Changes in How Students Use and Are Called Homophobic Epithets Over Time: Patterns Predicted by Gender, Bullying, and Victimization Status

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This longitudinal study tested for changes in how students used and were called homophobic epithets as they progressed through high school. Boys used and were called these epithets with increased frequency over time, whereas girls reported decreases on both. Distinct gender socialization processes may contribute to these different patterns for boys and girls. Also, variability in students’ own bullying and victimization across assessments corresponded with variability in their use of homophobic epithets and being called these epithets. These findings capture the dynamic yet significantly covarying nature of these behaviors, adding support for the link between bullying, victimization, and homophobic language. Further, students who reported overall higher tendencies to bully or to be victimized than others also reported more often using and being called homophobic epithets during their first semester of high school. Findings are discussed in terms of implications for research on the dynamics of this behavior, psychological and academic implications, and implications for educational policies and intervention programs.

Keywords: homophobia, prejudice, bullying, victimization, LGBT

Many adolescents report using, hearing, or being called homophobic epithets at school. Often, this is tied to bullying and victimization (Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009; Poteat & Espelage, 2005; Sweerar, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005). Name-calling, which can involve homophobic epithet use, is the most frequent form of victimization experienced by sexual minority youth (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010; Pilkington & D’Augelli, 1995). Heterosexual youth also are called homophobic epithets when victimized (Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003; Sweerar et al., 2008). Being called these epithets is associated with elevated mental health concerns and lower sense of school belonging for sexual minority and heterosexual youth (D’Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002; Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Sweerar et al., 2008). Further, recent findings underscore that students who experience bias-based victimization (e.g., on account of sexual orientation, race, religion) are even more likely than those who experience victimization absent of bias to report lower grades, higher truancy, and lower perceived importance of graduating (Poteat, Meresh, DiGiovanni, & Koenig, 2011; Russell, Sinclair, Poteat, & Koenig, in press). These findings from single time points underscore the psychological and academic concerns related to these experiences and emphasize the need to examine students’ prolonged experiences of using and being called homophobic epithets. The absence of longitudinal data on this behavior, however, is a notable current limitation in the literature.

The deleterious association between victimization and academic concerns, ranging from current academic performance to long-term academic goals, for heterosexual and sexual minority youth further underscores the importance of the issue of victimization for educational psychologists (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006; Russell et al., in press; Schwartz, Gorman, Nakamoto, & Toblin, 2005). Examining students’ use of homophobic epithets in educational settings from a broader developmental framework could provide a clearer understanding of the development and perpetuation of this behavior. It would also indicate when this behavior is most prevalent during students’ academic experience. To address this issue, we tested patterns of change in how often students used and were called homophobic epithets as they progressed through high school. The identification of these patterns of change is critical to develop effective programs to counter this behavior, provide adequate resources, and foster environments that promote the psychological, social, and academic development of students.

Moving Beyond Individual Differences: Attention to Patterns of Change

Although there are basic individual differences in how often students use or are called homophobic epithets (Poteat & Espelage, 2005, 2007; Sweerar et al., 2008), there has been an implicit assumption that these rates are relatively stable for students. Studies have not considered whether students actually may increase or decrease in how often they are perpetrators or targets of this language over time. This constitutes a more nuanced developmental issue and points to the need to study this behavior from a much more dynamic approach. Related to this, there are several competing arguments for different patterns of change. We present these
arguments below and how each would point to both similar and unique implications for addressing this behavior.

As one possibility, there may be little change in how frequently students use or are called homophobic epithets over time. Whereas some students may regularly and continually use this language, other students may rarely, if ever, use it. Similarly, certain students may remain consistent targets of epithets as they progress through school (e.g., sexual minority or gender nonconforming students; D’Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006; Williams et al., 2005), whereas others may never be targeted in this manner. Adults at school often do not intervene when homophobic epithets are used (Kosciw et al., 2010; Phoenix et al., 2003). The most recent national school climate survey from the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN; Kosciw et al., 2010) found that nearly two thirds of sexual minority students who experienced homophobic bullying did not report the incident because they believed nothing would be done. Among those who did report it, one third stated school staff did nothing to respond. Some school staff may dismiss this behavior as part of teasing, which is distinct from bullying in that it is not intended as aggressive or antagonistic (Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, & Heerey, 2001). Indeed, some boys who direct homophobic epithets toward others often minimize it as harmless banter and teasing; yet those who are targets of these epithets consistently identify them as stigmatizing, offensive, and harmful (American Association of University Women, 2001; Phoenix et al., 2003; Thurlow, 2001). The absence of interventions by adults could perpetuate this behavior among students. Stable patterns would indicate the importance of more consistent intervention efforts across grade levels. They would also suggest that students who are targets of these epithets experience this in a chronic manner throughout high school.

As an alternative, students’ use of or being called homophobic epithets may increase over time. In addition to inconsistent adult interventions, many sexual minority youth report heterosexist policies at their school (e.g., lack of formal or explicit protection against discrimination; Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009). As a result, students may use this language more often in various contexts (e.g., as part of bullying, enforcing dominance hierarchies, homophobic banter or discourse with friends) as they gradually realize that it is passively condoned or inconsistently sanctioned. Similarly, there may be a corresponding increase in how often students are called these epithets. This would underscore the need for more effective interventions and suggest that mental health and academic concerns could potentially increase in severity among those who are targeted chronically and increasingly over time.

As a final possibility, students may use or be called homophobic epithets less often over time. Bullying and dominance-promoting behavior are generally higher during transitional periods, as students establish new peer hierarchies (Pellgrini & Long, 2002). Because students often use homophobic epithets in relation to these behaviors (Pascoe, 2007; Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010; Swearer et al., 2008), their use and being the target of this language may decrease after hierarchies are established. In addition, a growing number of sexual minority youth are coming out (i.e., disclosing their sexual orientation to others) during middle to late adolescence (Grov, Bimbi, Nanín, & Parsons, 2006). This may motivate the friends of these students to reflect on their use of this language and how it may offend others, leading to a subsequent decrease in their use of it. Nevertheless, it is also possible that students who come out in already hostile environments may then increasingly be the target of these epithets from others. These patterns would highlight the necessity of intensive early prevention efforts to address this behavior to ensure safe and welcoming environments for sexual minority youth.

Although a single pattern of change could emerge in how frequently students use or are called homophobic epithets (i.e., a general increasing, decreasing, or stable trend), these trajectories could vary significantly across students. For instance, some students may use these epithets more often, whereas others may use them less often, as they progress through school. As such, in addition to testing for changes in these behaviors, we also tested whether several factors predicted different patterns of change for certain students.

