT individuals as well as toward some heterosexual students. These results also suggested a degree of similarity within peer groups in how frequently they called students homophobic epithets, providing support for the homophily hypothesis (Kandel, 1978). An important area for continued research would be to identify factors that promote engagement in various forms of homophobic behavior within these groups and to identify additional characteristics of these peer groups. In the general aggression literature, individuals within aggressive peer groups have reported higher levels of conflict and lower friendship quality (Cillessen, Jiang, West, & Laszkowski, 2005), and nominated tough individuals as being popular (Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2006). Further, individuals not involved in bullying report greater support from their peers (Malecki & Demaray, 2004). From these findings, friendship quality and connection to other peers might be constructs of interest to research examining homophobic behavior among peers.

This investigation identified aggressive social climates as one factor accounting for more frequent use of homophobic epithets. As

such, individuals who engaged in bullying behavior and affiliated with more aggressive peer groups engaged in even greater use of homophobic epithets than individuals who reported comparable levels of bullying behavior but who affiliated with overall less aggressive peers. This group-level effect supports and expands upon existing research that has documented strong associations among bullying behavior and use of homophobic epithets at the individual level (Poteat & Espelage, 2005). It is likely that engaging in aggressive behavior promotes the use of homophobic epithets, in that these epithets are a part of the verbal content occurring during many bullying episodes.

Expanding this concept to the group level, individuals might adopt other supportive roles that could partially explain the added effect of the aggressive social context over and above individuals' own self-reported bullying behavior. Roles such as assisting or reinforcing the bullying individual, as proposed by Salmivalli and colleagues (1996), could account for additional use of homophobic epithets. For example, members within aggressive peer groups could use homophobic epithets when another individual in their peer group is engaging in the primary bullying role toward another student. As a result, individuals' more frequent use of homophobic epithets could be accounted for based on their own engagement in bullying and their support for the bullying behavior of their friends.

The homophobic climate of the group did not contribute to the additional explanation of differences in overall use of homophobic epithets while concurrently controlling for the aggressive social climate of the group. This suggests that the aggressive social climate has a stronger effect accounting for increased use of homophobic epithets, relative to the homophobic social climate. It could be that use of these epithets is not always a direct reflection of individuals' homophobic attitudes or the homophobic climate of the group. Rather, a variety of factors could contribute to an individual's or group's decision to use this language, and may serve alternative purposes

other than indicating an individual's or group's homophobic attitudes.

Homophobic Banter and Homophobic Group Climates

When more specifically addressing engagement in homophobic banter, findings from this investigation indicate the need to consider the homophobic climate of the peer group in accounting for individuals' reactions and responses to being the target of homophobic epithets. Specifically, results indicated that being the target of homophobic epithets from other students had a stronger effect predicting an individual's own use of homophobic epithets toward other students when the social climate of the individual's peer group was more homophobic. Being the target of homophobic epithets could be considered more hostile when it occurs within a peer group climate that is more homophobic. Students interacting in this climate might interpret these episodes as more serious provocations from their peers, and could feel pressured to respond in a homophobic manner. Models for social-information processing (see Coie & Dodge, 1998, for a review) have been used in research on bullying and aggression as ways to explain why some individuals are more likely to engage in aggressive behavior. Students within more homophobic peer groups who are called homophobic epithets might feel more threatened by potential stigmatization or possible rejection from their peers if they do not challenge or counter the perpetrator. Qualitative findings indicate that homophobic epithets are often used to assert an individual's heterosexuality (Plummer, 2001), and a common reaction for students in homophobic environments to being called gay, lesbian, or a harsher epithet ascribed to sexual minorities could be both to deny this and to respond with homophobic epithets and engage in banter with the perpetrator.

The significant moderating effect indicated that this pattern was not as strong for individuals within peer groups characterized by lower levels of homophobia. For individuals affiliated with these peer groups, being the

target of homophobic epithets was not as strong a predictor of their own use of homophobic epithets toward other students. It is possible that, because these individuals are interacting with peers who do not hold attitudes that are as negative toward gay men or lesbians, being called a homophobic epithet by another student is not interpreted as a serious provocation or challenge that necessitates a homophobic response. Individuals who adopt antihomophobic attitudes likely respond in alternative, nonhomophobic, ways to these provocations.

