Adolescents' Appraisal of Homophobic Epithets: The Role of Individual and Situational Factors

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ABSTRACT

Homophobic epithets have become commonly used insults among adolescents. However, evidence suggests that there are differences in how these homophobic epithets are evaluated based on beliefs held by the observer and the context in which they are used. To examine this, Italian high school students were asked to rate the offensiveness of homophobic epithets, as well as to consider how they or others would react to homophobic epithets across various situations. Homophobic beliefs and beliefs about the social acceptability of homophobic epithets were also examined. It was found that greater perceived social acceptability of homophobic epithets was related to dismissive reactions to their use, whereas homophobic beliefs were predictive of negative emotional reactions but in varying ways depending on the specific context. The results indicate that homophobic epithets may not always be perceived as homophobic by adolescents, and that attempts to alter the social acceptability of these insults may be an effective manner of reducing their use.

KEYWORDS

Gay men; homophobia; offensiveness; slurs; social acceptability; verbal insults

Homophobic epithets, which in English include such words as *faggot*, *poofter*, or *fairy*, are derogatory labels that refer to homosexuals in a disparaging or pejorative manner. Current research suggests that these words are commonly used as insults among adolescents, with a survey of teens from California reporting that a majority of teens hear such insults on a daily basis (Athanases & Comar, 2008). From this, it is unsurprising that being exposed to homophobic epithets represents the most common form of discrimination experienced by sexual minority youth, including in the United States (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006) and in Italy, where the current research was conducted (Prati, Pietrantoni, & D'Augelli, 2011). The use of these slurs has a clear impact on sexual minority youth, with reported impacts ranging from mild distress to substance use, posttraumatic stress symptoms, and suicidality (Bontempo &

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D'Augelli, 2002; D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002; Friedman, Koeske, Silvestre, Korr, & Sites, 2006).

The large range of negative impacts on sexual minority youth associated with the use of these slurs makes it apparent that when sexual minority youth hear these words, they interpret them in a negative way and equate their use with homophobia and discrimination (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006). However, what is not clear is how homophobic epithets are interpreted by heterosexual adolescent students who may hear them. Given that heterosexual adolescent students are likely to be the predominant users of such slurs, how they interpret the use of such words may provide indicators of how to best reduce their use and therefore their harmful impacts on sexual minority youth. An important question is: When hearing these slurs, do heterosexual adolescents specifically associate their use with discrimination against sexual minorities? Here the evidence is less clear. On the one hand, it has been found that individuals holding stronger sexual prejudice use homophobic epithets as insults more often (Burn, 2000; Poteat, DiGiovanni, & Scheer, 2013; Prati, 2012). However, this correlation, while consistent and strong, may not reflect that the use of homophobic epithets is specifically driven by a desire to display sexual prejudice. Indeed, other findings coming from content analyses tradition suggest that many adolescent students dismiss the seriousness of these epithets, by classifying these labels as humorous and not as a form of prejudice (Korobov, 2004; Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003). Indeed, a recent study found that over 65% of adolescent students do not associate homophobic epithets with negative attitudes toward sexual minorities and categorize their use as merely generic insults (Athanases & Comar, 2008).

So if adolescents' understanding of these words is not always directly linked to perceptions of homophobia, what other factors may be used by adolescents in interpreting homophobic epithets? Another way of exploring this topic may be to examine the extent to which the use of these words is viewed as socially acceptable—that is, the extent to which their use is condoned or accepted in various social situations. It has been noted that the overt expression of prejudice is highly correlated with the perceived social acceptability of the specific form of discrimination (e.g., discrimination against ex-convicts is considered more socially acceptable than discrimination against paraplegics and is therefore more likely to be expressed overtly; Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002). This is confirmed by experimental work that has shown that the use of sexist language by male university students is more closely tied to the perceived acceptability of sexist language among male peers than the perceived reaction of female targets (Hunt & Gonsalkorale, 2014). Thus the perceived social acceptability of the use of homophobic epithets may be another factor influencing how these words are interpreted, with those who consider the words to be more acceptable across a variety of social situations likely to find their use less offensive.

