Heterosexuals' Use of "Fag" and "Queer" to Deride One Another: A Contributor to Heterosexism and Stigma

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ABSTRACT. This paper is on heterosexuals' use of words such as "fag" and "queer" to refer to one another in an insulting manner. This behavior perpetuates heterosexism and the stigmatization of gays. Two hundred and fifty-seven university students (73% Euro-American) served as participants. Males exhibited more anti-gay prejudice and anti-gay behavior than females. Heterosexual males frequently used words such as "fag" and "queer" to put one another down. Anti-homosexual prejudice was predictive of anti-gay behavior. However, approximately half of those who engaged in the behavior were not strongly anti-homosexual. For these individuals, the behavior may win approval from their social group. Awareness campaigns and peer reminders that the derisive use of "fag" and "queer" harms homosexuals may be effective in changing this group. It is more difficult to reduce this behavior in individuals with strong anti-homosexual attitudes. The role of individuals and educational and work organizations in bringing about change is discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Anti-gay harassment is verbal or physical behavior that injures, interferes with, or intimidates gays. Psychologists are concerned with anti-gay harassment because it threatens the physical and psychological well-being of individuals and violates the human rights and civil liberties of a stigmatized minority group (Herek, 1989). Like other forms of sexual harassment, anti-gay harassment may be subtle. For instance, gays may experience a "chilly" social environment in work and school settings when, upon learning of their sexual orientation, heterosexuals avoid them and do not include them in social activities.

Harassment of gays is believed to be especially harmful during adolescence and young adulthood and is linked to the unusually high suicide rate among lesbian and gay youth (D'Augelli, 1992). As D'Augelli (1992) points out, personal identities are in a formative stage at this time. Young lesbians and gay men are usually coming out to themselves and to others for the first time. D'Augelli maintains that the emotional stress created by actual and expected harassment seriously impedes personal development. Friedman and Downey (1995) suggest that this occurs because the young person internalizes the societal message that homosexuals are bad. Consequently, s/he experiences lowered self-esteem and shame as well as guilt about maintaining a false image as a heterosexual. Meyer (1995) terms the psychosocial stress which arises from minority status "minority stress." He maintains that gay people, like members of other minority groups, are subjected to chronic stress related to their stigmatization. For homosexuals, this occurs because the expectations of rejection, discrimination, and violence require that considerable energy be spent monitoring their behavior such that discovery does not occur.

Unfortunately, harassment of gay students appears to be common. For instance, D'Augelli's (1992) survey of gay and lesbian college students found that 77% had experienced verbal insults, 27% had experienced threats of physical violence, and 22% reported being chased or followed. Nearly all of the university students in D'Augelli's study (99%) had heard derogatory antilesbian/antigay remarks on campus.

Gay college students are frequently exposed to language reminding them that gays are seen as abnormal and undesirable by the dominant heterosexual society. The focus of this paper is on the use of words like "fag" and "queer" by heterosexuals (especially males) to refer to one another in an insulting manner. The author's observations and informal interviews with college students, both homosexual and heterosexual, suggested that this type of behavior was frequent among the college student population. Curiously, this anti-gay language appears most common in young male cultures and is specific to male homosexuality. A corresponding analogue does not appear to

be common in female friendship culture. In other words, female friendship groups are not inclined to regularly refer to and derogate female homosexuality. Nor do they typically tease each other by casting aspersions on each others' sexual orientation, as male heterosexuals so often do. This difference may be due in part to the general invisibility of lesbianism in comparison to male homosexuality, an invisibility which contributes to an out-of-sight-out-of-mind situation. Worldwide, lesbianism, like female sexuality in general, has been rendered invisible by cultures who naively limit female sexuality to reproduction carried out as part of heterosexual marriage. Lesbians typically keep their sexual orientation secret to avoid the loss of employment, family, children, and safety (Pharr, 1988). We also find more research on male homosexuality, more media portrayals of male homosexuality, more clubs for male homosexuals, and, worldwide, more laws prohibiting male homosexuality than female homosexuality. Historically, women have been considered lower status than men, and it was only through heterosexual marriage that status and economic security could be achieved. This too has contributed to the invisibility of lesbianism, as many lesbian and bisexual women lived heterosexual lives or quiet homosexual ones. In short, the lesbian possibility is largely invisible and, as such, it is seldom referred to in heterosexual female friendship culture. Furthermore, lesbianism, is not experienced as a threat by heterosexual women since most heterosexual women do not live in fear of being preyed upon by lesbians as much as they do by heterosexual men.

