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Marginalized Sexuality and Masculinity: An Ethnographic Exploration of Adolescent

Homophobic Language in a Rural High School

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of
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ABSTRACT

Marginalized Sexuality and Masculinity: An Ethnographic Exploration of Adolescent
Homophobic Language in a Rural High School

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Researchers have examined homophobic language (HL) with both qualitative and quantitative methods and have studied HL's relationship to multiple factors such as sexual prejudice, masculinity, and religiosity. However, our understanding of this language, while expanding, is still limited because the meaning of this evolving language varies depending on the context in which the language is used. In order to get a more in-depth and current understanding of this language, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 males who were high school seniors. I also conducted 102 hours of observations in their high school. I analyzed the interviews and observations with a phenomenological hermeneutic method. Based on the interpretations from this analysis, findings indicated that students used HL in order to marginalize other students; to both challenge adult authority and also to emulate admired adults; to get attention and assert authority by using rebellious and taboo language; to explore and understand certain aspects of sexuality and masculinity; to police sexuality and masculinity within the parameters of traditional and expected roles; and to increase group cohesion. I explored each of these themes in detail and considered how students both shape and are shaped by their culture. To conclude, I offer suggestions for strategies to support a more accepting culture and to decrease the use of HL.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Homophobic language (HL) has been identified by researchers as a national concern (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 1993, 2001; Hill & Kearl, 2011; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). In a national school climate survey conducted with 7,261 students, Kosciw et al. (2010) found that approximately three-fourths of students reported hearing the term *fag* or *dyke* frequently and almost 90% heard the term *gay* used in a negative way. On three occasions over the past three decades, the AAUW (AAUW, 2001; Hill & Kearl, 2011) administered self-report questionnaires to roughly 2,000 students, grades 7–12, from across the country. Regardless of their sexual orientation, one-fifth of students from the most recent survey reported that over the previous school year they had been called *gay* or *lesbian* in a negative way by their peers, 18% in person and 12% online (Hill & Kearl, 2011). Although some research indicates a slight decrease in this type of language, the majority of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students continue to report hearing this language in school classrooms, hallways, and school activities (Kosciw, Bartkiewicz, & Greytak, 2012; Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014). Additionally, both students and teachers indicate that HL is often ignored and/or not corrected, and that students, teachers, and staff commonly use homophobic terms (Kosciw et al., 2010; Pascoe, 2007; Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003).

Some researchers indicate that students' use of terms such as *gay* is frequently not intended to target sexuality, but rather to express or describe a general derogatory or negative comment (Nicolas & Skinner, 2012; Pascoe, 2007). However, Nicolas and Skinner (2012) found that this language contributes to a homophobic culture, even when not intended to be explicitly directed toward LGBTQ students. In fact, research indicates that the use of HL correlates with sexual prejudice and other exclusionary ideological beliefs (Poteat & DiGioivanni, 2010; Poteat

& Spanierman, 2010; Stones, 2006). Additionally, conservative religiosity has also been shown to correlate with homophobia, but this relationship is reportedly complex since religious individuals are also encouraged to be kind (Myler, 2009; Pascoe, 2007; Wilkinson, 2004). From a more direct perspective, students who are targeted with HL concede that these terms are more offensive and hurtful than other types of name-calling and bullying terms that are associated with size and other behaviors (McCann, Plummer, & Minichiello, 2010; Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008). Furthermore, HL sometimes has dire consequences as some targeted students violently react. In fact, researchers have associated HL with high school shootings and student suicides (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Meyer, 2010; Peet, 2010).

Consistently, research indicates that males use HL more commonly than females (Poteat, Kimmel, & Wilchins, 2011; Poteat & Rivers, 2010; Poteat & Spanierman, 2010). To explain this more frequent use, researchers propose that males may use this language to police masculinity, targeting boys who are emotionally expressive, who exhibit feminine interests, or who are identified with any type of minority status (Oransky & Marecek, 2009; Pascoe, 2007; Phoenix et al., 2003; Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni & Scheer, 2013). HL targets both heterosexual and LGBT students (Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010). This type of language appears to be more common when males are participating in sports-related activities or when youth are engaged in aggressive and violent activities (Poteat, O'Dwyer, & Mereish, 2012; Poteat et al., 2011). HL use also increases when students belong to a group that encourages homophobic or masculine beliefs. Similarly, students' use of HL also increases when they interact with a group that frequently uses HL (Birkett & Espelage, 2015; Poteat, 2007).

In summary, quantitative research has demonstrated that adolescents' HL use has many correlates, including the following: gender, individual and group beliefs, behaviors, and

environments (e.g., Poteat et al., 2011; Poteat & Rivers, 2010; Poteat & Spanierman 2010). Although these quantitative studies are helpful, the results from these studies are also limited because outcomes are based on specific measures that cannot account for or incorporate new or unexpected data. For example, the *Homophobic Content Agent Target* (HCAT) scale is frequently used in quantitative studies. However, this scale specifically measures the frequency of HL use and only includes limited examples of HL, including *homo, gay, lesbo, fag, or dyke* (Poteat & Espelage, 2005). Furthermore, these studies may only represent how this language is used in rural Illinois since the majority of studies were conducted in this area.

Internationally qualitative studies have explored HL from multiple perspectives including political, sexual, positive, and gendered (McCormack, 2013; Plummer, 2014; Rivers, 2013). However, the majority of qualitative studies that have investigated HL and were conducted in America have approached the issue from the theory of masculinity (Oranksy & Marecek, 2009; Pascoe, 2007). Additionally, studies conducted across different regions and countries represent a wide variety of social contexts and HL varies in each of these contexts. Only one previous study has been conducted in the Intermountain West region of the United States and this study only analyzed adolescent interviews without observations (Bailey, 2015).

Thus, the current study, conducted alongside the interviews in the participating high school, attempts to expand on previous research about HL, incorporating qualitative observations in the same high school that was previously described through interviews (Bailey, 2015). Analyzing the interviews and observations together will offer more depth and breadth to the previously conducted research. Comparing and contrasting both types of data provides an opportunity to better understand how HL is used within the Intermountain West, but more

specifically in the participating high school. I intend to use this data to actively challenge existing assumptions about HL using a hermeneutics analysis (described in more detail in the methods section), repeatedly reading over transcripts of the observations and interviews, to understand how specific uses of this language relate to how students use HL generally. Based on the analysis of the previous interviews (Bailey, 2015) and preliminary analysis of observations conducted for this study, the following research questions will be investigated.

1. How does the participating school's context influence the meanings associated with adolescents' homophobic language?

2. How does the participating school's context influence who perpetrates and who is targeted by homophobic language?

3. How does the participating school's context contribute to or mitigate the use of homophobic language?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Homophobic language has been identified by researchers as a national concern (Hill & Kearl, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2010). According to Eckholm (2011), parents and supporting organizations have filed lawsuits against school districts for ignoring the use of homophobic epithets. Heightening the fervor surrounding HL in schools, the media has shared tragic examples of the link between this type of victimization and youth acting out violently towards others and themselves, even completing suicide (Associated Press, 2015; Meyer, 2010; Peet, 2010). For example, a large study conducted in England of roughly 1,600 LGBTQ youth ranging from 11–19 years of age found that LGBTQ students who were bullied were twice as likely as their non-bullied peers to attempt suicide (Guasp, 2012).

According to studies based on self-report, homophobic bullying is more harmful to teenagers than other types of bullying, such as being targeted for size and other behaviors (McCann et al., 2010; Swearer et al., 2008). A national advertisement campaign, created by Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) and the Ad Council, has tried to discourage adolescents from using language such as "That's so gay." This campaign, entitled *Think before you speak,* received support from famous musicians, actors, and the National Basketball Association (*Think before you speak*, 2012). These disturbing events were reported nationwide, including the Intermountain West (Schencker, 2013).

Defining Homophobic Language

Homophobic Language (HL) is not concisely nor uniformly defined by researchers or by the general public. Many researchers believe this language is most appropriately considered a form of sexual harassment (Gruber & Fineran, 2008; Hill & Kearl, 2011). These same researchers often consider that enforcing gender norms is a form of sexual harassment; however,

the United States Department of Education (DOE), Office for Civil Rights (OCR) does not

clearly define HL in the same manner. This office defines sexual harassment as "conduct that: 1)

is sexual in nature; 2) is unwelcome; and 3) denies or limits a student's ability to participate in or

benefit from a school's education program" (US DOE, OCR, 2008, p. 3). They further claim

that Title IX, covering sexual harassment, "does not address discrimination or other issues

related to sexual orientation" (US DOE, OCR, 2008, p. 8). However, despite this definition,

researchers, Gruber and Fineran (2008) still define sexual harassment as being "clearly related to

hegemonic masculinity and therefore taps into potent structural and culturally sanctioned roles

and meanings (masculine-feminine, heterosexual-homosexual) that are central components of

social stratification" (p. 2) and therefore include HL as a form of sexual harassment. Other

research, such as the AAUW's studies (AAUW, 2001; Hill & Kearl, 2011), includes HL as a

form of sexual harassment, under a definition similar to Gruber and Fineran, regardless of how

HL is used.

Homophobic language is often also categorized as bullying (Poteat, Mereish, et al.,

2013). However, Gruber and Fineran (2008) tried to delineate between sexual harassment and

bullying. They state that the primary difference between bullying and sexual harassment is that

sexual harassment is part of a larger social power differential, but bullying focuses more on the

psychology of the bully and other interpersonal relations. In his legal review, Stein (2003)

makes a similar claim: that harassment laws focus more "on a larger civil rights framework"

whereas bullying laws focus more on "individual behaviour" (p. 787). Because HL refers to a

marginalized group, Gruber and Fineran (2008) and Stein (2003) claim that it is more

appropriately categorized as sexual harassment. Bullying researchers attempt to compensate for

this difference by delineating between bullying and biased bullying: when students are bullied

because they belong to a certain group or claim a certain identity (Russell, Sinclair, Poteat, & Koenig, 2012). Furthermore, targets of biased bullying are more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors and have higher rates of depression (Russell et al., 2012).

