External versus Internal Motivators as Predictors for LGBTQ-Directed Bullying Behavior in Adolescents

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B.A. – Psychology, expected May 2011

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Abstract

There are a number of influences that predict bullying behavior. Participants in this study were 10th grade male and female adolescents from various American high schools, graduating class of 2000 (N = 1211, 80.5% white, 9.3% black, 10.1% other, mean age = 16.33, SD = .602). The participants were given a social attitudes survey that included questions about their relationships with parents, peers, and feelings of self-worth, and for this exploratory study were used to predict usage of anti-gay remarks. Respondents who reported hearing parental use of anti-gay remarks strongly predicted their own use of such epithets above all other hypothesized predictor variables (β = .37, p < .01). Special consideration should be given to external factors such as exposure to biased language as being far more influential over internally-based motivators such as self-esteem and quality of relationships with parents.
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School bullying is not a new phenomenon and neither is its negative impact on the victims. Bullying can come in various forms such as physical aggression, name-calling, and internet-based harassment, and may result in depression, anxiety and suicides. Recent bullying-related suicide statistics are alarming: victims of bullies are anywhere from two to nine times more likely than non-victims to attempt suicide, almost half of suicide attempts in Britain are bullying-related and over 160,000 kids stay home every day due to bullying fears (“Bullying Statistics 2009”, 2009). From August to September 2010, the press has reported several LGBTQ-identified individuals as being victims of suicide, assumed to be influenced by specific cases of bullying and harassment (McKinley, 2010). However, the focus and importance of anti-gay bullying seems to take a backseat to other types of bullying such as racism-related aggression (Thurlow, 2010).

While bullying may occur across different types of individuals, the targets of bullying that are studied are often from stigmatized or minority groups. A combination of possessing a stigmatized identity and becoming a bullying victim has profound negative outcomes for youth (Espelage & Swearer, 2008), from lowered self-esteem to committing suicide. Obviously taking one’s own life is the ultimate negative impact bullying has on an individual and his or her loved ones. From these accounted incidents there is an obvious need for intervention and prevention of such tragedies, but in order to effect these changes a better understanding of the foundations of bullying behavior must occur. This study examines the relationship that parents, peers, relationships and self-esteem have on individuals who partake in anti-gay slurs or bullying remarks.
While there is no exhaustive list of what describes a typical bully, there are common themes across definitions that include a general negative outlook toward life, poor self-image, low academic achievement, and a distant relationship with parents (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim & Sadek, 2010). However, not every study has concluded that low self-esteem contributes toward having a propensity for bullying. Bushman, Baumeister, Thomaes, Ryu, Begeer and West (2009) used measures of self-esteem, narcissism and egotism to assess levels of aggression in general and found the opposite to be true; higher levels of self-esteem contributed toward higher levels of aggression. Those who rated highest in self-esteem and narcissism reacted more aggressively when being provoked by way of threat or humiliation versus those with low self-esteem. In fact, those with low self-esteem did not react aggressively when being provoked. While this assessment addressed individual differences in aggressive behavior, there was no particular focus from where these behaviors or traits came.

Poteat (2008) illustrated that when aggression and peer groups combine, a higher likelihood of bullying behaviors are produced, such as anti-LGBTQ epithets. This study focused on the social context and its influence on bullying behaviors rather than on individual differences. A need to account for the way in which individuals and their homophobic behaviors interact within groups was addressed to gain a clearer picture of the peer-group influence on using such epithets. The social climate of particular groups increased the use of anti-gay remarks over an individual’s bullying behavior; however, one particularly dominant group member that uses such remarks most often may have an impact on other members’ support and level of anti-gay epithet use. This seems to highlight that one individual can have a profound impact on the likelihood for peer group members to replicate such behaviors. Poteat and DiGiovanni (2010) noted that higher levels of dominance and bullying occurred during transitional phases in
adolescence (the move from middle to high school) than during non-transitional phases (senior-level high school students). A dominant peer may have a greater influence over other peer group members during transitional phases because adolescents may be especially anxiety-ridden and self-conscious by trying to adjust to a new school and social environment; they are likely far more vulnerable and apt to seek out a social safe-haven during transitional phases than in any other phase of adolescent life.

Cook et al (2010) found that peer use of anti-gay remarks has a higher influence on individuals who engage in such behavior than on parental use, although parental influence does matter somewhat. Brubacher, Brank, Fondacaro, Brown and Miller (2009) focused on a specific aspect of how parents influence a child’s bullying behavior through an assessment of family procedural justice. Family procedural justice is explained as how fairly conflict is resolved within families. This approach to conflict resolution may contribute to the child’s feelings toward him- or herself and assess his or her propensity toward bullying behaviors. As such, levels of bullying decreased as children reported higher levels of fairness within their family’s conflict-resolving environment and increased with reported lower levels of fairness.