The primary aim of the current research is to conduct an exploratory cross-sectional examination on the extent to which adolescents' evaluation of homophobic epithets is driven by either homophobic attitudes or by their perceived social acceptability, and whether these evaluations differ depending on how these slurs are used. Participants in the current study were Italian high school students. The current study chose to focus on participants' ratings of the offensiveness of these words rather than on students' own use of homophobic slurs given that students may be likely to underreport their own use of slurs because of their taboo status, which has been suggested by previous work in this area (Athanases & Comar, 2008). We investigated this question using a sample of high school students in northeastern Italy. We argue that the contribution of the homophobic attitudes and social acceptability in the construal of the offensiveness of these epithets changes as a function of the situation in which these words are used. We will attempt to address this question by examining both evaluations of the words when they are presented without any contextual information (which we have termed *general evaluations*) and evaluations of the words that are made where students were asked to reflect on their use across different given situations.

With regard to general evaluations, as has been found for other taboo words (i.e., "the lexicon of offensive emotional language;" Jay, 2009, p. 154), the perception of the offensiveness of homophobic epithets is likely to be strongly linked to the degree to which these epithets are restricted and sanctioned at the institutional and at the individual level. In other words, when no other information but the words themselves are available, the perceived social acceptability of these epithets—more so than perceivers' homophobic attitudes—should account for the assumed offensiveness of these words, with those who find the homophobic epithets more socially acceptable likely to find the words less offensive. If this were the case, we would also put forward that higher levels of perceived social acceptability of homophobic labels should additionally predict lower levels of perceived offensiveness of other curse words, such as generic insults or slurs. By contrast, when considering perceived offensiveness of descriptive words that refer to homosexuals, such as *gay* and *homosexual*, it is likely that the rated offensiveness of these words would not be related to the social acceptability of homophobic epithets. This is because *gay* is not, in and of itself, a taboo word (at least in the linguistic context of Italy, where this research has been conducted). However, the degree to which individuals classify these categorical descriptors of homosexuality as insults is likely be predicted by perceivers' level of homophobic attitudes (Rasmussen, 2004; Woodford, Howell, Silverschanz, & Yu, 2012).

Situational evaluations, by contrast, are made when additional information about the situation in which the target word is spoken has also been given. In

the current study, we aimed to look at range of possible reactions to homophobic epithets across four different situations. Specifically, we examined two situations in which participants were asked about what their own reactions to the use of homophobic slurs would be, and two in which participants were asked to anticipate the reaction of others. Given that previous work on adolescents' reactions to homophobic language has found that interpretations of such words ranges from dismissing their use as humorous or generic insults to offense and anger at their use (Athanases & Comar, 2008), in the current study participants were asked about both dismissive and negative emotional reactions to these words, so that a larger spectrum of potential responses were mapped across the different situations.

Previous research attested that humor ratings assigned to jokes about minorities are related to the degree that the expression of that form of discrimination is perceived as being socially normative (Crandall et al., 2002). Hence, it is likely that those individuals who perceive homophobic epithets as more socially acceptable are also more likely to find their use amusing or to dismiss their use as a joke across the given situational contexts. They are also likely to believe that others would do the same when asked to predict the likely reactions of others to the use of the slurs.

As for negative emotional reactions (such as anger or offence) to the use of homophobic epithets in situational evaluations, it is likely that these will vary by the different examined situations. Given that individuals will attempt to avoid being misidentified as members of a group they consider to be a negative social category (Barreto & Ellemers, 2003), it is likely that those high in homophobic beliefs would react more strongly to being classified with sexual minorities. We thus predicted that those who displayed higher levels of homophobic attitudes would react more negatively when they are themselves called a homophobic insult than those with lower levels of such attitudes. However, this type of negative emotional reaction by those high in sexual prejudice is likely only when they are themselves the target of the homophobic insult. By contrast, previous work has shown that it is those who object to the denigration of sexual minorities who are likely to be offended at hearing homophobic epithets being directed toward others (Athanases & Comar, 2008). Similarly, those higher in homophobic attitudes are also more likely to deny the harm done when witnessing the use of homophobic epithets (Byers, 2013). Thus we would predict that those with higher levels of homophobic attitudes would report experiencing lower negative emotion reactions when witnessing the use of a homophobic epithet as a bystander than those with low level of homophobic attitudes.

From these empirical and theoretical considerations, we can derive the following hypotheses:

(1) That situational-free "general evaluations" of homophobic slurs should be negatively predicted by their perceived social acceptability (i.e., the higher the perceived social acceptability of the homophobic slurs, the lower the perceived offensiveness of such labels), whereas evaluations of descriptive words to describe gay people should be positively predicted by homophobic beliefs (i.e., the higher the levels of homophobic beliefs, the higher the perceived offensiveness of these labels);
(2) That the perceived social acceptability of homophobic slurs will predict dismissive reactions to homophobic slurs across different situational contexts;
(3) That homophobic beliefs will predict greater negative emotional reactions when participants are asked how they would react to being referred to by a homophobic slur, but lower negative emotional reactions when asked to consider how they would feel witnessing someone else being called such an insult.