Although some researchers believe that labeling HL as bullying rather than sexual harassment may ignore marginalized students' civil rights and protect schools from civil rights lawsuits (Stein, 2003). The DOE's policy (2008) does not define this type of language as bullying or sexual harassment. Furthermore, one potential drawback of categorizing HL exclusively as harassment of sexually marginalized groups is that legal protection may not extend to traditionally non-marginalized groups, such as heterosexuals, targeted for other reasons besides their sexuality (Bailey, 2015; Pascoe, 2007). In fact, one research article reported that sometimes heterosexual students were targeted more than LGBTQ students (Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010). Furthermore, researchers have concluded that often heterosexual students targeted with HL suffer similar negative effects and sometimes act out violently (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Poteat et al., 2011; Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Swearer et al., 2008). Therefore, while defining HL as sexual harassment may offer better legal protection to students of marginalized groups, it could limit who is protected.

By students, HL is often perceived as neither sexual harassment nor bullying. McCormack (2013) has argued that researchers need to consider three factors while studying language traditionally considered homophobic: malicious intent, negative social effect, and homophobic environment. He believes that these factors will help researchers navigate whether or not terms that are traditionally considered homophobic are really perceived as homophobic by the users and receivers of this language. Operating under the assumption that not all of this language is homophobic, McCormack suggests that researchers first label this

language as "homosexually-themed language" (2013, p. 96). McCormack and Anderson (2010) found that homophobic terms, such as *That's so gay,* could be used in a homophobic way or a non-homophobic way, and students in Bailey's (2015) research expressed a similar sentiment. A number of researchers have also found that many students perceive HL as friendly banter or proof of familiarity (Bailey, 2015; McCormack, 2013; McCormack & Anderson, 2010; Norman & Galvin, 2006; Pascoe, 2007). Pascoe concluded that words like *gay* had lost their gendered or sexual meaning and instead represented a general negativity. On the other hand, she noted that words like *fag* or *faggot* were still biased and often used to degrade the target's masculinity (2007, p. 56). McCormack (2012) has further argued for the existence of "pro-gay language," where students use homosexually-themed language to increase intimacy with friends. His examples of pro-gay language include homosexual students fondly joking about their actions being gay with their heterosexual friends or when heterosexual students refer to close friends as their "boyfriend."

While McCormack does offer a good counterpoint about the complexity of homosexually-themed language, this perception may be deceiving. The examples offered above, particularly the former, may still perpetuate a limited stereotype of homosexual people even if they are not explicitly demeaning. Furthermore, Nicolas & Skinner (2012) have found that students who use these words, even if they perceive the language as neutral and even if those who use the language are homosexual, are more likely to have negative attitudes about homosexuality. Similarly, even though students reported that they did not believe phrases like "That's so gay," had a homophobic meaning, they were still afraid to use these terms around their gay friends or acquaintances (Bailey, 2015). This hesitancy implies that they still recognized the language as homophobic on some level. Plummer (1999) has suggested that HL

always has a homophobic meaning even if there is no homophobic intent, suggesting a process called "onion skinning" (p. 44). He argues that even if intent changes, the underlying homophobic meaning is always present.

Some studies have implied that students may perceive harassment as different from bullying since sexual harassment is more frequently reported by girls and bullying is more frequently reported by boys (AAUW, 2001; Nansel et al., 2001). However, according to Gruber and Finerans' (2008) analysis of these studies, this discrepancy may actually be the result of the time frame inquired about and the number of questions asked of students in sexual harassment and bullying surveys. When Gruber and Fineran accounted for these weaknesses in the previous studies, they found no significant difference between genders targeted by bullying or sexual harassment. Instead, they found the frequency varied between heterosexual and LQBTQ students, with LGBTQ students reporting being sexually harassed and bullied more frequently than their heterosexual peers. Furthermore, they found that overall bullying was reported more than sexual harassment: bullying by just over half of students (52%) and sexual harassment reported by a third of students (34%; Gruber & Fineran, 2008).

Although students' perceptions of HL are somewhat ambiguous, sexual harassment and HL appear to be related. Multiple researchers have found that students who bully other students are likely to sexually harass other students as well (Desouza & Ribeiro, 2005; Pepler et al., 2002, Pepler et al., 2006). Furthermore, bullying has also been shown to be predictive of more serious forms of sexual harassment such as sexual violence and partner violence later in life (Espelage, 2013). Based on the large overlap between those who bully and those who harass, the difference between the two may be a false distinction (Poteat et al., 2013). However, this overlap does not mean researchers and administrators should ignore when the language is used against

marginalized groups. Furthermore, HL may extend beyond hegemonic masculinity and its related power structure, and also be motivated by other power structures common to a specific group of friends or culture (Bailey, 2015). Within this context, students use HL to police what is normal or popular within the broader cultural context and within the group. Other researchers have further found that students are often targeted with HL for belonging to various marginalized groups and that this type of biased bullying is more harmful to students than non-marginalized students (Poteat et al., 2013; Russell et al., 2012). These marginalized students are more likely to engage in unhealthy behavior and have depression. Therefore, while HL may be appropriately categorized as biased, it may not be strictly based on hegemonic masculinity alone.

The Targets and Effects of Homophobic Language

According to studies using self-report measures, both LGB and heterosexual students are targeted with HL (Hill & Kearl, 2011); however, which group is targeted more has not clearly been defined. Poteat and DiGiovanni (2010) found evidence that boys targeted students they perceived as heterosexual more with homophobic epithets than those they perceived as homosexual. Reasons Pascoe observed in her study for this reluctance to label LGB individuals with homophobic epithets is that students did not want to demean something they saw as biological and that students are more concerned with masculinity than sexuality (Pascoe, 2007, p. 58). However, evidence from multiple studies still finds that LGBTQ students report bullying and homophobic victimization more than their heterosexual peers (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig 2009; Fineran, 2002; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005). Additionally, students who were questioning their sexuality reported more bullying and homophobic victimization than LGBT or heterosexuals individuals (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008).

While understanding who is labeled with homophobic terms may still need further evaluation, it appears that LGBTQ students may experience more deleterious effects than heterosexual ones, and that sexually questioning students experience more victimization and deleterious effects than both groups (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Birkett et al., 2009; Espelage et al., 2008). Espelage and her colleagues surveyed 13,921 high school students from the Midwest and found that overall, students who were LGBTQ experienced more depression, suicidal ideation, and drug use than students who were heterosexual. Students who were questioning their sexual identity reported being teased more than heterosexual and LGBT students, and they had higher rates of drug use. In another study done in the Midwest of 7,376 students in grades 7 and 8, Birkett et al. (2009) found similar results with negative effects being moderated by a lack of homophobic victimization and school climate. In their study of 1,032 Boston students, Almeida et al. (2009) also found that LGBT and questioning students experienced more deleterious effects, such as higher depression rates and suicidal ideation, from HL than heterosexual students. Furthermore, through mediation analysis, these researchers found that perceived discrimination accounted for these differences.

One reason for increased adverse effects on LGBTQ individuals may be their minority status in the community or being considered a sexual "other" (Duncan, 2013, p. 116). Students in Bailey's (2015) study and possibly Pascoe's (2007) appeared to recognize this minority status and claimed to avoid this type of language because they worried it would be more prejudiced and offensive to gay students. One bisexual student, who previously had a boyfriend but was currently dating a girl, confirmed this idea when he reported that homophobic terms were more hurtful when he was dating his boyfriend (Bailey, 2015). This anecdote potentially indicates that when he could pass as heterosexual, he did not feel homophobic insults were as offensive

personally. However, this personalization may also depend on the individual's acceptance of their own sexuality as well as their popularity (Bailey, 2015).

While HL typically may be experienced more negatively by LGBTQ students than heterosexual ones this type of language has been shown to be more detrimental to both types of students than other types of bullying language (Poteat et al., 2011, Swearer et al., 2008). This negative effect may be explained by the assumption that homophobic bullying is a type of biased bullying commonly perpetrated on groups of students that belong to a minority status and therefore relegates victims to this same marginalized status as LGBTQ individuals (Duncan, 2013; Russell et al., 2012). In Bailey's (2015) study, students described HL as a way of degrading someone's social status or, as one student described it, a way of labeling a student as "less than" (p. 23). All these findings indicate that one reason HL is offensive is the marginalized and victimized status of LGBTQ individuals so that labeling a student with a homophobic term "symbolically places that student in a subordinate position" (Poteat et al., 2013, p. 80).

Kimmel and Mahler (2003) explored how homophobic slurs can lead to violent retribution. Specifically, they analyzed 28 high school shootings that occurred between 1982 and 2001. These were similar to the April 20, 1999, school shooting that occurred in Columbine, Colorado in which two teenage boys from a suburban neighborhood shot and killed one teacher and 12 students and injured 21 other people. The shooters ended the rampage with a double suicide (Toppo, 2009). By analyzing the demographics and newspaper reports of the 28 school shootings, they found that a large majority of the shooters were white males, lived in suburban and rural areas, and were trying to prove their masculinity. Prior to the shootings, other members of the student body had challenged these students' masculinity though homophobic

epithets. There was no evidence that indicated these students were actually homosexuals; rather, they did not fit current masculine norms.