The relationship of parental and peer influence along with feelings toward self contribute toward the use of anti-gay remarks, but the question remains of what specifically within each influence contributes to the bullying behavior. However, in order for peers or parents to start influencing bullying behavior, one must be around to hear such remarks. This particular study hypothesizes that merely being in the vicinity or hearing anti-LGBTQ remarks predicts the likelihood of an adolescent to adopt such remarks more strongly any other influence. An adolescent’s feelings toward self and his or her relationship quality with parents in relation to his or her exposure to these remarks may also contribute toward the level of bullying behaviors.
Method

Participants

The study included male and female American high school students from various states (N = 1211, 80.5% white, 9.3% black, 10.1% other, mean age = 16.33, SD = .602). Each participant was a member of the graduating high school class of 2000 and all were in 10\textsuperscript{th} grade at the time of the study. Participant compensation is unknown.

Procedure

Initial data: survey was conducted by phone interview for CBS News during the time period of December 4-12, 1998, accessed from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR). The survey queried students on various topics. Respondents were asked a series of questions about their post-high school plans including college, job opportunities, and their anticipated quality of life compared to that of their parent(s) (see Figure 1). A series of questions addressed race relations in the United States, in respondents' communities, and in their high schools. Topics covered affirmative action laws, interracial dating, racial prejudice, and whether the respondent or family members had made racist remarks. Similar questions dealt with homosexuality, including whether laws were necessary to protect homosexuals, how respondents viewed the treatment of and prejudice against homosexuals, and whether the respondent or family members had made disparaging remarks about homosexuals. Additional topics covered AIDS, lying, cheating, shoplifting, tobacco use, marijuana use, alcohol use, premarital sex, teenage pregnancy, abortion, computer and Internet access, dieting, self-image, and suicide. Background information on respondents includes age, race, sex, education, religion, counseling/therapy history, extracurricular activity involvement, employment status,
number of siblings, parent(s)' employment and marital status, living arrangements, demographics of friends, and public/private school attendance.

Current data: a subset of questions specific to the topic of gay and lesbian social issues, parental relationships and self-esteem were used for analysis. The answers to these specific questions were used to measure usage and influences of LGBTQ-directed bullying remarks. Questions included, “Have you yourself ever made any anti-homosexual remarks, or not?” “How about your parents? Have you ever heard either of your parents make any anti-homosexual remarks, or not?” “How would you rate your relationship with your parents overall --excellent, good, fair or poor?” and “Overall, how positive or negative would you say you feel about yourself -- very positive, somewhat positive, somewhat negative, or very negative?” Additional questions on the topic of GPA, religious affiliation, morality views, etc., were included during a post-hoc analysis.

Results

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to assess the simultaneous affects of a high school student’s exposure to hearing anti-gay remarks from parents, hearing anti-gay remarks from their peers, feelings of self-worth, and quality of relationships with parents on their own usage of anti-gay epithets. Informal analysis of the data using histograms revealed no serious threats to the assumption of linearity or to the underlying distributional assumptions of residuals on the dependent variable.

The equation predicting student usage of anti-gay remarks from four independent predictors found to be anti-gay remarks = .971 + .020 gay-abuse in school + .414 parents anti-gay remarks -.003 adult relationship -.005 feelings about self.
The value of $R^2$ was .175, adjusted $R$ value was .172, a value that was highly significant, $F(4, 1206) = 63.92$, $MS_{residual} = .170$, $p < .001$. The standard error of the estimate was .41.

Parental anti-gay remarks had the only strong correlation with the students’ own usage of anti-gay remarks at $r = .42$. The strongest predictor for usage of anti-gay remarks was parental usage ($beta = .411$, $p > .001$); significantly higher than any other predictor. Other significant predictors included peer usage ($beta = .038$, $p = .001$) followed by quality of relationships with parents ($beta = -.004$, $p = .049$). Feelings about self had no relationship with nor predicted usage of anti-gay remarks ($beta = -.006$, $p = .102$). See Table 1.

Post-hoc Analyses

Stepwise regression analyses were conducted to include additional variables that may have an effect on whether or not adolescents use anti-gay remarks. Additional variables included sex of respondent, household income, parental usage of racist remarks, morality assessment of homosexuality, knowing gays/lesbians, knowing teen gays/lesbians, daily importance of religion and grade point average.

The additional variables that helped to predict whether or not a respondent participated in anti-gay remarks were sex of respondent ($beta = .277$, $p = .000$), morality views of homosexuality ($beta = .134$, $p = .000$), knowing gays/lesbians ($beta = -.087$, $p = .001$) and parental usage of racist remarks ($beta = .064$, $p = .012$). See Table 2.1.

Insert Table 1 here

Insert Table 2.1 here
Grade point average, household income, daily importance of religion and knowing teen gays or lesbians did not influence the likelihood of using anti-gay remarks by including the initial variables. Separate analyses were run for the excluded variables to see whether they had an effect on usage of anti-gay remarks; no significance was found for any of these variables.

To address the prior literature on the inconsistencies of the effects of self-esteem on bullying, an additional post-hoc regression analysis was conducted removing relationship with parents as a possible confounding variable with self-esteem; no significance was found for the effect of self-esteem ($beta = -.007, p = .102$). However, removing the variable relationship with parents seemingly removed the influence of peer usage on student usage of anti-gay remarks ($beta = .038, p = .149$), nullifying its significance. See Table 2.2.