Although bullying was identified as a significant contextual factor accounting for overall differences in levels of homophobic behavior across groups, it was not identified as a significant moderator of homophobic banter when also controlling for the homophobic climate of the group. Whereas the aggressive social environment might account for overall increased use of homophobic epithets, membership within an aggressive peer group might not necessarily enhance the association between being a target of homophobic epithets and calling others homophobic epithets. Membership within a more homophobic peer group could promote homophobic banter even within groups that are low in overall aggressive behavior. In these groups, this banter might occur in the absence of bullying episodes. It would be important to determine if differences exist in the nature of the homophobic banter that occurs in these different contexts. Banter occurring within the context of low aggression might reflect less antagonistic or offensive intentions than the banter that occurs within more aggressive contexts.

Limitations and Future Directions for Research, Theory, and Practice

Limitations and findings of the current investigation highlight several areas in need of continued research. Future research is needed to test the generalizability of the results beyond the current sample and across multiple schools, given the small sample size of the current investigation and relatively low number of identified peer groups. The broader

school context, as proposed by Chesir-Teran (2003), in addition to the more immediate peer group context, could also account for individuals' use of homophobic epithets, and schools representing a wide range of climates and across multiple geographic locations should be included in future research. Similarly, greater representation across racial minority groups and other demographic factors is needed to adequately test for differences because of individual and group compositional characteristics. In addition, data regarding the socioeconomic status of students were not available; this factor and the extent to which it may have an effect on findings should be assessed in future research. Research might also assess how the use of homophobic epithets relates to the different roles that individuals adopt during bullying episodes, as described in the aggression literature (Salmivalli, & Voeten, 2004). Furthermore, other indicators of homophobic behavior, in addition to the use of homophobic epithets, should be assessed. Research is also needed to identify additional factors that account for differences in homophobic behavior across groups. Research studying homophobic banter could benefit from examining individual cognitive processes in addition to social processes. Certain students might interpret these provocations differently and ascribe different meaning to these episodes based on their experiences, their own homophobic attitudes and beliefs, and the particular social context and individuals involved. Application of models for social-information processing to the study of homophobic banter could provide a framework to identify the interactions between individual and social processes that contribute to the decision to engage in this behavior.

Emerging research must also take into consideration the sexual orientation of students. A limitation of the current investigation was the inability to collect this demographic information. The sexual orientation of the perpetrator and the target of homophobic epithets could both significantly account for the perceived meaning of and reactions to these episodes. Lesbian and gay students might be less likely than heterosexual students to respond to

homophobic epithets in an aggressive manner because of their minority status in many situations, and less likely to respond with additional homophobic epithets. Similarly, the use of homophobic epithets among LGBT students likely carries a substantively different meaning and interpretation for the individuals involved compared to this behavior occurring among heterosexual students or between heterosexual and LGBT students.

The present findings contribute to and expand current theory and highlight several considerations for building upon and testing relevant questions in future research. Results provided support for homophily as an organizing framework to understanding attitudes and behavior among peers. Building upon this, homophily could be used as a framework for testing whether individuals' friends influence their use of these epithets or their engagement in other forms of homophobic behavior. In addition to homophily, other conceptual and theoretical frameworks might be explored based on the current findings. The establishment of dominance hierarchies among peers has also been proposed as a conceptual framework for understanding aggressive behavior (Pellegrini & Long, 2002), and this framework might be relevant to explaining the use of homophobic epithets and engagement in other forms of homophobic behavior. It is possible that banter occurring within peer groups is a part of establishing or maintaining hierarchies within these groups. This could partially account for why heterosexual individuals, in addition to LGBT individuals, are targets of homophobic epithets.

Several implications for practice also emerge from these findings. Based on the current findings and the expansive documentation of psychological and social consequences related to homophobic victimization for both LGBT and heterosexual targets, programming to promote respect for sexual orientation diversity should be developed. These programs should also be tested for their effect on the overall social climate of schools. Because the current investigation was not itself an intervention study, data on the effectiveness of various prevention and intervention programs

within schools are needed. Current findings indicate that attention to both individuals and their surrounding social environment contributes to more accurate predictions of their behavior. Future programming and training efforts might consider ways in which to incorporate this information in an attempt to increase the effectiveness of these efforts. Given the strong association between bullying and use of homophobic epithets at the individual and group levels, programs specifically addressing aggression should consider incorporating the discussion of homophobic attitudes and behavior and how homophobia can contribute to the perpetuation of bullying. Overall, countering the use of homophobic epithets and banter that occurs among the student population should be a part of the broader efforts made by administrators, teachers, and school psychologists to actively promote a positive school environment for all students.

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