There is yet another factor that may account for the greater derogation of male homosexuality and that is the commonly believed though inaccurate, "inversion theory of sexuality." This pseudo-theory involves the assumption that homosexuals are similar to opposite-sex heterosexuals (Kite & Deaux, 1987). Because masculinity is so often defined by the devaluing and avoidance of the feminine, male homosexuality is devalued and distanced from as well. Conversely, women acting like men (the common stereotype of lesbians) is more acceptable and understandable due to the greater valuing of male traits by our culture. Furthermore, males, in contrast to females, generally do not worry about rape. Stereotypes of male homosexuals as indiscriminate and insatiable may make heterosexual males fear them as potential rapists.

Heterosexuals' use of "fag" and other similar derogatory terms for one another is different from other forms of gay harassment in that it is not directed at the gay person. Nonetheless, it is probably experienced as harassment by the gay person that witnesses it. It reminds gay people that they are members of a low-status social group and probably further reduces the chances of their "coming out." For instance, over two-thirds of the college students in D'Augelli's study (1992) hid their sexual orientation in order to avoid harassment, although the majority felt that disclosure was important.

This is additionally unfortunate because research (D'Augelli & Rose, 1990; Herek, 1984) indicates that more positive attitudes toward homosexuals are associated with knowing a lesbian or gay individual.

The use of terms such as "fag" or "queer" in heterosexual friendship groups is in many cases normative. That is, it is part of the group's culture. If the individual wishes to be identified as an ingroup member, s/he must participate in the group's culture. The terms, which may be quite creative (e.g., "butt-pirate" and "fudgepacker"), are reinforced through laughter and frequency of use. In this way, this expression of anti-gay prejudice serves what Herek (1990) would call a *social-expressive function* by helping individuals win approval from important others and affirm their status as "insiders." Similarly, Sigelman et al. (1991) suggest that anti-gay behaviors may arise as individuals try to distance themselves from stigmatized persons out of a concern that they will be stigmatized by association (what Goffman called "courtesy Stigma"). By using anti-gay language, individuals distance themselves from this stigmatized social group. Kimmel (1994) suggests that the fear men have of being perceived as homosexual propels them to enact all kinds of masculine behaviors and attitudes, such as homophobic remarks, to make sure that no one gets the "wrong idea" about their manliness.

Anti-gay language may also serve what Herek (1990) would describe as a *value-expressive function*. This is the case if it is part of individuals' attempts to affirm their own goodness by setting up a contrast between the "dreaded" outgroup (homosexuals) and the "desirable" ingroup (heterosexuals). In some cases, it may serve a *defensive function* as well. This occurs when individuals are uncomfortable with their own homoerotic tendencies and desires and, consequently, attack homosexuals as an unconscious attack on this unacceptable part of themselves (Herek, 1990).

Compared to the overt hate violence that gays may experience, the use of derogatory terms for gays by heterosexuals to refer to each other may seem innocuous and minor. However, this behavior perpetuates anti-gay prejudice and violence by suggesting that it is socially acceptable to exhibit bias against gays. In other words, it contributes to heterosexism, which Herek (1990) defines as the denigration and stigmatization of any nonheterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community.

Hearing heterosexuals insult each other by using derogatory names for homosexuals also adds to the stigma and stress of being gay and makes gay people feel unwelcome in their own communities. Many young people today even use the word "gay" as a synonym for "stupid." These types of behaviors may interfere with a positive psychological adjustment to one's gayness. For instance, Meyer (1995) suggests that internalized homophobia, a dislike of oneself because one is gay, is especially acute early in the coming-out process. He suggests that internalized homophobia abates when the individu-

al accepts his or her homosexuality, but that this is impeded by exposure to others' antihomosexual attitudes. In this way, a social climate in which derogatory terms for gays are frequently used, even if not directed at gays, may slow down the self-acceptance process.