Associated Beliefs, Behaviors, and Group Norms

Often students that use HL have similar belief systems (Bailey, 2015; Oransky & Marecek, 2009; Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010). These belief systems range from prejudiced sexual beliefs (Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010) hegemonic masculine beliefs (Oransky & Marecek, 2009; Phoenix, 2003) and exclusive religious beliefs (Bailey, 2015; Pascoe, 2007). Certain behaviors, often aggressive in nature, have also been found to be correlated with HL (Fair, 2011; Poteat et al., 2012). Last, group and cultural beliefs interact with individual beliefs to further predict or conflict with HL use (Bailey, 2015; Williams, 2013).

Sexual prejudice. Research studies indicate that HL correlates positively with beliefs supportive of sexual prejudice against homosexuality, masculine norms, and violence (Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010; Poteat, Kimmel, & Wilchins, 2011; Poteat & Spanierman, 2010). Poteat and DiGioivanni (2010) found that students with high scores on a measure assessing sexual prejudice towards LGBT individuals also reported more frequently using HL, and the converse was also true. These researchers provisionally submitted that less prejudiced students may avoid this language because they find it more derogatory. Poteat et al. (2011) examined masculine role attitudes (MRA) and beliefs supporting violence (BSV) with MRA and BSV questionnaires to 288 students attending a rural Illinois high school. They found that each of these beliefs positively correlated with HL. When both beliefs were analyzed simultaneously they were even more positively correlated.

Another cultural factor that could potentially make HL appear to be more damaging is the sexual atmosphere of the school. Several studies have found that sexual behaviors and dialogue

are common in schools (Gruber & Fineran, 2008; Hill & Kearl, 2011; Williams, 2013).

Williams (2013) observed that one behavior students frequently do, is rate each other by their

sexual attractiveness. Francis, Skelton, and Read (2009) found that students who were rated as

being sexually attractive were often also rated by their peers as being popular.

Furthermore, HL is often used in atmospheres that use other sexualized insults: referring

to someone as sexually inferior, insinuating that someone's sexual behavior is abnormal and,

describing and acting out demeaning sexually demeaning acts (Bailey, 2015; Fair, 2011; Duncan,

2013). This type of behavior implies that sexuality in high schools is a type of social

capital. Therefore, being labeled with homophobic or any other sexually deviant terms devalues

a person's social worth. Duncan further suggests that sexual desirability may be a student's

primary form of social capital for high school aged students (2013). Some research has found

that students belonging to the LGBTQ community are the most affected by this type of

sexualized bullying (Gruber & Fineran, 2008). However, Gruber and Finerans' study did not

account for other students that could also be perceived as sexually deviant. Duncan (2013) has

demonstrated that disabled students, similar to LGBTQ students, are also bullied for not fitting

the prototypical sexual expectation of other students. Therefore, studies could further compare

the differences between the two groups.

Sexual prejudice and bullying perpetration are negatively related to many

factors. Empathy, affirmative parent attitude, and having a gay or lesbian friend were all

negatively related to sexual prejudice according to a study conducted by Poteat, DiGiovanni, and

Scheer (2013). They further discovered that school interventions could decrease sexual

prejudice, such as classroom norms that discouraged bullying and encouraged taking the

perspective of other students negatively associated with homophobic bullying. Bailey's (2015)

study corroborates with the aforementioned study, as students reported avoiding HL for the same reasons. These results imply that establishing a safe school climate and helping students understand different perspectives could help decrease HL.

        Policing masculinity. Phoenix et al. (2003) interviewed 11 to 14-year-old boys in England and found that they utilized HL to police masculinity: preventing their peers from acting or looking feminine. Pascoe (2007) reports that homophobic epithets exclusively targeted males but rarely females, and that these epithets were used to demean students' masculinity for their style of dress, inability to play sports and lack of compulsive sexuality, among other attributes. The vast majority of boys in Oransky and Marecek's (2009) study claimed that their male peers were called gay or girly for expressing emotion, being open about life difficulty, and any other kind of vulnerability. They also found that boys used the terms gay and girly in the same way. Researchers have also found that students may be labeled with homophobic terms for physical attributes, such as small size and delayed signs of puberty (McCann et al., 2010).

        Researchers have also argued that students use this type of language to police sexuality and assert their own heterosexuality (Fair, 2011; McCormack, 2013; Pascoe, 2007; Plummer 2014). In his study of Australian boys, Plummer found that one reason students were targeted with HL is because they were not assertive enough with their sexuality (1999). Pascoe (2007) found a similar theme, arguing that a theme of hegemonic masculinity is compulsive heterosexuality. Fair (2011) explored how this type of sexuality even occurred among males in wrestling, arguing that the dominating position in wrestling was the more masculine one and equates the term "pussy" with "fag." Fair believed that wrestlers preferred the term "pussy" to "fag," because they were often labeled with the term fag because of the physical nature of their sport between males. This implied sexuality was further evidenced by the sexual names

commonly given to wrestling moves, such as "Saturday night ride." These researchers currently

believe that ultimately compulsive heterosexuality fits within the construct of masculinity. Both

Plummer and Pascoe make this argument because HL is less common among females. Pascoe

suggests that one reason for this may be that females have more freedom to express different

gendered interests, offering the example that a "tomboy" has a somewhat positive connotation

while a "sissy" has negative connotations. Bailey's (2015) research holds these assumptions

tentatively because in this study lesbian or bisexual girls were also viewed negatively and often

gossiped about with homophobic terms. Furthermore, homophobic labeling may also result from

other cultural power structures such as socioeconomic status and sexual orientation (Bailey,

2015).

Concerning masculine beliefs and their connection to HL, multiple factors may contribute

to its use (Bailey, 2015). While HL is generally used to police others' behavior toward the group

norm, this is not always toward a masculine norm. HL may also police behavior toward more

religious or other cultural norms. Furthermore, although this type of language is less commonly

used to describe females, they are still targeted with this type of language. Language use toward

females indicates that there are other motivating factors aside from policing masculinity.

Religiosity. Religiosity may both increase and decrease the use of homophobic terms

among teenagers. However, this connection has not been studied in depth among high school

populations. Among college students, ideologies such as right-wing authoritarianism (RWA)

and social dominance orientation (SDO) were positively associated with homophobic attitudes

(Poteat & Spanierman, 2010; Stones, 2006). Homophobia and commitment to conservative

Protestant religions have also been shown to be positively related (Myler, 2009; Wilkinson,

2004). However, these studies investigate homophobic attitudes and not language and were all done with college students and or other adults and not high school students.

Although HL may not have been investigated specifically, researchers have examined if religious people believe that LGBT students should be free of harassment in school (Horn, Szalacha, & Drill, 2008). In their study of 1,076 high school students, they found that students could have religious values affirming the immorality of homosexuality and also believe that these students should be protected from sexual discrimination. While such findings may not extend to homophobic bullying of heterosexual students, they do indicate that students can have religious negative attitudes about a person's sexual orientation but still potentially refrain from hurtful language.

Furthermore, HL has been shown to be negatively correlated with empathetic concern and perspective taking and some studies suggest religious people are more empathetic (Lee, Poloma, & Post, 2013; Poteat & Espelage, 2005; Saroglou, Pichon, Trompette, Verschueren, & Dernelle, 2005). However, ideological belief systems like SDO, which is anti-egalitarian, and RWA, which is hostile and punitive, are logically antithetical to empathy and perspective taking. Pascoe, who observed Christian boys using HL less than their peers, hypothesized that they refrained from this language because their religious intuitions had given them more stable gender roles and, therefore, they felt less need to defend their masculinity (2007, p. 113). In Bailey's study (2015) there were a large number of participants that were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) and Catholic faith. A significant number of these students appeared to avoid HL because it was demeaning of other individuals which they viewed as being against their religious morals. Furthermore, some students were proactive and, because of their inclusive religious morals, and befriended students who were picked on with

homophobic terms. However, some religious students, because they viewed homosexuality as sinful, avoided LGBTQ individuals. This tension between an inclusive and exclusive morality found in their religious belief system appeared to make some religious individuals have more cognitive dissonance and therefore more aware of their HL use.

Behaviors. HL use is also strongly related to other behaviors, such as fighting, bullying, masculine activities, and other aggressive behaviors (Poteat et al., 2011; Poteat, O'Dwyer, & Mereish, 2012; Poteat & Rivers, 2010). One study found that male teenagers that reported being involved in sports, fighting, and other aggressive activities were more likely to use HL than their peers (Poteat et al., 2011). Teenage females were also more likely to use HL when involved in masculine activities such as playing sports (Poteat & Kimmel, 2011). HL may also be more common in masculine activities because of the encouragement of authority figures. Fair (2011) observed this encouragement in multiple school wrestling programs. He further claims competitive masculine sports programs have a different culture from the school they are situated in where homophobic discourse, as well as hegemonic masculinity, are openly embraced. In his ethnography, he observed coaches using and encouraging this type of language to encourage their athletes to act more aggressively. However, McCormack and Anderson, based on their research with athletes, suggest that as more gay athletes are coming out and participating in sports, this type of biased language is decreasing (McCormack, 2013; Anderson, 2013).

Other aggressive behaviors, such as bullying and HL use, are positively correlated. Poteat et al. (2012) found that individuals that reported bullying behaviors also reported more HL use. HL has also varied among different bullying roles. For example, although a *reinforcer* may not have directly bullied the victim, he or she may have taunted the victim with homophobic epithets to support the bully's actions (Poteat & Rivers, 2010).

Group beliefs. Group norms and attitudes often have augmented or diminished homophobic attitudes and language of individuals (Franklin, 2000; Poteat, 2007; Poteat & Spanierman, 2010). Furthermore LGBT students have reported that they were victimized by groups of people rather than individuals (Rivers, 2001). Franklin discovered that 163 of the 489 college students she studied had insulted and/or assaulted perceived homosexuals. Of these 163 students, 57 reported their peer dynamic as their motivating factor. In 2007, Poteat conducted a longitudinal study demonstrating that over time, teenagers developed more homophobic attitudes and used HL more often if such an attitude were common among their group. Prati (2012) found that classroom attitude toward LGBTQ individuals also moderated the use of HL after accounting for how often students observed HL.