Finally, the analyses of the relationship between homophobic attitudes and emotional reactions in situations where participants are asked to anticipate other people's reactions to the use of homophobic epithets should be considered explorative. If participants appraised victims' reactions by taking the perspective of the target of homophobic epithets, then the anticipated reactions of the victim should be driven by the same mechanisms as when they evaluate how they would react to being called a homophobic epithet. However, it might be also plausible that the predictions of others' reactions, especially the dismissive ones, would be based on participants' perception of the social acceptability of homophobic epithets rather than participants' homophobic attitudes, as social acceptability of such epithets would cue what to expect in terms of reactions by victims of these homophobic verbal attacks.

Method

Participants

Two hundred and twenty-two students in their final year of the high school (age range 16–18 years) took part in the present study, as a part of an anti-homophobic bullying program conducted by the local LGBT rights and support association (Arcigay Circolo Arcobaleno) and supported by the local government. The program was conducted as part of a region-wide education initiative and was not linked to any specific incidence of anti-gay bullying in the schools that participated. The data were collected for the current study prior to the students completing any components of the program. The sample comprised 84 male and 138 female students from

high schools located in city areas in the northeast of Italy. The anti–homophobic bullying program was presented in each school by the organizers and was approved by the schoolteacher and the parent board. It is anticipated that the majority of participants were heterosexual, but because they were not asked about their own sexual orientation, it is likely that a small number of participants identified with a sexual minority. The number of participants was not defined in advance but was contingent on the number of high schools that decided to enroll in the anti-homophobia program. Data were collected in the classroom with participants filling out the questionnaire individually.

Procedure

Participants were provided with a booklet containing the study materials. On the first page, they read a series of word pairs and indicated the extent to which they considered each word pair to be offensive (in Italian: *offensiva*) and insulting (in Italian: *insulto*) by means of a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*; e.g., "How much do you consider the words 'gay' and 'homosexual' offensive?" For a similar procedure, see Carnaghi & Maass, 2008). The first word pair referred to homosexuals in a category-neutral manner (i.e., category label: *gay, homosexual*), the second word pair referred to male homosexuals in a derogatory manner (i.e., homophobic epithets: *frocio*—faggot in English; *culattone*—poof in English), and the third word pair were slurs, but unrelated to homosexuality (i.e., generic slurs: *stronzo*—bastard in English; *coglione*—asshole in English). It is worth noting that no reference was made to the context in which these words would be used; we herewith refer to this set of variables as *general evaluations*.

Participants were then asked to evaluate to the use of the words *frocio/culattone* across four different situational contexts (i.e., *contextual evaluation*). Two contexts refer to participants' own reactions to a homophobic bullying episode. In the first item, they reported how they felt they would react when they themselves were the target of homophobic epithets (i.e., *target*: "How would you feel when someone calls you *frocio/culattone*?"). In the second item, they were asked about how they would react when they were a bystander of the homophobic epithet use (i.e., *bystander*: "How would you feel to hear someone else called *frocio/culattone*?"). Two additional items referred to participants' anticipations of someone else's reactions. Specifically, participants reported how they felt someone else would react when somebody else (i.e., *bystander-empathic*: "How would someone else feel if somebody called them *frocio/culattone*?") or the participant himself or herself (i.e., *agent-empathic*: "How would someone else feel if you called them *frocio/culattone*?") insulted this person in a homophobic manner. Participants provided their reactions in each context by means of a 7-point

scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*), with respect to three negative emotional items (i.e., offended, angry, ashamed) and three dismissive items (i.e., it makes me laugh, it is a joke, I would be indifferent). For each context, the three negative emotional items were summed to create a negative emotional reactions index (α = .86), and the three dismissive items were summed to create a dismissive reactions index (α = .84).

Participants reported their level of sexual prejudice by completing the shortened version of the Herek Homophobia Scale (1988; see Herek & Capitanio, 1996; in the current study α = .75), where they were asked to rate three items regarding attitudes toward homosexuality (e.g. "Sex between two men is just plain wrong") on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Participants also rated the social acceptability of the words *frocio/culattone* in five different contexts: in their family, among their friends, in their class, in their school, and among society as a whole, on 7-point scales, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Social acceptability ratings across the five different contexts were then summed to create a social acceptability index (α = .73).