Variability in Patterns of Change: Examining the Role of Gender and Race/Ethnicity

Studies have documented robust gender differences in the use of homophobic epithets and being the target of these epithets (Poteat & Espelage, 2005, 2007). Specifically, boys report greater use and being the target of homophobic epithets than girls. Beyond these basic differences, however, studies have not tested whether boys and girls differ in how their experiences as perpetrators and targets change over time. Yet several factors related to gender suggest that adolescent boys and girls may differ in their patterns of change through high school.

We suspect that gender socialization processes may foster different patterns of change for boys relative to girls. Many boys are socialized to adopt normative masculine beliefs and behaviors, which often are homophobic (Kimmel, 1997; Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1994). Also, boys use homophobic language to assert and prove their heterosexuality during adolescence (Korobov, 2004; Pascoe, 2007; Phoenix et al., 2003). As boys experience these socialization processes, this could result in their increasingly frequent use of this language. Similarly, because boys use homophobic language to enforce gender normative behavior (Pascoe, 2007; Phoenix et al., 2003), boys also could be called these epithets with greater frequency as peers solidify and then enforce gender normative behavior. Similar to boys, girls also are socialized to adopt various normative feminine beliefs and behaviors (Maccoby, 1998). In contrast to boys, however, these norms most often do not encourage girls to adopt homophobic attitudes or engage in homophobic behavior. Thus, girls may use or be called homophobic epithets less frequently over time. Alternatively, they may exhibit a fairly stable pattern of minimal epithet use or minimal experiences of being targets of these epithets.

Extant research on homophobic bullying and victimization, whether among heterosexual or sexual minority youth, has been conducted among predominantly White samples. Few studies have reported whether using or being called homophobic epithets is similar or unique across various racial or ethnic groups. Pascoe’s (2007) detailed ethnography on homophobic discourse suggested potential differences in how this was used among White and racial or ethnic minority youth. The predominant focus has remained on the role of gender; nevertheless, similarities or differences in patterns of this behavior across racial or ethnic groups could reflect the need to consider other cultural factors that influence this behavior. Thus, for exploratory purposes, we examined how de-
Developmental patterns may vary on account of students’ race or ethnicity.

**Bullying and Patterns of Change in Using Homophobic Epithets**

Homophobic epithet use is associated with a range of behaviors including bullying, dominance, enforcement of gender normative behavior, and general peer banter (Korobov, 2004; Phoenix et al., 2003; Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010). A major focus in this literature has been on homophobic language in relation to bullying. Although these are distinct behaviors, in that bullying may not necessarily involve the use of homophobic epithets, they are strongly associated (Poteat & Espelage, 2005). As such, in this study we focus on bullying as a factor that could account for significant variability in students’ use of homophobic epithets over time.

There are several ways in which bullying could predict changes in students’ use of homophobic epithets. First, when considered as a relatively stable characteristic, students who, overall, tend to bully more than others may differ in terms of how their use of these epithets changes as they progress through high school. Students who consistently report a greater tendency to bully may use this language more frequently over time, whereas students with lower overall tendencies to bully may use this language less frequently over time. Because bullying involves a power differential (Espelage & Holt, 2001), students who bully may be motivated to use this language to stigmatize and marginalize targeted students to maintain their dominant status over them (Phoenix et al., 2003; Poteat & Espelage, 2005). In this sense, bullying may moderate changes in students’ homophobic epithet use as they progress through school. Second, variability in students’ own engagement in bullying may be associated with variability in their use of epithets across multiple assessments. Modeling the relation between bullying and homophobic epithet use in this way would reflect a more dynamic approach that accounts for the possibility that students fluctuate in their engagement in both behaviors but that these fluctuations nonetheless covary with one another. This would offer additional evidence for bullying as a predictor of individuals’ own use of homophobic epithets. In this sense, bullying could be considered a time-variant predictor of within-individual variability in students’ homophobic epithet use. We consider both possibilities in relation to predicting use of homophobic epithets and test the effects of bullying as (a) a behavior that varies between students (i.e., overall bullying tendency) and (b) a behavior that varies within students (i.e., time-variant bullying).

**Victimization and Patterns of Change in Being the Target of Homophobic Epithets**

Victimization rates of sexual minority youth have changed little over the past decade, and a large majority of these youth have been called homophobic epithets (Kosciw et al., 2010; Pilkington & D’Augelli, 1995). Emerging findings indicate that heterosexual youth also are called these epithets when victimized (Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Swearer et al., 2008). For both, homophobic victimization is associated with mental health as well as educational concerns such as poorer grades and higher truancy (Poteat et al., 2011; Russell et al., in press). Several important questions emerge when considering these victimizing experiences in educational settings. For example, when might these experiences be most frequent during students’ years at school? Further, how might changes in being called these epithets differ for certain students? Attention to these questions could lead to the provision of better resources for students who are targets of this language. Because victimization is strongly associated with being the target of these epithets, victimization experiences could predict different patterns of change in how often students are called these epithets.

Similar to bullying, victimization could predict variability in how often students are called homophobic epithets in several ways. First, some students may tend to consistently experience more frequent victimization than others (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001), which may predict different trajectories of change in their being the target of these epithets over time. In this case, victimization may moderate changes in being called homophobic epithets over time. Second, students may also vary in how frequently they themselves are victimized across multiple assessments (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001), and these fluctuations in their own victimization may significantly covary with how often they are called homophobic epithets across assessments. As with bullying, modeling the relation between victimization and being the target of homophobic epithets in this way adopts an approach that captures the more dyamic nature of both behaviors. We tested for the significance of victimization in both ways, namely, as a behavior that varies between students (i.e., overall victimization tendency) and as a behavior that varies within students (i.e., time-variant victimization).

**Current Study and Hypotheses**

Despite the consistent evidence that homophobic epithets are used regularly in schools (Kosciw et al., 2009) and that homophobic victimization is associated with mental health and academic concerns (D’Augelli et al., 2002; Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Russell et al., in press), there are key limitations in our understanding of this behavior. Primarily, to our knowledge, no studies have actually examined students’ prolonged use of or being called these epithets. This has prevented the ability to examine the potentially changing and dynamic ways in which students are perpetrators and targets of this behavior across their years at school. This carries a high level of importance for informing the development of maximally effective efforts to counter the socialization of this behavior over time. To address this limitation, we used an accelerated longitudinal design to test a series of models of how this behavior changed and, moreover, how gender, race/ethnicity, bullying, and victimization predicted nuances in these changes.