In addition, an interaction between individual attributes and group attributes has been reported in other studies. Birkett and Espelage (2009) conducted a multi-level model study of young adolescents ranging from 5th to 8th grade and found that peer-group masculine attitude was a more significant predictor of HL use than individual masculine attitudes. However, an individual's homophobic victimization and bullying perpetuation were more significant predictors than these group factors. Furthermore, predominately male groups were more likely to use HL. Longitudinally, groups that previously used HL or were victimized with HL were more likely to use HL a second time.

Although it is easy to make generalizations about adolescent use of HL, HL use appears to vary by context (Williams, 2013, McCormack 2013). For example, in Williams' study, some students were more likely to use HL in a physically aggressive atmosphere while other students were more likely to use this language with online social networking (Williams, 2013). The way groups of individuals perceive homosexuality and HL can be influenced by environmental

contexts such as levels of masculinity (Pascoe 2007), positive relationships between LGB and heterosexual persons (McCormack, 2013), and religious context (Bailey, 2015). However, while these themes were highlighted in these studies, all of the above factors had some influence in each of our studies. McCormack envisions a sort of evolution of cultural norms, which gradually will lessen the offensiveness of HL (McCormack, 2013). This type of evolution may be occurring; however, it may be difficult to assess because of the interaction of the many cultural factors, which may even contradict to some degree. As discussed earlier, religiosity is one example of a conflicted theme.

Even within larger cultural norms, there are subgroup norms within that culture. These differences appear most richly in qualitative studies. In Pascoe's study (2007), she noticed a big difference between how the drama students and popular athletes in the school interact with their gender. She argues that the drama students are engaged in a sort of embracive gender play and experimentation while the popular athletes are much more abrasive and forceful. As mentioned earlier, Pascoe also finds a distinct difference in how religious students use HL. Bailey (2015) found that there were distinct differences between the debate team, religious students, and popular athletes. In this study, students from the debate team admitted to using the language fairly frequently, but they stated that they tried not to use it in a gendered or sexualized way because then they considered it to be prejudiced. Religious students generally avoided the language, but many still carried homophobic attitudes. Last, popular athletes seemed to openly use HL in a sexual, gendered, and prejudiced way.

Fair's (2011) ethnography of wrestling teams in states on opposite ends of the country suggests that while these students came from different broader cultures, their homophobic wrestling culture was similar. The similarities between studies suggest there is some truth to the

claim that wrestling culture was similar regardless of location. However, it also seems that there are some important differences between groups depending on their broader culture and location. One example is the difference Pascoe and Bailey (2015) found between religious students in different areas. Pascoe (2007) argued that they refrain from HL primarily because of a secure hegemonic masculine structure within their faith. In contrast, Bailey argued that they refrain primarily because of religious moral values and to avoid bad language. These differences suggest that groups of students are perhaps influenced by the broader culture and/or location. However, it also may indicate that the research that is reported is colored by the researcher's biases.

Frequency and Reactions from Authority Figures

Studies indicate that HL is frequently used in schools and rarely corrected by school adults (Athanases & Comar, 2008; Hill & Kearl, 2011; Phoenix, et al., 2003). The AAUW (1993, 2001; Hill & Kearl, 2011) administered self-report questionnaires to roughly 2000 students, grades 7-12, from across the country. The 2001 study asked students about sexual harassment over their entire school career and found that 73% of students had been called gay or a lesbian. Students from the most recent survey, which only inquired about the previous school year, reported that they had been called *gay* or *lesbian* in a negative way by their peers, 18% in person and 12% online, regardless of their sexual orientation. According to a national school climate survey of 7,261 LGBTQ students from all 50 states, 64.5% of students heard the term *fag* or *dyke* frequently and 71.4% heard the term *gay* used in a negative way (Kosciw et al., 2014). In their study of 133 seventh graders, Athanases and Comar measured how often this might occur and found that 62 % of students reported hearing the phrase *That's so gay* and 57 % of students reported hearing *fag* on a daily basis.

In addition to occurring within schools, homophobic bullying also frequently occurs among students outside of school, often in the form of cyberbullying (Rivers, 2013; Williams 2013). Cyberbullying is defined as aggressive, intentional and repeated actions perpetrated from a bully towards a victim through either electronic or online means. The anonymity of the electronic communication often enables perpetrators to be more vulgar and insulting because there are less potential social repercussions (Bailey, 2015; Suler, 2004). Furthermore, this type of bullying can be distributed to a much wider audience quickly (Pascoe, 2011).

Adolescents may frequently use HL because it is rarely corrected by authority figures. The interviewees in the study conducted by Phoenix disclosed that teachers or other school staff did not reprimand them when they called their peers homophobic epithets (Phoenix et al., 2003). Some studies report that students observe teachers and other school staff using HL. In their national survey, Koswic et al. (2010) report that 60.4% of students recalled their school staff using these terms. Pascoe (2007) also observed teachers directing homophobic insults toward boys they thought were *odd*. In Bailey's (2015) study, one student athlete explained that he felt comfortable using the language with his coaches when they developed a close relationship and were friends.

There is also some evidence that teachers want to intervene but are overwhelmed by the prevalence of the language and feel hindered by policy. Norman and Galvin (2006) interviewed 125 students, teachers, parents, and administrators and found that teachers rarely corrected HL because it was so common among children. One teacher stated that this language was how students labeled anything negative (2006). In another study, teachers also reported that legislation that disallows teaching that homosexuality is an acceptable practice impeded them from effectively correcting HL. Teachers also felt that more school policy addressing HL use

would be helpful (Chambers, van Loon, & Tincknell, 2004). School policies have been shown to decrease HL use and increase teacher intervention (Phoenix et al., 2006). Teachers may also fail to intervene because of a lack of awareness and understanding of their own self-efficacy. A survey conducted by Greytak and Koswic (2014) found that teachers were more likely to intervene if they had a personal connection to LGTBQ people, were aware of homophobic bullying in the school, and felt confident about their interventions.

In summary, researchers have demonstrated that adolescents' HL use has many correlates, including the following: gender, individual and group beliefs, behaviors and environments (Poteat & Kimmel, 2011; Poteat & Rivers, 2010; Poteat & Spanierman 2010). Although these quantitative studies are helpful, they are also limited as they use specific measures that cannot account for or incorporate new or unexpected data. The Homophobic Content Agent (HCAT) scale was used by a large number of these studies which specifically measures the frequency of HL use and only lists examples of HL as *homo, gay, lesbo, fag, or dyke* in the survey (Poteat & Espelage, 2005). Furthermore, these studies may only represent how this language is used in rural Illinois, where many of these studies were conducted.

Internationally, qualitative studies have explored HL using multiple theories, such as sexuality, masculinity and marginalization generally. However, of the qualitative studies that have been completed in America, most have approached the issue from the theory of masculinity and/or were focused on homophobic bullying rather than HL specifically. Additionally, studies conducted across different regions and countries represent a wide variety of social contexts and HL varies in each of these contexts. Only one previous study has been conducted in the Intermountain West region of the United States (Bailey, 2015).

Research Questions

Thus, the current study attempts to expand on the author's previous study of HL, incorporating observations taken at the same time period as the interviews (Bailey, 2015). Analyzing both the interviews and observations together will offer more depth and breadth to the previous research. Comparing and contrasting both types of data will provide better understanding of how HL functions within the Intermountain West and the specific culture associated with this setting. Specifically, I will be able to analyze why context mattered so much to interviewees. While the analysis of the interviews from my thesis offered the student's perspective, observations paired with these interviews will offer more direct and comprehensive understanding. These observations, although limited, will offer an experiential and empathetic grounding for the interviews. I intend to use this data to actively challenge all assumptions about HL using hermeneutics to understand how specific uses of HL relate to the broader context. Specifically, the following research questions will be investigated. Based on my analysis of the previous interviews (Bailey, 2015) and preliminary analysis of observations conducted for this study, the following questions are proposed:

1. How does the participating school's context influence the meanings associated with adolescents' homophobic language?

2. How does the participating school's context influence who perpetrates and who is targeted by homophobic language?

3. How does the participating school's context contribute to or mitigate the use of homophobic language?

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

This is a case study of a rural high school that used ethnographic collection methods and phenomenological hermeneutic approach to study adolescents' use of HL (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Phenomenological hermeneutics "represents a shift from epistemological emphasis on understanding essences and seeking universal truths to… the idea that knowledge of our everyday existence is intersubjective, temporal and relational" (Vandermause & Fleming, 2011, p. 369). From this perspective, individuals cannot escape their subjective experience to discover an objective truth but rather must start from their subjective experience and create their reality as they negotiate the intersection between their beliefs, actions, and culture. Their culture and subjective experience are an inseparable part of their reality (Schwandt, 2000). Truth, then, is not a stable and unchanging thing uncovered by an individual, but rather the process of negotiating this intersection.

In a similar way, the researcher comes to understand a phenomenon through interviews and observations. During interviews, the interviewer and interviewee create a more accurate understanding of reality as they compare and contrast their personal perceptions of reality through dialogue. When observing, the observer enters into dialogue through observation of a new culture, which challenges and expands his/her understanding (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2011). In the interviews and observations, a new understanding and truth is created by a *fusion of horizons* (Debesay, Nåden, & Slettebø, 2008; Gadamer, 1975). In my research, this fusion occurred as my paradigm blended with the participants' paradigms through interviews and observations. This fusion created a new understanding of HL. This process also occurred during the analysis of the text through the hermeneutic circle: when I repeatedly compared parts of the

interviews and observations with my own prejudices and to the phenomenon as a whole (Debesay, et al., 2008).