Results

Analyses

Means and standard deviations of and correlations between key variables are presented in Table 1. On the predictor variables, there were no gender differences on the perceived social acceptability of homophobic epithets (for females $M = 18.45$, $SD = 6.03$; for males $M = 19.12$, $SD = 6.87$, $t(215) = 0.75$, $p = .46$), although male participants were found to score higher on the Herek Homophobia Scale ($M = 12.25$, $SD = 5.40$) than women, $M = 8.11$, $SD = 4.41$, $t(219) = 6.20$, $t < .0005$, $d = .84$. The following reported analyses are based on multiple hierarchical regressions that were designed to assess the relative contribution of anti-gay cognitions and perceived social acceptability of anti-gay slurs to both general and contextual evaluations of homophobic labels. First, gender (dummy coded as 0 = female, 1 = male) was entered as a predictor to examine and control for any overall gender differences at Step 0. Then, Herek Homophobia Scale and Social Acceptability scores were regressed onto each other to obtain residual scores (HHSres and SAres, respectively) where the effect of the other predictor was partialled out. These were used to create two regression models: A, where HHSres was entered at Step 1 and the interaction between this and gender entered at Step 1; and B, where SAres was entered at Step 1 and the interaction between this and gender entered at Step 1. Where a significant interaction between gender and one of the predictors was found, separate regressions were run for male and female participants for that dependent variable.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations between key variables

Variable	*M* (*SD*)	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.
1. HHS	9.67 (5.20)	.18**	.40**	−.04	−.10	.16*	−.05	−.24**	.17*	−.09	.12	−.04	−.12
2. Social Acceptability	18.71 (6.35)	-	.05	−.14*	−.14*	−.09	.16*	−.04	.33**	−.04	.24**	−.10	.08
3. Offense Category Labels	6.09 (3.83)		-	.05	−.06	.20**	.03	−.04	.16*	.05	.11	.15*	.03
4. Offense Homophobic Labels	11.40 (2.97)			-	.34**	.22**	−.10	.12	−.06	.23**	−.05	.13	−.03
5. Offense Generic Insults	10.20 (2.94)				-	.19**	−.07	.20**	−.06	.16*	−.03	.15*	−.14*
6. Target—Negative	8.29 (5.04)					-	−.53**	.30**	−.11	.42**	−.18**	.39**	−.27**
7. Target- Dismissive	12.66 (4.82)						-	−.12	.44**	−.19**	.48**	−.18**	.47**
8. Bystander- Negative	6.50 (3.88)							-	−17*	.29**	−.07	.35**	−.13
9. Bystander- Dismissive	10.50 (4.02)								-	−.01	.47**	−.05	.41**
10. Bystander Empathic- Negative	11.83 (5.05)									-	−.34**	.57**	−.20**
11. Bystander Empathic- Dismissive	11.40 (4.42)										-	−.23**	.57**
12. Agent Empathic- Negative	9.93 (5.61)											-	−.43**
13. Agent Empathic- Dismissive	11.96 (5.10)												-

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

1. HHS = Herek Homophobia Scale (Herek, 1988); 2. Social Acceptability = Perceived social acceptability of homophobic slurs; 3. Offense category labels = Offensiveness and insulting ratings of categorical labels for homosexuals; 4. Offense Homophobic Labels = Offensiveness and insulting ratings of derogatory labels for homosexuals; 5. Offense Generic Insults = Offensiveness and insulting ratings of generic slurs; 6–13. Contextual evaluations of reactions to homophobic slurs: Target = target context; Bystander = bystander context; Bystander Empathic = bystander empathic context; Agent Empathic = agent empathic context; Negative = negative emotional reactions; Dismissive = dismissive reactions.

General evaluations of labels

Participants' ratings on the two items pertaining to the perceived offensiveness and insulting tone were summed to form an overall index of offensiveness of the category labels, the homophobic epithets, and the generic slurs, separately. Key statistics from regression equations for these items are displayed in Table 2.