Discussion

The hypothesis that merely being in the vicinity or hearing anti-LGBTQ remarks predicts the likelihood of an adolescent to adopt such remarks more strongly than any other influence was supported, but found that parental influence was a significantly stronger predictor than peer influence. The hypothesis that an individual’s feelings toward him- or herself and the quality of relationships with his or her parents in relation to exposure to these remarks also predicted usage of anti-gay remarks was partially supported. The relationship one has with his or her parents predicted anti-gay remark usage while feelings about him- or herself held no influence, even after a potential confound was removed.
There is an interesting distinction between external factors, or outside influences, like peer and parental usage of anti-gay remarks, and internal, psychological factors like feelings about self and the quality of relationships with parents that predict adolescent usage of anti-gay remarks; further analyses into these differences are warranted to answer why external factors hold a much stronger prediction toward the use of anti-gay remarks. Furthermore, according to Cook et al (2010), peer influences held a stronger influence over adolescent anti-gay remark usage than did parental influences, which is in contrast to this particular study’s findings. An investigation into the differences between peer and parental influence measurements may help to differentiate why our findings contradict one another. That self-esteem had no effect on whether or not adolescents used anti-gay remarks are indirectly consistent with previous literature in that feelings about self are inconsistent (Bushman et al, 2009; Cook et al, 2010).

There are a number of limitations from this study. Survey measures are correlations and thus cannot predict causation like an experimental design; only relationships can be assessed. Furthermore, survey self-report is often not a strong measure of dependent variables, as participants are not always truthful about their answers. For this particular survey, respondents may not have been comfortable with reporting their usage of anti-gay remarks; had they been truthful, the numbers may have been significantly different, although the predictors may not have changed. In addition, reports of self-esteem may not always be a valid measure; this particular survey reported a very high number of respondents who felt very good about themselves, disproportionate to those who reported low levels of self-worth. A better measurement of self-esteem is needed and could help to solve the inconsistency of this variable as evident from previous research.
Additional inquiry into the effects of gender and sexual orientation on adolescent usage of anti-gay remarks could not be effectively addressed, as the original data set did not provide sufficient information on these variables. While the data analysis suggested a significant difference between genders on adolescent usage of anti-gay remarks, the data set did not show how the sex of respondents’ were labeled (gender was coded as 1 and 2, but there was no explanation as to which number represented which sex). Sexual orientation was not included in the survey and therefore could not be measured as a predictor variable, which might have been an important factor as is evident in Espelage and Swearer (2008), a study that addressed a need to answer questions regarding the effects of homophobic bullying specifically on LGBTQ youth. Additionally, the sample size was predominantly White, and is not representative of the general population.

The concerns of bullying behavior are obvious based on the suicide statistics alone (BullyingStatistics.org, 2009; McKinley, 2010), but also have detrimental psychological effects to those living with day-to-day victimization. If parents and peers have such a tremendous effect over the decisions for adolescents to use such bullying-related remarks, it seems only natural for individuals to stop using such language as a way to stop a snowball effect of continued epithet usage. Preventative measures should be used to educate parents and teens on the dangers of bullying behaviors as well as how influential their own language is on their respective children and friends. If a decline in usage is assessed, additional surveys analyzing these same variables should be conducted to see if there is any change in adolescent use of anti-gay remarks. If we see such adolescent behaviors decline as a result of their parents and friends abstaining from anti-gay remarks, we may have a clearer picture illustrating whether or not explicit influences really are more effective than implicit influences on bullying behavior.


## Table 1

### Influences on adolescent usage of anti-gay remarks (a priori)

<table>
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<th></th>
<th>b</th>
<th>SE b</th>
<th>β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<td>.069</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anti-gay remarks (parental usage)</td>
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<td>.027</td>
<td>.411***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anti-gay remarks (peer usage)</td>
<td>.020</td>
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<td>.038**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship quality with parents</td>
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<td>-.004*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feelings about self</td>
<td>-.005</td>
<td>.020</td>
<td>-.006</td>
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Note. \( R^2 = .175 \) (p = .000) * p = .049 ** p = .001 *** p = .000
Table 2.1

*Influences on adolescent usage of anti-gay remarks (post-hoc)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>b</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<td>.079</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anti-gay remarks (parental usage)</td>
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<td>.026</td>
<td>.366***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sex of respondent</td>
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<td>Adolescent views about morality of homosexuality</td>
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<td>.134****</td>
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<td>Anti-gay remarks (peer usage)</td>
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<td>.013</td>
<td>.064***</td>
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<td>Racist remarks (parental usage)</td>
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<td>.020</td>
<td>.064**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feelings about self</td>
<td>-.042</td>
<td>.018</td>
<td>-.057*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

R² = .283 (p = .022) * p = .022 ** p = .012 *** p = .011 **** p = .001 ***** p = .000

****** p = .000 ******* p = .000
Table 2.2

*Parental, peer and self-esteem influences on adolescent usage of anti-gay remarks with removal of parental relationships variable (post hoc)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>b</th>
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<th>β</th>
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$R^2 = .175$ (p = .000) * p = .000