The project described below measured the frequency of this behavior in a university student sample, where it appears to be especially frequent and harmful. The study was also designed to determine the relationship between heterosexuals' gay-putdown behavior and anti-homosexual prejudice. This is an important question because it affects how we intervene. This general idea was introduced by Herek (1984), who suggested anti-homosexual attitudes served different functions for different individuals and that intervention must proceed with this in mind. For instance, if heterosexuals with otherwise accepting attitudes toward homosexuality call their heterosexual friends derogatory names for gays and merely have not thought of its contribution to antihomosexual bias, simpler awareness efforts should succeed in changing behavior. Schreier (1995) provides suggestions for university programming to increase awareness. However, if the behavior is rooted in a deep dislike for homosexuals, more elaborate intervention is required, such as the gay and lesbian speaker panels described by Croteau and Kusek (1992).

METHOD

Participants

One hundred and thirty-eight heterosexual male and 119 heterosexual female university students from five introductory psychology classes served as research participants. Ages ranged from 18 to 40 with a mean of 19.39 and a standard deviation of 2.39. Participants came from a variety of majors. Of the 239 participants (92.9%) who provided information on ethnicity, 73% identified themselves as Euro-American: 10% identified themselves as Asian-American; 4% as "Mixed"; 9.6% as Chicano: and 1% as African-American. Participants were predominantly first year students (58.8%), 21.8% were sophomores, 12.5% were juniors, and 7% were seniors.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to measure the frequency of the homosexual put-down behavior, awareness of the behavior as a form of gay-bashing, and anti-homosexual prejudice.

Participants used a seven-point scale, anchored by "Very Often" (7) at one end and "Never" (1) at the other, to respond to seven statements having to do

with whether the individual's male friendship group engaged in the behavior. For example, they rated the statement, "The word 'faggot' and similar terms are used as a joking insult among my friends." An index was created by taking their mean responses to the seven items (called the "behavioral index" for the remainder of this paper). Cronbach's alpha for this index was .84, indicating high internal reliability. Participants also responded to the question "How often do you join your friends in the types of behaviors described above?" using the "Very Often/Never" scale. A "non-applicable" option was also provided.

To measure awareness of the behavior as a form of gay-bashing and to sensitize participants to this possibility, participants used a seven-point scale, anchored at one end by "Very True" (7) and the other end by " Not At All True" (1), to rate four statements: "I think it offends homosexuals when they hear others using terms such as 'fag'"; "I consider using words such as 'fag' and 'queer' to be gay-bashing"; "When using anti-gay language I worry about a homosexual overhearing me"; "I have thought about how homosexuals would feel when heterosexuals say things like 'fag' or 'butt-lover.'" An additional statement, "As a result of taking this survey, I think that I will be more aware of the use of anti-gay language," was rated with the "Very True/Not At All True" scale.

A seven-item index was used to measure anti-homosexual prejudice. The seven-point "Very True/Not At All True" scale was used to rate such statements as: "A man should not continue a friendship with another man if he finds out that the other man is homosexual," and "I believe homosexuals deserve the insults that they get." Participants' responses to the seven statements were averaged to produce an antihomosexual prejudice index. Cronbach's alpha for this index was .80.

Procedure

At the beginning of the class meeting, the researcher or her assistants read aloud a set of standardized instructions. Participants signed an informed consent accentuating participants' anonymity and voluntary participation and describing the study as on "the use of words like faggot and queer in heterosexual male friendship groups." After turning in their signed consent forms, participants completed the surveys. Verbal and written instructions on the survey emphasized participants' anonymity and the importance of honesty. Participants placed completed surveys in an envelope. The researcher/assistant thanked them for their participation and gave them the researcher's phone number for study results.