Gender was a significant predictor of considering category labels offensive, with males evaluating these labels more offensive or insulting than women, $t(214) = 5.94$, $p < .0005$, $\Delta R^2 = .142$. Herek Homophobia Scale scores were also a significant predictor of offensiveness ratings of category labels, with those higher on the Herek Homophobia Scale finding these labels more offensive than those lower on the scale, $t(213) = 4.54$, $p < .0005$, $\Delta R^2 = .076$. With regard to the homophobic epithets, social acceptability score was negatively associated with the perceived offensiveness of these labels—albeit this effect fell short of significance, $t(213) = -1.92$, $p = .06$, $\Delta R^2 = .017$. For generic slurs a significant interaction emerged between gender and the social acceptability, $t(212) = -1.97$, $p = .05$, $\Delta R2 = .017$. For this variable, separate regressions were then run for male and female participants. It was found that for male participants, social acceptability was predictive of how offensive they considered these slurs, with males who scored higher on the social acceptability measure reporting finding the generic slurs less offensive $t(77) = -2.70$, $p = .01$, $\Delta R^2 = .085$. For female

Table 2. Key statistics from regression equations on general evaluations of labels

Dependent Variable	Model	Predictor Variable	*df*	β	*t*	R^2	*ΔF*
Offensiveness of Category Labels for Homosexuals	**Herek Homophobia Scale**	*Step 0*—Gender	214	.38	5.94**	.14	35.32**
		Step 1—HHSres	213	.30	4.54**	.22	20.63**
		Step 2—Gender × HHSres	212	−.07	−0.34	.22	0.54
	Social Acceptability	*Step 1*—SAres	213	−.01	−0.13	.14	0.02
		Step 2—Gender × SAres	212	.08	1.01	.15	1.01
Offensiveness of Derogatory Labels for Homosexuals	**Herek Homophobia Scale**	*Step 0*—Gender	214	−.08	−1.11	.01	1.23
		Step 1—HHSres	213	.01	.06	.01	0.00
		Step 2—Gender × HHSres	212	−.17	−1.72	.02	2.96
	Social Acceptability	*Step 1*—SAres	213	−.13	−1.92	.02	3.68
		Step 2—Gender × SAres	212	−.08	−0.89	.03	0.80
Offensiveness of Generic Insults	**Herek Homophobia Scale**	*Step 0*—Gender	214	−.20	−2.97**	.04	8.79**
		Step 1—HHSres	213	−.01	−0.12	.04	.01
		Step 2—Gender × HHSres	212	−.16	−1.66	.05	2.74
	Social Acceptability	*Step 1*—SAres	213	−.13	−1.98*	.06	3.90*
		Step 2—Gender × SAres	212	−.17	−1.97*	.07	3.99**

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

HHSres = Standardized residual when Herek Homophobia Scale (Herek, 1988) regressed on social acceptability scores; SAres = Standardized residual when perceived social acceptability of homophobic slurs regressed on Herek Homophobia Scale; Gender × HHSres = Interaction between gender and Herek Homophobia Scale standardized residual; Gender × Social Acceptability = Interaction between gender and perceived social acceptability of homophobic slurs standardized residual.

participants, social acceptability was not related to considering these generic slurs offensive.

Contextual evaluation of homophobic labels

The negative emotional and dismissive reactions indices were regressed on the same statistical model as above, separately for target, bystander, bystander-empathic, and agent-empathic contexts. Key statistics from regression equations based on negative emotional reactions to these items are displayed in Table 3, and dismissive reactions to these items are displayed in Table 4.

For negative emotional reactions to the use of homophobic labels across contexts, it was found that the Herek Homophobia Scale was a significant predictor of participants' own negative feelings in the target context, with those displaying higher levels of sexual prejudice reporting greater negative feelings to being called a homophobic label, $t(208) = 2.28$, $p = .02$, $\Delta R^2 = .024$ The Herek Homophobia Scale was also a significant predictor, alongside gender, of participants' own negative feelings in the bystander context. Participants displaying higher levels of sexual prejudice reported lower levels of negative feelings in the bystander context, $t(209) = -2.41$, $p = .02$,

Table 3. Key statistics from regression equations on negative emotional reactions to homophobic slurs in different contexts