Rather than limiting the phenomenon of HL to items on a survey, as in most quantitative studies, this methodology explores personal perspectives and observations in depth in order to discover novel data (Morrow, 2007). Interviews using the hermeneutic method were worded to invite open-ended questions from participants and encourage them to consider instances of HL and how these relate to HL as a phenomenon. Similarly, I considered how observed instances of HL related to the overall observed phenomenon. During the analysis both I and another researcher repeatedly compared themes that arose from the interviews with themes from the observations. Furthermore, we compared themes that arose from studying the observations and interviews to overarching themes of the whole and our previous notions about HL. Because the researchers cannot escape their own biases, we further questioned and compared our own biases to all the information gathered. Through this process we were able to potentially filter out incorrect prejudices and understand the phenomenon in truthful and novel ways (Debesay, et al., 2008).

Researcher as Instrument/Horizons of Understanding

Because participants and research findings are inevitably influenced by a researcher's presence and prejudices, in actuality, they cannot objectively remove themselves from their own research (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2011; Berger, 2015). For example, in my study the participants may have responded and acted differently if interviews and observations had been conducted by another researcher. Furthermore, the analysis completed by another researcher and me were colored by our personal biases. Therefore, it is important to be transparent about our own biases and experience that we bring to the research.

At the time of the study, I was a graduate student enrolled in Brigham Young University's Counseling Psychology Doctoral Program and had training and experience with qualitative methods. I was raised in a religiously conservative environment where homosexual acts were considered sinful, but I was also taught to exhibit empathy and kindness toward all people. Therefore, I have struggled to reconcile my personal faith as I have accepted and formed close personal relationships with LGBTQ friends and family members. HL has been a common occurrence in my life, especially as a teenager. As a teenager, I observed that it was commonly used to bully other students and that my peers were afraid to be labeled with homophobic terms. I also observed how it harmed and offended people who were close to me. My research on HL has further solidified my perspective that HL is common and deleterious among high school student, regardless of their sexual orientation.

My dissertation chair, Melissa Heath, who served as a co-investigator, was also raised in a religious and conservative environment that considered homosexual behavior as sinful. However, the overarching Christian directive to treat others as you would like to be treated (the Golden Rule) and the admonition to avoid judging others were and continue to be highly influential on her perceptions of others and how she interacts with others. As taught within her church community and within her family, she avoids curse words, foul language, and sexualized language, including HL. Additionally, her relationships with others in her family and with close friends have moderated her views on issues related to LGBTQ topics, so that she considers herself accepting of others viewpoints. However, from her perspective, disrespectful sexual language of all varieties, including HL, creates feelings of discomfort.

We have attempted to account for our own biases and construction of reality through the hermeneutic process and a process called *researcher reflexivity*, an explicit self-aware analysis of

how our background and social context influenced our findings (Finlay, 2002). The specific methods we used to account for this bias are discussed in the Design section of this paper.

Participants

Both interviews and observations were conducted to understand students' perception of HL. The interviews were previously completed and analysed for my thesis (Bailey, 2015). The current study collected new data through observations. Because I re-analysed the interviews in conjunction with the observations, I included the process for the interviews and observations in the following sections. Interviews were completed among male students to better understand this population's perspective. Observations were completed of the entire school to understand the interviewees' context within the context of the school.

Interviews. I used a random number generator to select 20 male 12th-grade students from a high school within the Intermountain West to participate in the study. In order to get a more in-depth look at a particular population, participants were narrowed down to this specific gender and grade level. I chose to interview male students because studies suggest that HL is more common among males (Poteat & Kimmel, 2011; Poteat & Rivers, 2010; Poteat & Spanierman, 2010). I chose seniors because one study has found that HL is more common among older high school students (Poteat et al., 2012). Students were selected randomly to obtain a variety of perspectives within this population.

In the selected school, there were approximately 600 students, grades 10 through 12, and 30 teachers, 3 counselors, 1 vice principal, and 1 principal at the time the study was conducted. The student body was approximately 81% White, 15% Hispanic, 1% American Indian, 1% Asian, 1% African-American, and 1% Multi-racial. The randomly-selected interview participants had similar demographic characteristics: 80% white (n=16), 10% Hispanic (n=2),

5% Asian (*n*=1) and, 5% Multi-Racial (*n*=1). The high school was located in a rural town within the Intermountain West.

The number of interviewees in qualitative studies is determined by "data saturation, which occurs when there is no new data emerging and redundancy occurs" (Jeanfreau & Jack, 2010, p. 615). Other qualitative studies suggested that approximately 20 participants would be sufficient to reach saturation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The information shared by participants was "evaluated by quality and amount of data – not the number of participants" (Jeanfreau & Jack, 2010, p. 215) and found to be sufficient in this study.

Observations. Observations were conducted throughout. For example, I observed class teaching, hallway conversations, sports practices, etc. While only 20 students were formally interviewed, I observed the entire school in order to gain a better understanding of these students' context. Observations helped me understand the school environment and contextualize answers offered by the boys in the interviews. Furthermore, the observations offered a more in-depth look at the school environment and how it contributed to or mitigated the use of HL. Because of their large impact on the school environment, faculty and school staff were observed in addition to students. The observations occurred during the last two weeks before school ended for graduation and summer vacation. Doing observations at the end of the school year may have allowed for a more solidified social context since the students had been together all year and school context can change from year to year.

Design

The study utilized both individual interviews in a private room provided by the high school and non-participant observations of the entire school. I avoided group discussions, such as focus groups, because they may have discouraged adolescent participants from openly and

honestly disclosing their perceptions of HL use. Males may avoid this type of disclosure because being open about difficulties, especially emotional ones, can make students appear feminine or weak to their peers. Previous research supports this suspicion (Phoenix et al., 2003). Individual interviews also eliminated the possibility of participants sharing sensitive information about peers' disclosures. Non-participant observations were done to maintain the confidentiality of the interviewees because it made it easier for interviewees to not acknowledge me and keep their previous participation confidential.

Interviews. To encourage more open disclosure, I started the interviews by asking the students to discuss and interpret their peers' experiences instead of directly asking them about their own personal experiences. This method was an indirect and less threatening way to understand their thoughts and prejudices. This indirect approach likely led to more honest disclosure and still allowed students to project their own attitudes and beliefs about HL (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Indirect questioning has been found to produce more truthful answers in numerous studies (Lusk & Norwood, 2010). Furthermore, when students observed that I was accepting of their friends' attitudes, they were often willing to volunteer their own experiences and ideas. I explored their personal experiences when they volunteered them, assuming that volunteering indicated they were comfortable disclosing personal experiences.

I conducted semi-structured interviews (Appendix A), meaning interviews had topics and potential questions rather a strict list and order of questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I used these topics and questions as a loose guide as I interviewed the students. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to diverge and explore new topics as they came up but also offered a general and loose structure to help me address the same issues with each student. The informal nature of this approach encouraged participants' self-disclosure. Furthermore, it allowed for the

researcher and participant to engage in dialogue and more fully compare their perceptions of HL. I used Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) model to develop the questions, which includes many types of questions (e.g., introductory questions, follow-up questions, probing questions, specifying questions, direct questions, indirect questions, structuring questions, and interpreting questions). Other studies have found that information obtained from these types of interviews offered a more in-depth explanation of HL (Levitt, 2005; Pascoe, 2007).

I conducted the interviews because I was the primary researcher in this study. Although my understanding of the current research introduced some inevitable bias into the process, this understanding also increased my expertise and capacity to identify themes relevant to this topic. The interviewees' responses then expanded and challenged my understanding of these themes. I further accounted for his bias using the following methods: subjectivity audit—"taking notes about the situations connected to one's research that arouse[d] strong positive or negative feelings"—and peer examination—"asking colleagues to comment on the findings as they emerge and to review drafts of the report" (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007, pp. 462, 476). Conducting informal interviews helped him foster both an etic and emic perspective because themes were founded on both the interviewees' perspective and his expertise.

Observations. Non-participant observations were conducted to allow more anonymity to participants that I had interviewed and because in some ways it was less intrusive for the student body in general (Polit & Beck, 2004). During the interview phase of my research, many provisions were created so that the student could deny participating in the interviews. Non-participant observations granted them that same privacy because I did not approach them. Furthermore, at least in my presence, many of these students did not acknowledge their previous participation. For those students that I did not interview, non-participant observations

allowed them more privacy because I did not question them or directly influence them. Last, this allowance made the school administration and institutional review board (IRB) more willing to allow the study because it prevented me from potentially influencing students and they viewed it as less invasive.

Non-participant observations may have also allowed for more authentic observations because the majority of the student body did not know exactly what I was studying (Polit & Beck; 2004). When asked by participants what I was studying I reported that I was "observing how high school students interacted with each other." This response potentially prevented the students from performing homophobic interactions just because I was observing. However, because I conducted the interviews first, several students knew what my interviews were about, and therefore, may have told some of the other students. I am not sure how many students knew that I was studying HL. Furthermore, although some students did not know that I was studying HL, they did know I was observing their interactions. My presence as an observer certainly may have influenced their actions and I are not assuming a "disembodied cultural reality" (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2011, p. 158). However, doing non-participant interviews and being intentionally vague about the nature of my study did potentially allow for a more genuine observation.