We hypothesized that the frequency with which students used and were called homophobic epithets would change as they advanced across grade levels. Building on this, we hypothesized that there would be substantial variability across students in their patterns of change. In effect, we did not expect to identify a uniform trend in how these behaviors changed across all students. Because of different gender socialization experiences for boys and girls (Kimmel, 1997; Pleck et al., 1994), we hypothesized that their developmental trajectories would differ. We anticipated that boys’ engagement in this behavior, as well as their frequency of being targeted, would increase during high school. In contrast, we
expected that girls’ use of this language and their frequency of being targeted would either decrease or remain at a consistent minimal level. In addition, we included students’ race/ethnicity in our models for exploratory purposes. Also, we tested bullying and victimization tendencies as moderators of students’ progressive grade-related changes in their use of homophobic epithets and their experiences as a target of these epithets. We hypothesized that overall bullying and victimization tendencies would predict initial differences across students and that they would also be significant time-variant predictors of students’ own experiences as perpetrators and targets across assessments. Because bullying and victimization vary for many students as they progress through school (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001; Pellegrini & Long, 2002), we expected that bullying and victimization status would be stronger predictors of using and being called these epithets as time-variant predictors than when considered as stable factors (i.e., overall bullying and victimization tendency). Because bullying and victimization often are associated, we included each in both models (i.e., those predicting use of homophobic epithets and those predicting experiences as a target of these epithets) to test the unique effect of one while accounting for the effect of the other. To our knowledge, this will provide the first test of how students who engage in bullying and experience victimization differ in their experiences as perpetrators and targets of these epithets over time.

Method

Participants

Participants included 380 students (192 girls, 188 boys) in a small Central Illinois public high school. The school includes the standard Grades 9–12 as well as a Grade 7/8 “subfreshman” cohort. The school maintains a population generally around 300 students. We note that this school included an organization comparable to a gay-straight alliance (GSA) and with progressive antibullying policies. However, the school was not targeted to participate in the present study for these reasons. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that schools that allow research on these issues (e.g., bullying) may differ from those that do not, and this should be considered within the context of this study. Most participants identified as White (n = 218), followed by Asian American (n = 91), biracial or multiracial (n = 34), African American (n = 11), Latino/a (n = 11), and Native American (n = 3), and 12 students self-reported other racial/ethnic group memberships. The proportion of students from each racial or ethnic background was comparable to the overall student population. This reflected a slightly higher representation of Asian Americans than the overall community in which the school was located. At the request of the school, we were unable to collect data on students’ self-reported sexual orientation. Ages of participants ranged from 12 through 18.5 years during the time of the study. Of the participants, 112 participated at all four waves, 104 at three waves, 126 at two waves, and 38 at one wave. Most of the missing data resulted from the design of the study (i.e., an accelerated longitudinal design that included all grade cohorts, for a total of six cohorts, even those cohorts that would graduate before the completion of the study and those that entered after the study began). At all waves, participants represented over 90% of the school population.

Procedure

We collected data during a 2-year, four-wave study. At each wave, consent forms were sent to parents of all students, and a copy of the survey was available for parents to review at the front office of the school. Parents were requested to sign and return the consent form only if they did not want their child to participate. Only one parent consistently denied permission for their child to participate, whereas all other students who did not participate at a given wave were absent on the date of data collection. We obtained child assent at each wave. These procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board and the participating school. Students completed the survey during 40-min class periods. Proctors answered questions and ensured the confidentiality of students’ responses. The time between Waves 1 and 2 was 8 months, the time between Waves 2 and 3 was 11 months, and the time between Waves 3 and 4 was 7 months.

Measures

Bullying. The nine-item Bullying scale (Espelage & Holt, 2001) assesses students’ self-reported bullying behavior in the last 30 days (e.g., “I teased other students”). Response options include never, 1 or 2 times, 3 or 4 times, 5 or 6 times, and 7 or more times. Construct validity and convergence with peer-nominated bullying have been documented (Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003). The internal consistency estimates at each wave were α = .80, .84, .87, and .92, respectively.

Victimization. The four-item Victimization scale (Espelage & Holt, 2001) assesses self-reported experiences of victimization in the last 30 days (e.g., “Other students called me names”). Response options include never, 1 or 2 times, 3 or 4 times, 5 or 6 times, and 7 or more times. Construct validity and convergence with peer-nominated victimization have been documented (Espelage & Holt, 2001). The internal consistency estimates at each wave were α = .79, .81, .87, and .85, respectively.

Homophobic language. The five-item Agent and five-item Target subscales of the Homophobic Content Agent Target scale (Poteat & Espelage, 2005) assess how often students used or were called homophobic epithets, respectively, during the past 7 days. Prior to responding to the Agent items, students are presented with the stem, “Some kids call each other names or use phrases like ‘homo,’ ‘gay,’ ‘lesbo,’ ‘fag,’ ‘dyke,’ or ‘that’s/you’re so gay.’ How many times in the last week did you say these things to . . . .” Items following this stem differentiate between types of relationships (e.g., “a friend” or “someone I did not like”) and the perceived sexual orientation (e.g., “someone I thought was gay/lesbian”) of targeted individuals. The Target items are then preceded by the stem, “How many times in the last week were you called these kinds of words by other students?” followed by the same set of items. Response options include never, 1 or 2 times, 3 or 4 times, 5 or 6 times, and 7 or more times. Construct validity for both subscales has been documented among adolescents (Poteat & Espelage, 2005). Internal consistency estimates for the Agent subscale at each wave were α = .77, .84, .81, and .90, respectively. Internal consistency estimates for the Target subscale were α = .70, .75, .70, and .80, respectively.
Data Analysis Overview

We used HLM 6.0 (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) to test our developmental models. Multilevel modeling allows for variability in the number of waves of data for individuals (Singer & Willet, 2003), thereby allowing the inclusion of participants with fewer than all four waves of data. This is because multilevel modeling uses maximum likelihood methods that involve iterative generalized least squares, whereas traditional approaches (e.g., repeated-measures analysis of variance) use least squares methods that require participants to have data from all time points in order to be included in the analyses (Snijders & Bosker, 1999). These traditional methods also require certain assumptions to be met, such as homogeneity of variance (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007), whereas multilevel modeling allows researchers to examine heterogeneity of variance and to test factors that may account for this heterogeneity (Snijders & Bosker, 1999). This flexibility summarily allows for the examination of the more complex research questions we test in this study. In multilevel longitudinal modeling, data gathered from all students contribute to the estimation of fixed effects. Students with fewer data points contribute less or no information to the estimation of the random effects. Thus, it remains important to test the extent to which the data are missing at random (Singer & Willet, 2003). We report our tests of this in the results.

Using an accelerated longitudinal design, we included students in all grade levels at each wave during the project. Accelerated longitudinal designs, also referred to as cohort-sequential designs, involve the collection of longitudinal data from the same individuals in more than one cohort. Because individuals are included from multiple cohorts, this provides the opportunity to test for change across a more expansive period of time than could be achieved when involving only one cohort during the assessment period. In this study, we used the 2-year longitudinal data from multiple cohorts to examine changes in homophobic language over the entire high school experience. This design has the added benefit of decreasing the likelihood of participant attrition over long periods of time and minimizes participant fatigue or reaction formation as a result of extensive repeated assessments (Willet, Singer, & Martin, 1998). An important recommended component of this design is the inclusion of overlap between adjacent cohorts (Miyazaki & Raudenbush, 2000). From this, it is possible to test whether data from multiple cohorts can be considered as contributing to a common developmental trajectory or if instead they are cohort-specific.