Context	Model	Predictor Variable	*df*	β	*t*	R^2	ΔF
Target Context		*Step 0*—Gender	209	.09	1.25	.01	1.57
	Herek Homophobia Scale	*Step 1*—HHSres	208	.17	2.28*	.03	5.18*
		Step 2—Gender × HHSres	207	.05	0.54	.03	0.29
	Social Acceptability	*Step 1*—SAres	208	−.11	−1.61	.02	2.58
		Step 2—Gender × SAres	207	.02	0.17	.02	0.03
Bystander Context		*Step 0*—Gender	210	−.24	−3.62	.06	13.12**
	Herek Homophobia Scale	*Step 1*—HHSres	209	−.17	−2.41*	.08	5.78*
		Step 2—Gender × HHSres	208	.08	0.78	.09	0.62
	Social Acceptability	*Step 1*—SAres	209	−.01	−0.12	.06	0.01
		Step 2—Gender × SAres	208	−.02	−0.28	.06	0.08
Bystander-Empathic Context		*Step 0*—Gender	209	−.16	−2.26*	.02	5.13*
	Herek Homophobia Scale	*Step 1*—HHSres	208	−.04	−0.57	.03	0.33
		Step 2—Gender × HHSres	207	.14	1.47	.04	2.16
	Social Acceptability	*Step 1*—SAres	208	−.01	−0.19	.02	0.04
		Step 2—Gender × SAres	207	−.02	−0.25	.02	0.06
Agent- Empathic Context		*Step 0*—Gender	210	−.02	−0.22	.00	0.05
	Herek Homophobia Scale	*Step 1*—HHSres	209	−.03	−0.33	.00	0.11
		Step 2—Gender × HHSres	208	.12	1.22	.01	1.50
	Social Acceptability	*Step 1*—SAres	209	−.08	−1.17	.01	1.37
		Step 2—Gender × SAres	208	−.00	−0.02	.01	0.00

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

HHSres = Standardized residual when Herek Homophobia Scale (Herek, 1988) regressed on social acceptability scores; SAres = Standardized residual when perceived social acceptability of homophobic slurs regressed on Herek Homophobia Scale; Gender × HHSres = Interaction between gender and Herek Homophobia Scale standardized residual; Gender × Social Acceptability = Interaction between gender and perceived social acceptability of homophobic slurs standardized residual.

Table 4. Key statistics from regression equations on dismissive emotional reactions to homophobic slurs in different contexts

Context	Model	Predictor Variable	*df*	β	*t*	R^2	ΔF
Target Context		*Step 0*—Gender	210	−.04	−0.64	.00	0.41
	Herek Homophobia Scale	*Step 1*—HHSres	209	−.07	−0.97	.01	0.95
		Step 2—Gender × HHSres	208	−.13	−1.28	.01	1.65
	Social Acceptability	*Step 1*—SAres	209	.17	2.47**	.03	6.10*
		Step 2—Gender × SAres	208	−.12	−1.36	.04	1.86
Bystander Context		*Step 0*—Gender	210	.17	2.52**	.03	6.37*
	Herek Homophobia Scale	*Step 1*—HHSres	209	.05	0.66	.03	0.43
		Step 2—Gender × HHSres	208	−.01	−0.11	.03	0.01
	Social Acceptability	*Step 1*—SAres	209	.30	4.60**	.12	21.17**
		Step 2—Gender × SAres	208	−.00	−0.04	.12	0.00
Bystander-Empathic Context		*Step 0*—Gender	209	.05	0.77	.00	0.59
	Herek Homophobia Scale	*Step 1*—HHSres	208	.08	1.00	.01	1.00
		Step 2—Gender × HHSres	207	−.04	−0.38	.01	0.14
	Social Acceptability	*Step 1*—SAres	208	.22	3.19**	.05	10.20**
		Step 2—Gender × SAres	207	−.12	−1.32	.06	1.75
Agent- Empathic Context		*Step 0*—Gender	210	.01	0.08	.00	0.01
	Herek Homophobia Scale	*Step 1*—HHSres	209	−.04	−0.46	.00	0.21
		Step 2—Gender × HHSres	208	.02	0.23	.00	0.05
	Social Acceptability	*Step 1*—SAres	209	.09	1.28	.01	1.63
		Step 2—Gender × SAres	208	−.11	−1.25	.02	1.56

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

HHSres = Standardized residual when Herek Homophobia Scale (Herek, 1988) regressed on social acceptability scores; SAres = Standardized residual when perceived social acceptability of homophobic slurs regressed on Herek Homophobia Scale; Gender × HHSres = Interaction between gender and Herek Homophobia Scale standardized residual; Gender × Social Acceptability = Interaction between gender and perceived social acceptability of homophobic slurs standardized residual.