While I still affirm the above advantages, non-participant observations had disadvantages as well. Although it did grant the students more privacy, it also denied the students an ability to assent to the research. This lack of assent created a power differential where the students were being studied without the ability to be involved in a more collaborative research process, which is thought to be ideal by many qualitative researchers (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2011). I did consider a more collaborative type of observation but were unable conduct this type of study because, generally speaking, the IRB and school administration found this type of observation

more invasive. Furthermore, the study was repeatedly rejected by multiple school districts before I found a district that would allow me to conduct the interviews and observations. Qualitative researchers acknowledge that these types of refusal are common (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2011). While I did not seek out direct youth assent to conduct the research, I did honor their non-verbal or verbal dissent when they expressed discomfort by no longer observing particular groups of students. Furthermore, while I never talked about my research directly, I sometimes did get verbal assent by asking verbally for students' permission to observe. In hindsight, I believe that this communication eased a lot of the discomfort around my observations.

Because I could not directly engage in dialogue with the students during my observations, this hindered my ability to create a *fusion of horizons* through the hermeneutic process (Gadamer, 1975). However, I was able to engage in this process by actively considering how my observations challenged and developed my current understanding of HL. I further engaged in this process in the analysis stage of the research.

Procedures

I first sought permission through local school district administrators. I scheduled a preliminary meeting with the high school principal through email. In this meeting, the principal and I discussed the most appropriate way and time to implement the study. I then contacted the school district's superintendent, who validated that my decisions were appropriate. After receiving approval from the school's administrators, I applied for and received permission from the International Review Board for Human Subjects (IRB) at Brigham Young University (BYU). The IRB approved the information and forms contained in this dissertation's appendices. Appendix A contains the guiding interview questions; Appendix B contains the list of questions pertaining to demographic information, which was competed on each student who participated in

the interviews; Appendix C is the parental permission form that was secured from the parent of each participating student; and Appendix D is the student assent form, completed by each participating student.

Interviews. After receiving approval from the IRB at BYU and school administration, the high school counselors gave me a list of current male seniors and their home phone numbers. I assigned each of these students a unique number and then used a random number generator to randomly select 20 students. I called the phone number of each of these students. If no one answered the phone after three attempts, I used the random number generator to select a new student. If I was able to speak to the parent, I briefly explained the study over the phone, stating that I was studying male adolescent use of HL and emphasizing that participation was voluntary. I then asked if I could interview their child. If the parents gave me verbal consent over the phone, I mailed a written consent form to the student's home with a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Once I received the signed written consent form, the student was pulled from a non-academic class to be interviewed. I received assent from each participant before beginning the interview. I explained the study to the student, emphasizing that participation was voluntary, and gave him a written assent form. I proceeded with the interview if the student signed the assent from.

I was given the contact information of all male high school seniors (74). I contacted and asked for permission from the parents of 41 students, and 22 of these parents gave both verbal and written consent to interview their child. Of these 22 students, 20 assented to be interviewed.

The interviews each lasted 20–45 minutes and were audio recorded. An undergraduate research assistant transcribed each interview. To ensure transcription accuracy, I reviewed the

transcriptions with the audio recordings. Furthermore, I occasionally returned to the audio recordings to pick up vocal nuances not apparent in the transcriptions.

We used participants' direct quotes to add depth and *trustworthiness* to the narrative (O'Dwyer, 2004, p. 403). I acknowledge that participants' verbatim quotes may be less clear and succinct when presenting a narrative, that it is difficult to accurately present pauses and voice inflections, and that colloquial speech patterns may make the participants appear less articulate. Nevertheless, I argue that using verbatim quote will help the reader understand the participants' perspectives better and that the benefits outweigh the drawbacks.

Observations. After receiving approval from the IRB at BYU and permission from school administration, I started going to the school for non-participant observations. Over a period of approximately two weeks, I spent 11 days observing the school.

I asked the principal of the school to send out an email to all the teachers informing them that I was a researcher from BYU and that I was doing observations to better understand the school environment. In the email, they were also asked to tell the principal if they had any frustrations with me and that I would be happy to leave if asked. Although offering them limited information may be viewed as deceptive, it allowed me the ability to observe the school environment in a more natural state. This deception was important so I could remain distant and be questioned less by the staff. When questioned by the staff, I offered the reason given by the principal in his email. When questioned by students, I told them I was doing a study about how high school students interact with each other. Although I am aware that students and staff may have acted differently as a result of my presence, it is hoped that after continued exposure, the novelty of my presence diminished and the behavior of students and staff was hopefully typical of their day-to-day behavior (Polit & Beck, 2004).

Generally, I arrived at the school before the opening bell, prior to first period classes, and left after all extra-curricular activities were over. Each day I would go to the front office and obtain a visitor's pass. After obtaining the pass, I would find an inconspicuous place to sit and take copious notes as the students entered the school. After the bell, I would drop in on classes and place myself in an area that offered minimal distraction (usually at the back of the room). Between classes, I sometimes stayed in the classroom and at other times walked around the hallway. When in the hallway, I walked in the halls to appear more natural and then logged data after the bell rang. After school, I attended sports practices or other after-school activities.

I took notes on any perceived HL or taunting and the context in which it occurred. At this time, I took notes on any language that appeared homophobic or sexual and then later reviewed if the language was homophobic. I further took notes to better understand the school environment including how students, teachers, and other staff "led their lives, how they carried out their daily rounds of activities, what they found meaningful and how they did so" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 2). This type of information was recorded to assist me in understanding the school context and any possible feature of that environment that may have contributed to HL use.

Recognizing that information obtained through the observations could be highly sensitive, I recorded pseudonyms instead of real names to protect individuals' privacy. Furthermore, to protect individuals' privacy I kept observation notes on my person at all times. Later these notes were transcribed and kept on a password-protected computer.

Confidentiality. I recognized that information obtained through the interviews and observation was highly sensitive. I changed names, places, and other revealing information in the transcripts and observation notes to protect confidentiality. Furthermore, I destroyed audio

recordings, demographic surveys and consent forms after our analysis was complete. All personal revealing information was kept confidential between interviewees and me. Information obtained from the demographic survey was used to inform the interviewer and create a summary of the interviewee characteristics. Creating a demographic summary allowed the researcher to compare the interview demographics to the community demographics. Although the interview was unlikely to be harmful, I informed both the parents and students that they could contact me or my research chair if they had any concerns or difficulty after the interview was concluded. I provided both the parents and the students with this contact information.

 Analysis. Unlike the previous study that solely analyzed the interviews with a single hermeneutic interpreter, this study employed a collaborative hermeneutic method to analyze the transcripts of the interviews and observations (McKenzie et al., 2013). A collaborative hermeneutic method utilizes two or more people who closely and repeatedly study the transcripts for relations of parts to the whole until reaching a unity between the two (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This method of interpretation is based on principles described by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) and was used in a qualitative study by McKensie et al. (2013, p. 5–6). The analysis for the current study was conducted in the following manner:

1. My research chair and I read all the transcripts. The purpose of the initial reading was to get a general sense of the interviews and observations.

2. During this reading and subsequent readings of the transcripts we identified meaningful passages that were relevant to the research questions. We considered passages meaningful when they consistently reflected themes in both the interviews and observations, and contributed to our understanding of HL.

3. We both generated some preliminary interpretations or themes, and then discussed and even debated the relevance of these themes. Through this process we were better able to potentially filter out incorrect prejudices and understand the phenomenon in truthful and novel ways. In order to account for the power differential between my research chair and me, I did most of the initial analysis so that I could have an equally authoritative opinion in our discussions.

4. After arriving at our preliminary themes, we began to consider and construct a collaborative interpretation.

5. We continued this process until we agreed upon themes that ultimately formed a coherent whole or framework for students' use of HL in our research site (Debesay, Nåden, & Slettebø, 2008).

The analysis was influenced by our knowledge of themes previously found in research about homophobic bullying, specifically my previous study, and our own bias. In my previous study, interview participants revealed that different groups of students used HL differently and that primarily students used HL to police popularity, normality, gender and sexuality. The current study allowed us to compare these reports with observations conducted by me and to more fully understand the context in which HL occurred. We challenged this previous bias using *researcher reflexivity* and by challenging each other through dialogue (Morrow, 2005). We actively questioned our biases until we arrived at *perspectival subjectivity*, a rigorous method to obtain a perspective of a text that is created by the unique questions brought to it, rather than selective interpretation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). After we felt that we had arrived at saturation and that no more themes could be discovered, I presented our findings and analysis to an external auditor trained in hermeneutic methods. The auditor reviewed each theme and parts

of the analysis and determined if they were valid. I retained the themes when both the auditor

and I agreed that the themes were valid.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This study's results include two sets of data. Data included were gathered from 20 male students' interviews and additionally from observations conducted in the high school where these students were enrolled.

Description of the School

Interviews and observations were completed in a high school located in the rural Intermountain West. The school itself was built in the 1950s with a few later additions to update the building. The look and feel of the school was dated and in need of repair. It had an older heating system and no central air. The library still had pictures of athletes from the 1970's lining the walls. Vending machines had papers taped to them warning, "use at your own risk." Most classrooms felt like college professors' offices, the walls cluttered but eccentrically organized with books and other educational artifacts.

Almost 80% of the school's population was affiliated with a conservative Christian religion with almost half identifying as LDS. Students in this school appeared to take pride in their diversity. Some of my interviewees even postulated that they were more accepting of different types of people, including LGB individuals, because of their community's diversity. This community was not only more religiously diverse from other intermountain west communities but more politically diverse as well. The high school included students from all socioeconomic classes.

The community was primarily White, so the school lacked racial diversity. However, the student body appeared to be racially inclusive, meaning people of minority races appeared to be equally distributed among different groups of students. The one observed exception to this

inclusiveness was Spanish-speaking students, who appeared to only socialize among themselves, most likely because of the language barrier.

While students generally did not segregate by race, students often organized themselves by their different interests. There were groups of people interested in sports, drama, band, student government, and other activities. Some of these activities appeared to offer students more social power. For males, being members of popular athletic teams appeared to offer most social power. For females, popularity appeared to be more related to physical appearance and who they were dating.