Prior to testing our models, we confirmed that it would be appropriate to treat the portion of longitudinal data from each of the six grade cohorts as contributing to a part of an overall common trajectory. By collecting data over a 2-year period, this yielded overlapping data points across adjacent grade cohorts. This allowed us to test whether cohort variability in scores around this overlap could be considered random or instead reflected unique cohort trajectory differences. Our intent was to test if the six trajectories for each grade cohort randomly varied around their portion of a single common trajectory or were instead cohort-specific, reflective of a Trajectory × Cohort interaction. A significant interaction would suggest unique overall trajectories for each cohort and would weaken our ability to make inferences from these data about a common trajectory.

Following the procedures of Miyazaki and Raudenbush (2000), first we tested a full cohort model with grade progression as the indicator of passage of time at Level 1 (the within-individual level) and with a random effect for this component at Level 2 (the between-individual level). In addition, we included dummy-coded grade cohort coefficients at Level 2. This full model assumed a Trajectory × Cohort interaction. Second, we tested a reduced model that did not include cohort coefficients. This model assumed that each cohort-specific trajectory varied at random around a single common trajectory. Because the reduced model was a nested model of the full cohort model, we conducted a likelihood ratio test to determine if the deviance (i.e., poorness of fit) of the reduced model was significantly higher than the deviance for the full model. A significant difference would indicate a rejection of the hypothesis that the reduced model fit the data as well as the full model. The difference was nonsignificant for the Agent model (i.e., use of homophobic epithets; likelihood ratio [LR] = 8.46, df = 10, p > .05) and the Target model (i.e., being called homophobic epithets; LR = 8.73, df = 10, p > .05). This indicated that variance between cohorts from a single trajectory was minimal and could be considered random. Consequently, the data across cohorts could be treated as a reflection of a common trajectory, and we did not include cohort effects in the subsequent models. We did retest for cohort effects in our final models and again documented no significant effects (Agent LR = 13.65, df = 20, p > .05; Target LR = 25.88, df = 20, p > .05).

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Preliminary Analyses

Basic descriptive data are included in Table 1 for each of the included measures across grade levels and overall correlations among the variables are provided in Table 2. We also tested for patterns of missing data among our sample. We found that the proportion of missing data on our predicted variables was comparable for boys and girls; boys and girls were missing approximately 31% of their scores on the Agent and Target subscales (30.7% and 31.3% for boys and girls, respectively, on each scale). Similarly, the percentage of missing data on the Agent and Target subscales was similar for White and racial/ethnic minority students (30.6% of White students were missing scores on both scales, compared with 31.5% of racial/ethnic minority students). The proportions of missing data on the Agent and Target subscales were also unrelated to levels of bullying and victimization.

Before testing our multilevel longitudinal models we tested the unconditional means model to identify the extent to which scores on the Agent and Target subscale varied across students. The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) for Agent scores was .61, and the ICC for Target scores was .55, indicating significant variance across students in their average Agent and Target scores (i.e., 61% and 55% of the total variance, respectively).

Developmental Trajectories of Using Homophobic Epithets

We tested a series of models to examine whether and how students’ use of homophobic epithets (AGENTt) changed as they progressed through school. Because each model progressively
built on the model before it, we focus only on the significant effects for the newly added terms in each model. Table 3 presents all fixed effects and random components for each of these models.

In Model 1, we tested our hypothesis that students’ use of homophobic language (AGENT_{it}) would change significantly over time. In this model we included Grade at Level 1:

$$\text{Level 1: } \text{AGENT}_{it} = \pi_0 + \pi_1(\text{Grade})_i + e_{it}$$

We centered Grade around Grade 7/8 (i.e., the initial grade level in the school) so that \(\pi_0\) represented students’ average use of homophobic epithets during their first semester in high school and \(\pi_1\) represented student \(i\)’s change in homophobic epithet use as they progressed each semester through high school. The residual \(e_{it}\) represented the variability in student \(i\)’s epithet use not predicted by Grade. We also tested for significant variance among students in their initial use of homophobic epithets in Grade 7/8 (i.e., variability in the \(\pi_0\) intercept) and for significant variance between students in how their use of homophobic epithets changed over time (i.e., variability in the \(\pi_1\) Grade slope).

As hypothesized, the coefficient in Table 3 shows that Grade was a significant predictor of change in students’ homophobic epithet use (\(b = 0.04, p < .05\)). The positive coefficient indicated that students’ use of homophobic epithets increased as they progressed through high school. We also identified significant differences between students in their initial level of epithet use (\(\chi^2 = 456.99, p < .001\)), as well as in how they changed in their use of these epithets over time (\(\chi^2 = 460.66, p < .001\)).

In Model 2, we added students’ gender, race/ethnicity, and overall tendencies to engage in bullying and to experience victimization as predictors of differences between students in their homophobic epithet use during their first semester in high school. Gender (boy = 1) and race/ethnicity (racial/ethnic minority student = 1) were dummy-coded. Students’ overall tendencies to engage in bullying and experience victimization were estimated by their averaged bullying and victimization scores across all assessments. We included these factors at Level 2 to predict the intercept:

$$\text{Level 1: } \text{AGENT}_{it} = \pi_0 + \pi_1(\text{Grade})_i + e_{it}$$

$$\text{Level 2: } \pi_0 = \beta_{00} + \beta_{01}(\text{Gender})_i + \beta_{02}(\text{Race})_i + e_{it}$$

We fixed the intercept in subsequent models to simplify the complexity of the analyses.