RESULTS

Females reported that their male friends used the derisive gay terms to a lesser extent than did males: $t(209) = 5.43$, $p < .001$; M (males) = 4.15, sd = 1.33; M (females) = 3.17, sd = 1.24. This suggests that the behavior is more frequent in all male groups. A comparison between females and males on the anti-homosexual prejudice index also found greater anti-homosexual prejudice among males: $t(246) = 5.73$, $p < .001$; M (males) = 3.49, sd = 1.20; M (females) = 2.66, sd = 1.07. Males also joined their male friends in the behavior to a greater extent than did females: $t(249) = 8.35$, $p < .001$; M (males) = 4.11; sd = 1.82; M (females) = 2.38; sd = 1.39. Furthermore, females were significantly more likely to report that they would be more aware of anti-gay language as a result of taking the survey: $t(252) = 5.36$, $p < .001$; M (males) = 3.50, sd = 1.89, M (females) = 4.78, sd = 1.89. In short, it appears that males are of special concern in regards to this behavior. Therefore, remaining results focus on the male sample.

The behavior appears to be common among heterosexual males. The mean on the 7-point index averaging responses to the seven items measuring the behavior was 4.15 (sd = 1.33). Of the participants, 63% had a mean of four or higher and only 23% had a mean under two. The two most common of the seven specific behaviors were making jokes about gays when seeing images of homosexuals on television (M = 5.08), and the use of words like "faggot" as a joking insult (M = 4.94). For both of these items, 66% of the participants circled 5, 6, or 7 (an additional 12% circled 4). This indicates that these behaviors occur regularly.

The correlation between the behavioral index and the anti-homosexual prejudice index was significant, $r(117) = .54$, $p < .001$. Still, the amount of variance accounted for is only 29%. However, as discussed in the introduction, anti-homosexual behavior may serve several functions. Some individuals who engage in such behaviors may not be antihomosexual and are merely externally, but not internally, conforming to social norms. To test this possibility, male participants scoring four or higher on the behavioral index were selected from the larger sample. Next, they were divided into two groups: those scoring less than four on the prejudice measure (n = 31) and those scoring higher than four on the prejudice measure (n = 32). Unsurprisingly, given these n's, a one-way chi-square did not find there to be significantly more participants in one group versus the other, $\chi^2 = .016$, $p > .05$. In other words, while approximately half of the participants who regularly engage in such behaviors are clearly prejudiced against homosexuals, half are not strongly prejudiced against them.

The two groups, those scoring high on both the behavioral index and the anti-homosexual index (the Anti-Gay Group) and those scoring high on the behavioral index but low on the anti-homosexual index (the External Confor-

mity Group), did not differ significantly in their beliefs that homosexuals are offended by words such as "fag," $t(61) = -.51$, $p > .05$, M (Anti-Gay Group) = 6.03, $sd = 1.06$, M (External Conformity Group) = 6.16, $sd = 1.02$. They also did not differ in their beliefs that 'fag" and "queer" are gay-bashing, with both groups scoring towards the 'not at all true" end of the scale: $t(61) = -.49$, $p > .05$, M (Anti-Gay Group) = 3.59, $sd = 1.84$, M (External Conformity Group) = 3.80, $sd = 1.57$. There were, however, some important differences between the two groups. Those scoring high on both the behavioral index and the anti-homosexual index were significantly less worried about homosexuals overhearing them use anti-gay language than were those scoring high on the behavioral index but low on the anti-homosexual index, $t(61) = -3.52$, $p < .001$, M (Anti-Gay Group) = 2.54, $sd = 1.72$, M (External Conformity Group) = 3.07, $sd = 1.74$. Also important is that the External Conformity Group was significantly more likely to report that as a result of taking the survey they would be more aware of the use of anti-gay language, $t(61) = -2.41$, $p < .01$, M (External Conformity Group) = 3.54, $sd = 1.72$, M (Anti-Gay Group) = 2.50, $sd = 1.72$. This suggests that relatively simple educational efforts may have the potential to change the anti-gay behavior of this group.