Students were also organized into "Mormon" groups or non-Mormon groups. Interestingly, students appeared to discriminate between "Mormons" and non-Mormons based on perceptions of students' moral code rather than their religious affiliation. One student definitively labeled the athletes as either "the jocks" or the "Mormon jocks." These perceptions were verified both during the observations and the interviews.

Generally, groups appeared to consist of both genders. Interestingly, student athletes appeared to be an exception and were more divided by gender than other groups. From my observations and interviews, it seems that there are two primary reasons for this division. First, sports teams naturally divided students by gender. The students appeared to establish close bonds during sports practice and games which extended into other social activities. This division of sexes is only true for sporting interests as other interests such as the arts and student government were co-ed. The second reason may be that male athletes were more likely to view females as sexual objects rather than distinct and respected individuals. Pasoce (2007) refers to this masculine ideology as compulsive heterosexuality. Therefore, a sincere friendship between different sexes would undermine this ideology.

Although students in school primarily spent their time with a specific group, the group boundaries appeared to be fairly permeable. Students of various groups frequently socialized with each other. However, this flexibility was limited, to students of similar popularity but different groups associating with each other or students with more popularity associating with students with less popularity. Popularity generally appeared to be strongly related to students' perceived socio-economic status and/or appearance. Students who were popular generally wore name-brand/new clothing and appeared to spend more time on their appearance.

Perhaps because the school was located in a rural community, the relationships between the students and teachers appeared to be more casual. Teachers often appeared to have the same type of casual vernacular and behavior as the students: joking, roughhousing and being sarcastic with them. During observations, teachers explicitly told me that they thought their relationship with the students was more casual because they lived in a smaller community, and a few of them expressed some embarrassment about some of the things they said in front of me.

Teachers often appeared to use this language to better relate to the students, and at times this behavior did appear to make teachers more approachable. I saw multiple examples of the students feeling comfortable with the adults: laughing at their jokes and having a space to be open with their teachers, even if it was in a sarcastic way. Furthermore, students often appeared to take this language as good-natured teasing, responding with playful rejoinders. In contrast to students, teachers often used this language to encourage prosocial or academic behavior and frequently used this language with more tact. For example, the most sarcastic teacher was equally hard on himself, so his language was not targeted toward the students alone. Furthermore, teachers frequently expressed interest and concern about their students' lives. This

care potentially created a relationship robust enough to create safety that would allow for sarcasm.

On the other hand, sometimes this language appeared to be hurtful. When teachers sarcastically demeaned a student, students would often respond defensively or just ignore the teacher's sarcastic criticism. Instead of a culture of approachability, these comments appeared to create distance and hostility between the teacher and student. Furthermore, while mutual sarcasm appeared to decrease the power differential, ultimately, teachers still had more power to reprimand students for their language. This power differential sometimes created a double standard where teachers could use language that students could not use.

How students interpreted these sarcastic comments appeared to depend on the context, tone, and relationship between the student and teacher. However, regardless of how the language was interpreted, the teachers were modeling a way to communicate. Their behavior may have communicated that insulting language, and therefore potentially HL, was acceptable to use among their peers. While I never observed teachers using HL, I did observe them using profanity, gendered insults, and sexual humor which appeared to be strongly related to HL. Although I did not observe school staff use HL personally, students reported to me that some school staff used HL more frequently than the students. This behavior explicitly models that HL is acceptable and even appropriate for students to use among their peers. Furthermore, perhaps because of this causal relationship, this language was not confined to certain areas of the school. Instead, students used homophobic and other sexual language everywhere in school.

Although the relationships between the teachers and students generally appeared to be casual, the class culture varied from class to class. Some teachers appeared to still have the students' respect, and students were better behaved and used less vulgar language in these

classes in front of their teacher. However, even in these classes, students still used offensive or

demeaning language quietly among their peers so that the teacher would not notice.

The Language of Marginalization

Because HL explicitly refer to sexual orientation and extant research has demonstrated a

connection between policing masculinity and HL, a person may assume that this language was

most frequently used to target someone's sexuality or masculinity. However, participants most

frequently used this language to symbolically marginalize others. Typically, this language was

used by privileged individuals who held power over other students. Several of my interviewees

referred to this use of HL as a way to label someone as "less than." Many appeared to understand

that HL could be used in this manner because LGBTQ individuals were a marginalized group.

In my observations, I observed both males and females using this language in this way. Poteat et

al. (2012) refer to this use of HL as "societal marginalization," arguing that "referring to a

student as a sexual minority in a disparaging manner, regardless of whether the student identifies

as LGBTQ, symbolically places that student in a subordinate position" (p. 80).

One example in which HL was used to marginalize another person occurred between two

girls. In this example, a seated female student in wood shop class used a compressed air hose to

blow a small piece of scrap wood several feet from her. After blowing the scrap, she pointed to

it on the floor and a second female student then picked up the scrap of wood and returned it to

her, similar to a dog playing fetch. After repeatedly playing this same sequence of behaviors, the

second female student, annoyed with the subservient interaction, threw the piece of wood at the

first girl and asserted, "I am tired of being your dog." In response, the first female, seemingly

self-assured, smirked and casually and jokingly remarked, "You are a faggot." This brief

exchange, although between friends and possibly not intended as demeaning, demonstrates how

HL extends beyond male privilege and power, to other contexts involving a power dynamic. In this instance, the first female implied that a "fag" was similar to a subservient dog or even a slave who was forced to do the master's bidding.

A similar instance occurred in the cafeteria between two males in the presence of a popular group of male students. The aggressor, a somewhat popular and belligerent adolescent, patronized a special education student with developmental delays. In this situation, the more popular student told the other student to "suck [his] balls," and when the student demurred, the popular student persisted, "I mean with your whole mouth." His friends laughed approvingly and the targeted student laughed acquiescently.   Interestingly, later in this conversation, the more popular boy tricked the special education student into getting him tater tots, positioning the boy into a similar servile role as the girl fetching wood. Similar to the first instance, requesting a servile response also marginalized the targeted student and identified him as someone with less power. In both instances, homosexual references were made in conjunction with servile requests.

Although these two situations are examples of sexual and homophobic abuse, they seemed to model a similar tone as that exemplified in racial, gendered, socioeconomic, and cultural slurs. In each of these cases, students appeared to be negotiating or asserting their power over others by comparing them to a marginalized group. In other words, labeling someone with a homophobic term was another way to say, "I have power over you," invoking a symbolic master and slave relationship. Furthermore, the insults were always delivered by someone with more popularity toward someone with less popularity. HL was used this way between groups and within groups.

In the interviews, students reported that this type of HL used to marginalize others was offensive, particularly when targeting already marginalized groups. Students reported opposing

this type of HL and sometimes protecting targeted individuals in marginalized group, such as having an intellectual disability, being small, being poor, or belonging to minority race. Furthermore, the only time a student interviewee admitted remorse was when he used HL to marginalize another student. This student admitted that he and his friends had labeled a "little Indian kid" with homophobic and other offensive terms. However, when asked why they targeted this individual, the student replied, "He was just so much littler than us… I joined in sometimes, but the people I was with took it to like to an extreme. I talked to him the other day. I apologized for it and all that."

Even though, similar reactions from other students illustrate that, in general, this type of HL was perceived as the most offensive. Sadly, students still commonly used HL to marginalize others. Furthermore, this marginalization was probably more extreme for adolescents because the latitude for individual differences in this age group is unfortunately very narrow. High school was described by most students as a place where "people try to fit in more than anything" and where students were labeled with HL for even deviating "a little out of the norm." This restriction appeared to apply to all but the most popular students. All types of students were targeted with HL for deviating from what was considered normal. However, students who were already marginalized were more commonly targeted with HL because they lacked supportive peers.

I observed students often marginalize entire groups with HL. In one conversation I observed a group of boys discussing potential wars with the United States of America (USA) they thought would be humorous. In each of these scenarios they labeled the other, presumably weaker, side (e.g., Texans, Danish people, terrorists) as "faggots." This comparison also occurred with traditionally foreign activities. For example, students in my observations referred

to soccer as "gay." There may be multiple reasons why soccer was considered gay, but one potential reason may be because it is not an "American sport." Soccer may also have been considered gay because this sport was traditionally first played by girls in the USA. However, soccer may have first been played only by females because soccer was considered to be a foreign sport. In other words, the initial pairing may have occurred because both foreign athletes and women athletes were marginalized groups in the USA.

Students I interviewed commonly paired HL with other marginalizing language, such as racial and gendered language. Perhaps because the LGBTQ movement is frequently compared to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, one student assumed that HL would be more offensive to people that grew this time period. Furthermore, students assumed that because females are marginalized that they would be more accepting of LGBTQ individuals and less likely to use HL. One student explained it this way:

> The fact that girls always used to be treated different from the guys, because the guys used to be a higher level and the girls used not to be. But now that the girls are here with the guys, it's now the gay community, it's getting put down, so the girls know what it's like to be down there. So, they're trying to help it to where the gay community is up with us equally.

Although this quote is about LGBTQ individuals and not directly about HL, the quote illustrates why so many students described HL as a way to label someone as "less than." Students did not think of HL as only a sexualized or gendered insult but also a marginalizing insult. Such an insult would group the target with a currently marginalized group, "symbolically placing them in a marginalized position" (Poteat et al., 2012, p. 80).

The Language of Adulthood

One cultural factor that appeared to affect HL was how adolescents wanted to assert their adulthood. As teenagers, students tried to assert their adulthood with several behaviors. Although, these behaviors varied largely in tenor, they generally fell under two themes. Students challenged adult power and authority and modeled adults they admired. We will first describe some of these behaviors generally and them to how students used HL in a similar manner.