In Model 3, we added gender, race/ethnicity, and bullying and victimization tendencies as predictors of the variability in how students’ use of these epithets changed as they progressed through high school. We included these factors at Level 2 to predict the Level 1 slope for Grade:

$$\text{Level 1: } \text{AGENT}_{it} = \pi_0 + \pi_1(\text{Grade})_i + e_{it}$$

$$\text{Level 2: } \pi_1 = \beta_{10} + \beta_{11}(\text{Gender})_i + \beta_{12}(\text{Race})_i + \beta_{13}(\text{Bully})_i + \beta_{14}(\text{Victim})_i + r_{it}$$ (3)

Table 1
Descriptive Data for Using and Being Called Homophobic Epithets Across Grade Levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Agent M</th>
<th>Agent SD</th>
<th>Target M</th>
<th>Target SD</th>
<th>Bully M</th>
<th>Bully SD</th>
<th>Victim M</th>
<th>Victim SD</th>
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<tr>
<td>Grade 7/8 Fall</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>0.64</td>
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<td>0.53</td>
<td>1.65</td>
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<td>0.39</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>0.37</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.61</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 9 Spring</td>
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<td>1.70</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 10 Spring</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 11 Fall</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 11 Spring</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 12 Fall</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 12 Spring</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
Correlations Among the Variables Aggregated Across All Assessments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Agent</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Bully</th>
<th>Victim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target</td>
<td>.70***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bully</td>
<td>.63***</td>
<td>.49***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim</td>
<td>.38***</td>
<td>.40***</td>
<td>.53***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Agent = use of homophobic epithets; Target = called homophobic epithets; Bully = average bullying behavior; Victim = average victimization experiences. ***p < .001.
**Fixed and Random Effects for Models Predicting Change in Use of Homophobic Epithets**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>1.29***</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.31**</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade (centered)</td>
<td>0.04*</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>−0.17**</td>
<td>−0.06</td>
<td>−0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bully (variant)</td>
<td>0.35***</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim (variant)</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.29***</td>
<td>0.16**</td>
<td>0.15**</td>
<td>0.15**</td>
<td>0.15**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bully tendency</td>
<td>0.70***</td>
<td>0.67***</td>
<td>0.79***</td>
<td>0.80***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim tendency</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
<td>−0.07</td>
<td>−0.09</td>
<td>−0.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade × Gender</td>
<td>0.11**</td>
<td>0.11***</td>
<td>0.11***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade × Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade × Bully Tendency</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>−0.05</td>
<td>−0.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade × Victim Tendency</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bully (variant) × Gender</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bully (variant) × Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bully (variant) × Bully Tendency</td>
<td>0.32**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bully (variant) × Victim Tendency</td>
<td>−0.06</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim (variant) × Gender</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim (variant) × Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim (variant) × Bully Tendency</td>
<td>−0.08</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim (variant) × Victim Tendency</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Random effects variance components**

| Level 1 residual | 0.19*** | 0.20*** | 0.20*** | 0.11*** | 0.11*** |
| Intercept | 0.15*** | 0.04* |
| Grade slope | 0.02*** | 0.01*** | 0.03*** | 0.04** | 0.04*** |
| Time-variant bully slope | 0.15*** | 0.04* | 0.03*** | 0.04** | 0.04*** |
| Time-variant victim slope | 0.02*** | 0.01*** | 0.03*** | 0.04** | 0.04*** |
| Deviance | 1,952.78 | 1,712.11 | 1,727.58 | 1,513.15 | 1,524.93 |
| Akaike information criterion | 1,962.53 | 1,721.91 | 1,733.42 | 1,539.12 | 1,547.73 |
| Bayesian information criterion | 1,982.35 | 1,741.71 | 1,743.31 | 1,563.83 | 1,572.41 |

**Note.** Grade (centered) = grade level centered at Grade 7/8 Fall semester; Bully (variant) and Victim (variant) = students’ engagement in bullying or experience of victimization, respectively, at each assessment centered at their own mean bullying or victimization score; Gender and race/ethnicity are dummy-coded (1 = boy; 1 = racial/ethnic minority student); Bully and Victim tendency = students’ overall tendency to engage in bullying or experience victimization based on their averaged bullying or victimization scores across all their assessments; Gender × Race/Ethnicity = moderating effect of gender on trajectories over time; Grade × Gender = moderating effect of gender on trajectories over time; Grade × Race/Ethnicity = moderating effect of race/ethnicity on trajectories over time; Grade × Bully Tendency = moderating effect of bullying tendency on trajectories over time; Grade × Victim Tendency = moderating effect of victimization tendency on trajectories over time; Bully (variant) × Gender = moderating effect of gender on the strength of association between bullying and homophobic epithet use across assessments; Bully (variant) × Race/Ethnicity, Bully (variant) × Bully Tendency, and Bully (variant) × Victim Tendency represent analogous effects; Victim (variant) × Gender = moderating effect of gender on the strength of association between victimization and homophobic epithet use across assessments; Victim (variant) × Race/Ethnicity, Victim (variant) × Bully Tendency, and Victim (variant) × Victim Tendency represent analogous effects. Lower values for the deviance, Akaike information criterion, and Bayesian information criterion indices indicate better model fit to the data. We also tested our models while specifying autocorrelated errors, but this had no effect on the fixed or random effects estimates in our models.

In Model 4, we added gender, race/ethnicity, and time-variant bullying and victimization (i.e., students’ bullying and victimization at each assessment as opposed to their overall bullying and victimization tendencies across assessments), centered around students’ average bullying and victimization score, to predict variability in their homophobic epithet use across assessments. We also allowed the relationship between the measures of time-variant bullying, victimization, and use of homophobic epithets to vary across students:

**Level 1:** \[ AGENT_{it} = \pi_0 + \pi_0(\text{Grade})_{it} + \pi_2(\text{Bully})_{it} + \pi_3(\text{Victim})_{it} + \epsilon_{it} \]

**Level 2:** \[ \pi_0 = \beta_{00} + \beta_{01}(\text{Gender})_{it} + \beta_{02}(\text{Race})_{it} + \beta_{03}(\text{Bully})_{it} + \beta_{04}(\text{Victim})_{it} \]
Developmental trajectories of use of homophobic epithets across grade level.

1. Developmental trajectories for use of homophobic epithets
across grade level.

\[ \pi_{ni} = \beta_{10} + \beta_{11}(\text{Gender}) + \beta_{12}(\text{Race}) + \beta_{13}(\text{Bully}) + \beta_{14}(\text{Victim}) + r_{ni} \]
\[ \pi_{2i} = \beta_{20} + r_{2i} \]
\[ \pi_{3i} = \beta_{30} + r_{3i} \]

The results indicated that students’ time-variant bullying scores were significant and positive predictors of the variability in their own use of homophobic epithets across assessments (\( b = 0.35, p < .001 \)). That is, when students engaged in more frequent bullying at one assessment than another, they also reported more frequent use of homophobic epithets at that assessment. In addition, there was significant variation in this association across students (\( \chi^2 = 208.51, p < .01 \)). Similarly, although time-variant victimization was not significantly associated with variability in use of homophobic epithets across assessments, there was significant variance in this association across students (\( \chi^2 = 263.80, p < .001 \)).