ΔR^2 = .025, and men reported lower levels of negative feelings in the bystander context than women, $t(210) = -3.62$, $p = < .0005$, $\Delta R^2 = .059$. Scores on the Herek Homophobia Scale did not, however, predict participants' predictions of another person's negative feelings in the bystander-empathic context, $t(208) = -0.57$, $p = .57$, or in the agent-empathic context, $t(209) = -0.33$, $p = .74$. Perceived social acceptability of the use of homophobic labels was not a significant predictor of negative reactions across any of the four given situational contexts (all t values <1.61, all p vales >.1).

As for dismissive reactions to the use of homophobic labels across contexts, it was found that gender was a significant predictor of dismissive reactions in the bystander context, $t(210) = 2.52$, $p = .01$, $\Delta R^2 = .029$, with males showing more dismissive reactions than females. Gender was not a significant predictor of dismissive reactions in any of the other contexts examined (all t values < 0.77, all p values > .44). The perceived social acceptability of homophobic labels was a significant predictor of dismissive reactions to their use in three of the four contexts inquired about: those who perceived the homophobic labels as being more socially acceptable were more likely to believe that they would display dismissive reactions in either the target context, $t(209) = 2.47$, $p = .01$, $\Delta R^2 = .028$, or the bystander context,

$t(209) = 4.60$, $p < .0005$, $\Delta R^2 = .089$. They also were more likely to believe that someone else would display positive reactions to being referred to by a homophobic label in the bystander-empathic context, $t(208) = 3.19$, $p = .002$, $\Delta R^2 = .047$. However, the perceived social acceptability of homophobic labels did not predict how participants thought that someone else would react in the agent-empathic context, $t(209) = 1.28$, $p = .20$.

The Herek Homophobia Scale was not a significant predictor of dismissive reactions to use of homophobic labels in any of the examined contexts (all t values < 1.00, all p values $\geq .32$).

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to examine whether the evaluation of homophobic epithets was influenced by observers' perceptions of the social acceptability of the words or by the observers' own homophobic beliefs. As was predicted, observers' evaluations of homophobic insults varied along with both of these constructs, but in different ways depending on the specific situation in which they were asked to evaluate the words. First, for the general evaluation, in line with hypotheses in general of both neutral category words and derogatory words to refer to homosexuals, ratings of the offensiveness of these two groups of words appeared to stem from distinct psychological processes. Although descriptive in their purposes, category labels turned out to be offensive only for those who hold stronger sexual prejudice, indicating that they are found to be offensive only by those who consider homosexuality itself offensive. Conversely, and in line with previous research (Korobov, 2004; Phoenix et al., 2003), the lack of any perceived homophobic content in the homophobic epithets was confirmed by the nonsignificant association between the attributed offensiveness of these labels and participants' own sexual prejudice. Indeed, participants estimated the offensiveness of these labels by relying on the extent to which the use of these labels was at odds with prescriptions of social acceptability. The fact that, at least for male participants, the perceived offensiveness of non-homophobic, generic slurs was also rooted in the social acceptability of the former labels, suggests that homophobic labels might be equated in the mind of male adolescents with generic, non-homophobic slurs, similarly to what was suggested by studies of adolescent categorization of homophobic insults (Athanases & Comar, 2008). Further studies could corroborate this finding by including measures that examine the social acceptability of common slurs and demonstrating that they are appraised in a similar way as homophobic insults.

A more complex pattern of results emerged for the situational evaluations, as participants' evaluations of homophobic epithets appear to depend on whether participants' own reactions or participants' anticipations of others'

reactions were assessed. In line with the hypotheses, findings concerning participants' own reactions indicated that dismissive reactions were predicted solely by perceptions of social acceptability, both when the participant is the victim of such a slur and when the participant is a bystander. Conversely, and again in line with the hypotheses, negative emotions were predicted only by homophobic attitudes, but in a different fashion according to participants' role. Those exhibiting higher levels of negative attitudes toward homosexuals were more likely to be offended at being called by a homophobic insult, and less likely to be offended at witnessing someone else being called one. The first of these findings is highly consistent with the idea that individuals who perceive an outgroup negatively are more likely to object to being mischaracterized as a member of that outgroup (Barreto & Ellemers, 2003; Parent & Moradi, 2011). Second, the conclusion that those higher in homophobic beliefs are less likely to be offended by the use of homophobic slurs is in line with research showing that they are also likely to deny the harm done by these words (Byers, 2013).