DISCUSSION

As predicted, heterosexual males in this sample frequently use words such as "fag" and "queer" to deride one another. Consistent with past research, anti-homosexual prejudice was predictive of anti-gay behavior and males exhibited greater prejudice and prejudicial behavior towards homosexuals than did females. This indicates that masculinity in college-attending males continues to be defined as heterosexual and is demonstrated, in part, by verbal gay-bashing. As suggested earlier, anti-femininity has historically been one of the defining features of traditional masculinity and the equation of male homosexuality with femininity has contributed to its devaluing. Gender-role change in the U.S. has resulted in some progress towards the increased valuing of female qualities, such as emotional expressivity and the dissociation of masculinity with anti-femininity. If this trend continues, it may result in the reduction of anti-homosexual prejudice. Other social changes such as the increased acceptability of not marrying or having children may also contribute to the reduction of anti-homosexual prejudice. Historically, homosexuality was stigmatized as part of the effort to insure heterosexual marriage and reproduction.

The research findings are supportive of Herek's (1990) contention that not all of those who exhibit gay bias are strongly heterosexist. Indeed, approximately half of the heterosexuals who engaged in the behavior were not strongly anti-homosexual. For these individuals, the behavior may serve a

socially expressive function, helping them to win social approval and acceptance in their social group. In contrast to the overtly homophobic group, this group may have included more individuals who personally knew a gay person and came from family cultures who did not explicitly promote antihomosexual prejudice. These individuals may also have been less gender-role traditional. Research (cf. Burn, 1996) indicates that those with traditional gender role attitudes are less accepting of homosexuality.

Ignorance and mindless conformity to social norms may also be a factor for this group. For example, in comparison to the anti-homosexual group, individuals in this group indicated that they were less likely to engage in the behavior as a result of taking the survey. Survey items which asked if they considered how homosexuals feel when hearing anti-gay language may have increased their awareness that their behavior was inconsistent with their attitudes. For individuals such as these, awareness campaigns and peer reminders that the derisive use of ''fag'' and ''queer'' harm homosexuals may be effective. In talking with people about this research, the author found that many people professed that they had simply never thought of this type of behavior as gaybashing and were quite ashamed of themselves upon reflection.

Of course, awareness and educational campaigns are contingent upon social support for attitude and behavior change. Unfortunately, ignorance, fear of taking an unpopular stand, and anti-homosexual prejudice prevent officials in many institutions (including those of higher education) from actively creating a safe and supportive environment for homosexuals. This essentially results in an institutionalized homophobia that implicitly condones anti-homosexual attitudes and behavior. Efforts to promote diversity on college campuses too often fail to address anti-homosexual prejudice, and this is unlikely to change without activism.

It is an even more complex matter to reduce this behavior in those who hold strong anti-homosexual attitudes. Some success has resulted from lengthy interventions in university settings (cf. Croteau & Kusek, 1992), but these are untenable for non-university populations, and even in university settings instructional time and support for these may be unavailable. Individuals can play a role by communicating that the expression of anti-homosexual attitudes is inappropriate. In addition to individuals, educational and work organizations can make a difference by clearly communicating that such language is unacceptable and akin to hate speech. Many such organizations have anti-bias programs which at present do not clearly communicate that bias against homosexuals is unacceptable. Those of us who feel strongly about these issues must lobby for inclusion of homosexuals in these policies. Even those who hold antihomosexual attitudes may comply with such strongly stated and enforced policies against such bias (just as racist persons may

not be overtly discriminatory). Perhaps, over time, a reduction in overt prejudice could lead more gays and lesbians to come ''out'' and prejudiced individuals may alter their attitudes as they have numerous experiences with non-stereotypic individuals.

This research draws attention to a previously unaddressed form of antihomosexual behavior but its generalizability is limited by its largely Euro-American college sample. Ideally, the research should be replicated with more ethnically and age diverse samples. Additionally, the link between heterosexuals' use of words like ''fag'' and ''queer'' and its effect on gay individuals' mental health and willingness to come out should be investigated. The relationship of this behavior to the stigmatization of homosexuality should also be examined. The testing of interventions designed to reduce the behavior is also a logical extension of this research.

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