In Model 5, we added gender, race/ethnicity, and bullying and victimization tendencies as predictors of the relationship between time-variant bullying and epithet use, as well as time-variant victimization and epithet use, across assessments:

Level 1: \( \text{AGENT}_{ii} = \pi_{0i} + \pi_{1i}(\text{Grade}) + \pi_{2i}(\text{Variant Bully})_{i} + \pi_{3i}(\text{Variant Victim})_{i} + e_{ii} \)

Level 2: \( \pi_{1i} = \beta_{10i} + \beta_{11i}(\text{Gender}) + \beta_{12i}(\text{Race}) + \beta_{13i}(\text{Bully}) + \beta_{14i}(\text{Victim}) + \epsilon_{1i} \)
\[ \pi_{2i} = \beta_{20i} + \beta_{21i}(\text{Gender}) + \beta_{22i}(\text{Race}) + \beta_{23i}(\text{Bully}) + \beta_{24i}(\text{Victim}) + \epsilon_{2i} \]
\[ \pi_{3i} = \beta_{30i} + \beta_{31i}(\text{Gender}) + \beta_{32i}(\text{Race}) + \beta_{33i}(\text{Bully}) + \beta_{34i}(\text{Victim}) + \epsilon_{3i} \]

The only significant effect was that for bullying tendency on the association between time-variant bullying and use of homophobic epithets (i.e., Variant Bullying \( \times \) Bullying Tendency; \( b = 0.32, p < .05 \)). However, we also note that there was negligible change in the amount of random variance in the time-variant bullying slope with the inclusion of this factor, and the indices of model fit indicated that this overall model was a slightly poorer fit to the data than the more parsimonious Model 4 (see Table 3).

Developmental Trajectories of Being Called Homophobic Epithets

We followed the same sequence as above to test models predicting how often students were called homophobic epithets (TARGET). Because the equations for the models below are analogous to those provided above, we omit them in this section. Also, as with our presentation of results above, for parsimony we focus only on the significant effects for the newly added terms in each progressive model. Table 4 presents all fixed effects and random components for each of these models.

In Model 1, we tested our hypothesis that there would be significant change in how often students were called homophobic epithets as they progressed through high school and that there would be significant variance across students in these changes (see Equation 1). Table 4 shows that there was significant variability among students in how often they were called homophobic epithets during their first semester at high school (\( \chi^2 = 389.85, p < .05 \)). Also, although our results indicated that the overall effect of Grade was nonsignificant (\( b = 0.02, p > .05 \)), there was significant variability in this effect across students (\( \chi^2 = 420.90, p < .01 \)).

In Model 2, we added gender, race/ethnicity, and overall tendencies to engage in bullying and to experience victimization as predictors of differences between students in how often they were called homophobic epithets during their first semester in high school (see Equation 2). Gender and victimization tendency, as well as bullying tendency, predicted significant individual differences in how often they were called homophobic epithets during the first semester of high school. Boys (\( b = 0.22, p < .001 \)) and those who experienced more overall victimized than others (\( b = 0.23, p < .001 \)) who engaged in more overall bullying than others (\( b = 0.28, p < .001 \)) were more often called homophobic epithets during their first semester. After including these factors, the remaining variance in the intercept was marginal (\( \chi^2 = 384.99, p = .03 \)), so we fixed the intercept in subsequent models to simplify the complexity of the analyses.

In Model 3, we added gender, race/ethnicity, and bullying and victimization tendencies as predictors of the variability in change among students in how often they were called homophobic epithets over time (see Equation 3). Only gender accounted for variability in change among students over time. Holding constant these other factors, girls reported a decrease in how often they were called homophobic epithets over time (\( b = -0.13, p < .05 \)), whereas boys reported an increase in how often they were called these epithets (\( b = 0.06, p < .05 \); Figure 2). The variance in the Grade slope remained significant (\( \chi^2 = 710.40, p < .001 \)), and therefore, we allowed the slope to vary randomly across individuals in the next model.
In Model 4, we added gender, race/ethnicity, and time-variant bullying and victimization to predict variability in how often students were called homophobic epithets across assessments. We also allowed the relationship between the measures of time-variant bullying, victimization, and being called homophobic epithets to vary across students (see Equation 4). Results indicated that students’ time-variant bullying and victimization scores were significant and positive predictors of the variability in how often they were called homophobic epithets across multiple assessments ($b = 0.13$, and $p < .01$, respectively). That is, when students engaged in more frequent bullying or experienced more frequent victimization at one assessment than another, they also reported more frequently being called homophobic epithets at that assessment. There was no significant variability in these relationships across students for time-variant bullying ($\chi^2 = 141.41, p > .05$) or time-variant victimization ($\chi^2 = 186.12, p > .05$). Therefore, we did not proceed to test a model with predictors of variability in these slopes (i.e., Model 5), as we did for use of homophobic epithets.

**Discussion**

As research continues to document the high prevalence of homophobic behavior in many schools and the significant psychological and academic consequences of it, the present study underscores the need for greater attention to this issue. Our study is among the first to examine this behavior from a more dynamic and comprehensive developmental perspective. There were significant changes in how often students used and were called homophobic epithets over time. Moreover, these patterns of change differed

![Figure 2. Developmental trajectories for being called homophobic epithets across grade level.](image-url)
across students. Whereas boys used and were called homophobic epithets with increased frequency as they progressed through high school, girls reported decreases on both. Also, variability in students’ own engagement in bullying across assessments was associated with variability in their use of homophobic epithets, as was variability in their bullying and victimization and being the target of these epithets. Overall bullying tendency predicted initial individual differences in using these epithets, and both overall bullying and victimization tendencies predicted initial individual differences in being called these epithets. However, they did not moderate progressive grade-related patterns of change. Finally, we identified no effects on account of race/ethnicity. These findings carry a number of implications for research in this area and for the development of school-based prevention and intervention efforts to address this behavior and its relation to psychological, social, and academic concerns (Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Poteat et al., 2011; Russell et al., in press).

Distinct Changes in How Boys and Girls Use and Are Called Homophobic Epithets

As hypothesized, there were distinct patterns of change for boys and girls in using and being called these epithets. Notably, boys reported using homophobic epithets with increased frequency as they progressed through high school. Because adults often intervene inconsistently when this language is used (Kosciw et al., 2010; Phoenix et al., 2003), boys gradually may have learned that this behavior would not be sanctioned by certain adults or under certain conditions. Gender socialization factors also may explain why this behavior increased among boys but not among girls. Many masculine norms reflect homophobic beliefs (Kimmel, 1997), and masculine norms also are associated with homophobic behavior among adult men (Alden & Parker, 2005; Franklin, 2000). The ongoing socialization of normative masculine beliefs among adolescent boys may have contributed to their increased use of homophobic epithets. They may have used this language increasingly as an expression of their prejudice toward sexual minorities or as one way to enforce gender normative behavior among their peers (Pascoe, 2007; Phoenix et al., 2003). This increase in epithet use could be directed toward sexual minority youth who are coming out during this same period of early to late adolescence (Grov et al., 2006). Additional research is needed to distinguish the instances in which and individuals toward whom boys use these epithets with greater or lesser frequency.