When examining participants' anticipations of others' reactions, our results are less clear. In the bystander-empathic context, dismissive reactions are predicted solely by the social acceptability of homophobic epithets, thus mimicking the same pattern of results as in the bystander context. However, and differently from the bystander condition, the level of homophobic attitudes was not predictive of negative emotional reactions in the bystander-empathic condition. These results indicate that as far as the bystanders consider homophobic epithets socially acceptable terms, and regardless of bystanders' own levels of homophobic attitudes, they would dampen the seriousness of the use of these epithets and expect the victim would react similarly.

Finally, neither dismissive nor negative emotional reactions were predicted by either social acceptability or by homophobic attitude in the agent-empathic context. Thus adolescents, when using homophobic insults, must be using a process other than considering their own thoughts about gay men or how socially acceptable these words are to evaluate whether they can offend others. While the current research cannot speak as to what these processes may be, possible variables that may influence reactions in these contexts and that have been identified in previous work include the degree of empathy for the victim (Hong & Espelage, 2012) or friendship with LGBT individuals (Poteat et al., 2013). Future research may benefit from examining such variables.

Also of interest was the relative lack of gender differences in the data. Previous work has found gender differences in use of homophobic insults, with males reporting greater use of such slurs than females (Athanases & Comar, 2008; Burn, 2000; Poteat et al., 2013). However, much of this research has focused on the degree to which males and females report

using the insults themselves, as opposed to how they perceived such slurs in terms of offensiveness and how they feel when they hear the words used, as was the focus of the current study. While previous work that has used focus groups with male adolescents has suggested a link only between homophobic epithet use and masculine norms (Korobov, 2004), the current results suggest that similar links are also present for women, and therefore may be related to more general social norms rather than gender-specific ones. However, in the current data there were two clear gender differences. First, men rated categorical descriptors such as *gay* and *homosexual* as being more offensive than women. This may be reflective of the higher rates of homophobia in male students, as was seen in the current sample and which is consistent with previous work (Poteat et al., 2013), which may lead to greater use of category labels as insults among groups of male adolescents. Second, women reported greater negative emotions in the bystander context, when they are witness to someone else being the victim of homophobic insults. This is highly consistent with work that shows different emotional reactions in male and female bystanders of bullying, with the later more empathetic and supportive of the victim (Hong & Espelage, 2012).

The current study has several important limitations. First, given its cross-sectional nature and its focus on students' evaluations rather than the use of homophobic epithets, it is unclear whether the variables examined here play a causal role in the continuing common use of these slurs in schools around the world. This line of research would benefit from ongoing experimental work where the perceived social acceptability of insults was directly manipulated. Second, while this study is unique in attempting to examine the evaluation of homophobic epithets across different situations, there are many more different ways of examining situational evaluations of these words that may provide additional insight into the continuation of this form of discrimination. In particular, it may be of interest to compare the use of these words among a group of friends to when they were directed to someone outside of a friendship group. It may also be useful to compare their use in the presence or absence of adults generally or authority figures specifically.

Overall, the results obtained here highlight that adolescents' understanding of homophobic insults is situationally dependent and is not always related directly to homophobic beliefs. While these insults may not be said with homophobic intent by their users, and may not be interpreted as such by other heterosexual individuals, the use of these words does have the potential to harm sexual minority individuals in a variety of ways. Not only are sexual minorities who experience frequent homophobic insults during their school years more likely to experience distress and mental health problems later in life (D'Augelli et. al., 2002), the use of homophobic epithets is more likely to activate negative evaluations of sexual minorities in heterosexual individuals who hear these derogatory labels used (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007). Although

the conclusions are tentative due to their correlational nature, the present study suggests that one of the more effective ways of tackling the use of these slurs is through altering the perceived social acceptability of these slurs. From this, success is likely to come through education of not just students but also others in the environment (such as teachers and parents) who have the potential to influence perceived acceptability of how these words have the potential to hurt. Such factors have been identified in other work on this topic (Hong & Garbarino, 2012), which highlight the complex interplay of school, community, family, and media impacts that can influence the rates of homophobic bullying. It may also be of benefit to provide greater information about the homophobic nature of these words and the potential to cause harm as a way of addressing their acceptability. Moreover, information designed to reduce the stigma associated with homosexuality might also reduce the (general) perceived offensiveness of the word *gay*, which may in turn reduce the discomfort of being classified as homosexual, thus decreasing, at least in part, the impact of bullying acts on victim wellbeing. It is hoped that through such changes will the use of this derogatory language be successfully reduced.

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