Although girls did use homophobic epithets, it was with less initial frequency than boys, and it subsequently decreased over time. Homophobic epithet use is less strongly associated with dominance among girls than boys (Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010), which may explain these initial gender differences. Boys may have been more likely to use these epithets during the high school transition as part of establishing and then maintaining new hierarchies (Pellegrini & Long, 2002). Although girls also establish hierarchies during this period, they may not have used this language as often during this process. Of importance, this transitional period is one during which academic performance can be at risk for some students (Roesser, Eccles, & Freedman-Doan, 1999; Wigfield, Byrnes, & Eccles, 2006), and this could partially be due to social experiences such as homophobic bullying. Thus, it is important that adults at school intervene in this behavior among boys and girls, as it may negatively affect their social and academic development. Also, it is important for future research to consider greater nuance in these changes among girls. Although there is an average decrease in this behavior among girls, this pattern could vary across situations. For example, it could decrease in connection to general peer banter but may remain fairly consistently used over time in relation to certain aggressive behaviors.

Several factors may explain why girls’ overall use of epithets decreased whereas boys’ use did not. Adults may have intervened more consistently with girls than with boys. They may have viewed this behavior as more normative and acceptable among boys than among girls, partly because of their own expectations for gender normative behavior. Girls themselves also may have developed different social norms from boys on the use of these epithets. They may have viewed homophobic language as more offensive and subsequently may have established norms that discouraged its use. Indeed, many students report that this language is particularly offensive (American Association of University Women, 2001; Thurlow, 2001). These potential processes for girls could point to possible approaches to counter the use of these epithets among boys. Specifically, administrators and teachers should intervene more consistently when boys use this language, and programming should be tailored in a way that encourages boys to challenge and change peer norms that promote it. Anti-bullying interventions among boys could potentially be more effective if they address issues such as certain masculine gender norm expectations that may promote bullying and homophobic epithet use.

Similar to patterns for using homophobic epithets, boys were called homophobic epithets with increased frequency and girls with decreased frequency as they progressed through school. Students may direct this language primarily toward same-gender peers, which may explain why these patterns matched those for using homophobic epithets. Boys may have been called these epithets by other boys because of their gender nonconformity, for being a sexual minority, as part of victimization, or as part of general banter that may have escalated over time (Korobov, 2004; Pascoe, 2007; Poteat & Espelage, 2007).

Escalations in these processes, as suggested by the increases in both using and being called these epithets among boys, could reflect the emergence of a deleterious cycle. Namely, the establishment and enforcement of gender normative attitudes and behaviors and the increased pressure for boys to assert and prove their heterosexuality not only prompts them to use these epithets with greater frequency (Pascoe, 2007; Phoenix et al., 2003), but, in turn, it also places them at increased risk of being targets of these epithets. This pattern likely would be especially harmful for sexual minority boys, who may be the primary targets of such epithets by heterosexual boys who seek to prove their masculinity, distance themselves from being perceived as a sexual minority, and who wish to express their prejudice toward sexual minorities. The significant increases we documented for boys are of even greater concern when taking into consideration the mental health and academic risks associated with this form of victimization (Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Poteat et al., 2011; Russell et al., in press; Swearer et al., 2008). Those who are called these epithets with increased frequency may experience even greater distress, and this may have even stronger negative effects on their academic performance or school engagement over time. Our findings suggest that even if boys initially use or are called these epithets infrequently, admin-
The Dynamic Effects of Bullying and Victimization

Our findings indicate distinctions in how bullying and victimization predict variability in students’ use of or being called homophobic epithets. Both were strong time-variant predictors that accounted for variability in students’ own frequency of using or being called these epithets across assessments. Fluctuations in students’ engagement in bullying significantly covaried with fluctuations in their use of homophobic epithets across assessments. In effect, one reason why a student reported more frequent use of homophobic epithets at one assessment than another was because he or she also engaged in more frequent bullying at that assessment than at others. This provides much stronger evidence of the connection between homophobic epithet use and bullying than from single time point data and further emphasizes the connection between these behaviors (Poteat & Espelage, 2005; Swearer et al., 2008). This also provides a portrayal of these behaviors that more accurately captures their dynamic, rather than static, nature. Future research might consider additional nuance in this association. Although we assessed the use of homophobic epithets across a broad range of targeted individuals, the association between bullying and epithet use may be stronger or weaker when considering specific targeted individuals (e.g., friends vs. nonfriends or heterosexuals vs. sexual minorities).

In the case of being called homophobic epithets, we identified the same time-variant effect for bullying, as well as for victimization. Analogous to the findings for the relation between time-variant bullying and homophobic epithet use, the results for time-variant victimization indicate that when a student reported more frequent victimization at one assessment than another, he or she was also a target of more homophobic epithets at that assessment than at others. This finding is of particular concern, as emerging findings suggest that bias-based victimization (e.g., homophobic victimization) is associated with even greater risk for negative psychological and academic outcomes than victimization absent of this form of bias (Russell et al., in press). These effects could be further compounded from prolonged exposure over time. The additional effect for time-variant bullying could be reflective of homophobic banter. This banter may occur during certain bullying episodes during which those who bully may be called epithets in retaliation by those who they are bullying. Alternatively, this may simply reflect that individuals who bully may be exposed to homophobic banter among their peers as part of homophobic discourse. This issue points to the need for research to examine greater nuance around the instances during which this language is used.

Overall bullying and victimization tendencies accounted for initial individual differences, but not patterns of grade-related changes, in how often students used or were called homophobic epithets. Taken in combination with gender, for example, boys who had a greater overall tendency to bully reported more frequent use of these epithets than boys who generally did not bully, and for both, their rate of increase in using these epithets was comparable as they progressed through high school. Several factors may explain why bullying and victimization tendencies did not moderate grade-related changes across students. Homophobic epithets, although strongly associated with bullying and victimization, also can be used outside of bullying episodes (Korobov, 2004; Pascoe, 2007; Phoenix et al., 2003). In the case of boys, even those who generally did not engage in bullying or experience victimization in high school may have reported increased use of or being called these epithets because they increased in other contexts. This could include instances of general peer banter and teasing (Keltrn et al., 2001; Korobov, 2004; Pascoe, 2007). We would argue, however, that although these instances may not be as blatantly antagonistic as bullying, they could still have negative academic and psychological effects on the targeted individuals and on the broader school climate (e.g., by fostering perceptions of unwelcoming school climates; Poteat et al., 2011). This highlights the need for schools to address the use of these epithets not only in the context of bullying but also in other social contexts and as part of other social processes (e.g., gender socialization). It is possible that increases across these contexts could have negative effects on students’ mental health as well as academic outcomes, such as motivation, performance, and long-term academic goals.

Strengths, Limitations, and Implications for Application and Research

This study extends the literature on homophobic behavior within schools in several key ways. Our findings provide a much broader and more dynamic developmental understanding to this serious issue than has been considered or portrayed in prior research. Notably, this study highlights how students’ use of and being called homophobic epithets varies substantially across their academic experience. To our knowledge, it is the first study to examine patterns of this behavior over extended periods of time and, moreover, to identify factors that account for the complex variability in how this behavior changes.

Although this study makes important contributions to the literature, several limitations must be addressed. We were not permitted to assess students’ sexual orientation. Yet changes in these behaviors likely vary on account of this factor. For example, although heterosexual boys may use this language more often, we suspect that this pattern would not apply to sexual minority boys. Also, we tested for different patterns of change in students’ use of and being called homophobic epithets on account of bullying and victimization. Although this offers critical attention to the issue of bias-based bullying and discriminatory victimization, additional research is needed to examine how different patterns of change may emerge in relation to its use in other contexts or in connection with other behaviors (e.g., banter among friends, establishing or maintaining dominance hierarchies among peers). This specificity would provide a greater understanding of the conditions that may promote this behavior and in what ways it is perpetuated over time. Additionally, research is needed to test the generalizability of our findings to schools that vary in size, geographic location, or on other characteristics distinct from the participating school in our study. In effect, future studies need to examine how individual and social contextual factors may interact in ways that contribute to even more nuanced trajectories than those we documented in this study. In addition to examining within-individual factors (Level 1) and individual characteristics (Level 2), studies could examine
effects at broader levels (Level 3), such as the effects of different norms across peer groups or families, or norms and policies across schools.

Our data represent students’ self-reported responses. Prior work has documented convergent validity between self-reported and sociometric peer nominations for bullying and victimization behavior (Espelage & Holt, 2001; Espelage et al., 2003). However, research on homophobic bullying and victimization has relied entirely on self-report. Findings from this approach do consistently identify a range of responses from students that are linked with bullying and victimization. Nevertheless, a multi-informant approach would be beneficial. Similarly, although self-reported bullying and victimization were within a 30-day period, self-reported use of or being called homophobic epithets were within a 7-day period. It is possible that this more restrictive time frame could adequately examine the association between these behaviors, and future research should consider assessing this and other forms of homophobic behavior within a longer time frame.

Finally, we examined the effects of race/ethnicity for exploratory purposes and identified no significant effects. This could reflect that developmental trajectories are indeed comparable across racial or ethnic groups, or it could reflect the insufficient representativeness of our sample. Further, combining the data across racial and ethnic minority groups in our sample could have masked variability across these groups. Research is needed to more adequately examine possible racial or ethnic group differences and also should examine the role of cultural factors.

Despite these limitations, our findings highlight important implications for schools as they seek to promote safe and welcoming environments that foster the social development and academic excellence of students across their entire educational experience. Perhaps most clearly, they underscore the need for more effective programming efforts for boys, whose use of and being called homophobic epithets actually increased over time. This raises serious concerns for several reasons. Because many students consider these epithets particularly offensive (Thurlow, 2001), boys may come to view their schools as more unwelcoming and unsafe over time. Also, these increases could compound the already serious mental health and academic concerns associated with homophobic victimization documented from single time point data (D’Augelli et al., 2002; Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Russell et al., in press; Sweerar et al., 2008). Future research might also examine whether these differential experiences between boys and girls in relation to homophobic bullying partially contribute to any gender differences in academic-related outcomes (e.g., academic engagement or performance; Pomerantz, Altermatt, & Saxon, 2002; Ryan, Shim, Lampkins-uThando, Kiefer, & Thompson, 2009).

Adults in schools should be particularly attentive to students who are called these epithets and, in addition to intervening during these episodes, ensure the provision of adequate resources to these youth. Consistent enforcement of school discipline and availability of caring school adults are associated with students’ reports of school safety (Gregory, Cornell, Fan, Sheras, Shih, & Huang, 2010).

Because our data were collected from a school with a group comparable to a GSA and with relatively progressive antibullying policies, our findings suggest that although the inclusion of these programs and policies is critical, they may not be sufficient in and of themselves. It is likely just as important for students to be aware of these policies and for these policies to be consistently enforced and supported. Other school-based efforts also may be important, such as the representation of sexual minorities within the curriculum, the visible presence of LGBT teachers and administrators, activity levels of GSAs or similar groups, or ongoing antibullying programming that addresses issues of diversity and prejudice. Certain effects that we documented actually may be underestimated for schools without these policies and programs (e.g., the increases we documented among boys). This underscores the need for future research to examine school-level effects that may moderate progressive grade-related changes in this behavior in ways other than what we documented.

The dynamic changes and variability in this behavior for students underscore the need for intensive prevention efforts during students’ initial transition to high school, followed by continual and consistent intervention efforts across subsequent grade levels. Because our findings offer stronger evidence of the connection between homophobic language use and bullying than do prior studies, this further emphasizes the need for antibullying programs to place a greater emphasis on issues of diversity and prejudice within their materials. Most antibullying programs, even those with empirical support, provide minimal explicit attention to issues of diversity. Programs that address issues of diversity and prejudice often are separate from those that address issues of bullying and victimization. Comprehensive programs are needed that integrate both issues and that directly acknowledge and address prejudice as a factor that underlies bullying.

Our findings also point to several new directions for research. It is important for future research to assess this behavior among students for longer periods of time and with a greater number of time points. This would provide the ability to test more complex patterns of change. Whereas prior research has focused on specific time points at which students’ homophobic attitudes or behaviors significantly differ (e.g., on account of grade level), it is equally beneficial to examine these more comprehensive and complex patterns that span across students’ overall educational experience. Also, future research should incorporate additional factors associated with homophobic behavior that may predict variability in how these behaviors change, such as gender ideology beliefs (Pleck et al., 1994) or intergroup contact with sexual minority peers (Heine & Horn, 2009). These factors may have stronger moderating effects on changes in the use of homophobic epithets over time than we documented for bullying and victimization. Further, although we focused on individual characteristics as predictors of different patterns of change, future research should consider the additional influence of the social context. This could include attention to peer group social norms (e.g., homophobic peer group climates; Poteat, 2007) or school-level factors (e.g., school policies or resources; Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009) and how these may moderate changes in how often students use or are called homophobic epithets. Moreover, attention to variability in homophobic bullying and victimization experiences and how these relate to varying patterns and fluctuations in students’ mental health or academic performance and school belonging over time is needed. Continued research in this area is critical in order to inform efforts to foster safer and more welcoming schools, to encourage diversity-affirming attitudes and behaviors among students, and to promote academic achievement for all students.
References


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