While challenging adult authority and modeling admired adults may seem like opposites, and sometimes are, they can also be similar. For example, students both challenged and modeled adults by emulating their academic confidence. Students confident of their academic abilities proved their adulthood by intellectually challenging the teacher or inviting the teacher's critical feedback on their academic projects. Similarly, some students in interviews with me attempted to demonstrate that they had thought more critically about HL than I had. These students sometimes answered my questions in a patronizing tone and tried convince me of their interpretation of HL.

As discussed previously, although adults may have been more relatable by being more sarcastic, and therefore potentially more adolescent, this choice may have modeled adult bad behavior. Therefore, students may have been sarcastic with teachers not only to challenge them but also to emulate them. Students impersonated adults mockingly, pulled pranks on their teachers or insulted the teachers publicly while challenging their authority. Furthermore, students were often as equally as willful as adults about what they considered appropriate behavior, sometimes explicitly disobeying or challenging adult correction. Students directly defied teachers' instructions and retorted sarcastically when teachers complained about their behavior.

Collectively, the seniors challenged adult authority with their senior prank, by parking their cars in random places, including the faculty parking and refusing to move them.

Similar to the above behaviors, students used HL to assert their adulthood by challenging adult power and authority and emulating adults they admired. Furthermore, using HL as a way to appear more adult overlaps with other themes discussed in this paper. These interactions are explored in the following paragraphs.

Homophobic language, as a taboo language individuated students from the current cultural standards and therefore challenged adult authority. Students may have used these taboo and rebellious words to claim their own authority by undermining the school's rules about profanity. Students seemingly tested teachers, administrators, and other school authority figures by saying crass and/or HL loudly in classrooms and hallways, waiting to see if they could incite a reaction from the responsible adults.

Occasionally students even tried to provoke a reaction from me. Most often students tried to provoke me by explicitly stating their annoyance or sometimes calling me names like "creep" or "fag." However, the most dramatic event occurred nearing the end of my observations. A student, who I had observed testing other adults in the school, sat next to me during my observations and dramatically jested, "Oh my gosh, look what the hell my friend sent!" When I turned, I was shocked to find what appeared to be a computer-edited picture of a nude male teenager with a large green line covering his genital area. I quickly looked away but I was so stunned and confused by his behavior, I just sheepishly smiled and returned to my notes. This student had successfully baffled me and in so doing had changed our relationship so that he had power and control over me, an adult.

Although I never observed an adult use HL and rarely heard them use taboo language, students reported that they used HL because adults modeled this language for them. One student interviewee, who described HL as the "same thing as cussing," explained the reason he believed that students in junior high first started using HL. "Usually you hear your dad cuss, and so you think 'Oh, that's, that's because he's grown up. He's mature' and so people in junior high will use words like that." In this example, the student hypothesizes that students first use this language to try to emulate adults they admire and therefore to feel more adult. This phenomenon may have also occurred on sporting teams, where students reported that coaches in general frequently used HL and other taboo language.

Students also appeared to use HL because the language was sexual and sex was an adult topic. HL and other sexual language were often communicated through teasing and other playful, although also potentially harmful, interactions. Similar to children playing house to understand and experience adulthood, adolescents may have played out different parts of their sexuality to understand and experience their sexuality. Multiple students I interviewed confessed in their interviews that the teenage years were a sexually confusing time for adolescents. Therefore, students may have used sexual language in a playful and/or ironic way because it was less threatening to their identity. Students that belonged to more athletic and masculine groups tended toward more ironic play. Their play appeared ironic because of the group's strongly established heterosexual norms. On the hand, the more artistic and feminine groups tended toward more openly explorative play.

As the language of masculinity, HL was a way of typifying what the ideal adult man should be like. Interestingly, in my observations words like "fag," "girl," and "baby" all had a similar meaning. Students appeared to intend that HL or gendered comments police someone's

maturity level by using HL synonymously with terms like baby. In these instances, this language almost always communicated that to be emotionally vulnerable was childish and therefore ludicrous. Therefore, this language also implicitly privileged a masculine ideal.

Students also used HL to motivate and pressure students to do "adult" activities such as drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes. In my interviews and observations, students appeared to consider these activities both "manly" and "adult." Logically, these activities may be considered more adult by both genders because of the age requirement. However, only males described these activities as adult. This exclusivity may imply that these activities are more male-gendered. Students playfully talked about these activities for perhaps a similar reason they talked about sexuality. This play allowed them to imitate adult activity.

An appealing thing about being an adult is that adults have more power and freedom. In all of these examples, students were trying to claim one of these advantages. As discussed earlier, students sometimes engaged in HL to playfully or ironically explore adulthood. We understand that several students may have already been actively engaged in certain "adult" activities, being sexually active and drinking and smoking. However, even among these students, HL and other "adult" language in the presence of their peers was still a way to explore developing or uncomfortable parts of themselves. Furthermore, playfully and ironically using HL and other sexual language in the presence of adults allowed adolescents to elevate themselves to equal footing and sometimes, as when I was targeted, even claim more power than the adult.

The Language of Rebellion

Many student interviewees considered homophobic terms to be "cuss words" or "swear words." HL was also used in conjunction with other offensive terms. As previously discussed,

using offensive language appeared to be a way that students tried to assert their adulthood or at least to challenge the current cultural norms. In other words, students used this type of culturally offensive language as an act of rebellion. When considering HL as rebellious, the "Think Before You Speak" campaign, which identifies HL as disrespectful, has potentially made HL even more enticing. As adults magnify the offensiveness of HL, rebellious adolescents will likely increase its use.

For males generally, using this type of language may have been a way to affirm their masculine identity. A common reason that interviewees gave for HL being more common among males than females was that men were more comfortable with taboo and offensive language in general, and this language included HL. Concerning specific groups, only certain types of students used taboo language: the most popular athletic students and raucous social outcasts. In the following paragraphs we will explore how both groups of students appeared to have compelling reasons for using HL.

In the case of the popular male athlete, there seemed to be a cultural expectation that popular athletes should have loud and vulgar personalities. This personality was then reinforced by the students who laughed at or submitted to this type of behavior. A scenario demonstrating this type of reinforcement occurred in the gym. A large popular male athlete, seeming to act like a dinosaur with arms pulled into his sides and taking large exaggerated strides, walked up to some less popular boys and then spit water on them. Instead of acting offended, the boys instead laughed and affirmed the player for being funny. In the interviews, interviewees described these types of behavior as a way that popular students flaunted their popularity, broadcasting their ability to be outrageous and offensive without social consequence. Similarly, they believed that these students used HL, as taboo language, so frequently for the same reason.

However, being in the most popular group did not protect a person from social consequences within the popular groups. For example, during a sports practice when a less popular team member made a homophobic comment amidst a homophobic conversation, he was corrected by his peer, but the more popular members of the team were not. This targeted correction demonstrates that only the most popular students of the most popular groups were able to be taboo and use HL without any correction by their peers.

In the case of the unpopular and raucous students, vulgar language appeared to be how they set themselves apart. These students were not unpopular only because of their apparent lack of friends but also because they were openly rude and vulgar with most people. However, although their behavior made others dislike them, it was often so taboo and so shocking that others could not ignore them. This attention reinforced their outlandish behavior. These students had a specific role within the school, and they attained a certain notoriety through this role. One example of this notoriety occurred during the practice for an improvisation drama performance. The audience picked roles for the students on stage. When one of these unpopular and raucous students was considered for his assigned role, the audience almost immediately and unanimously suggested that this student should play the part of a "creep" and a "pervert." This student noticeably grimaced as his classmates discussed how well he fit the part, and he appeared to regret his infamy in this moment. This example demonstrates how a student's taboo language has social advantages and disadvantages. This student was well known by his peers, a type of social capital, but his taboo language had limited his freedom, and his peers were restricting him to a negative label.

Although they were unpopular, these students could still use taboo language to claim their power over other students. These unpopular and raucous students usually targeted specific

marginalized groups such as racial minorities, women and special education students. These students were still white and/or male and taboo language was another method to marginalize other students, telling racist and sexist jokes. These unpopular and raucous students may have been some of the most disliked students. However, they were still white and male and therefore had more privilege than these marginalized groups. Using this language appeared to be a way of affirming their social capital, limited as it was.

For all students that used taboo language was a way to make people laugh. There may be multiple reasons that people laugh at taboo humor. They may feel shocked by it, be anxious about it, or feel pressured to comply with social expectations. In my observations, students most frequently laughed because of social pressure. As previously mentioned, this type of humor was frequently directed at people who were less popular and therefore felt compelled to laugh to maintain their reputation with the more popular peer. Similarly, when used by students with the same amount of popularity students appeared to laugh to preserve their relationship with peers. Often students that laughed at taboo humor also appeared uncomfortable. Unlike more mild humor, taboo humor seems more polarizing because it is also offensive to many people. In this way, taboo humor was a way of testing the limits of a friendship or of social capital.

Just as some students used HL because it was taboo, others avoided HL for that same reason. Generally speaking, taboo language is unkind and considered to be a swear word. Students that identified as actively religious or belonging to a religious group of friends claimed to abstain from HL because they did not want to be unkind or use vulgar language. One student described his friends, who he labeled as the "good LDS group," in this way, "I say 'good' because of the ones that aren't LDS but they are good, they're respectful, they show respect towards everyone around them." I never observed the actively religious students using HL or

any other type of taboo language. Even during the interview, these students seemed more self-conscious of using HL, than other students, despite the more formal and academic tone of our conversation.

Although religious students wanted to be kind and avoid taboo language, these students appeared homophobic and expressed feeling uncomfortable around anything they found taboo. In addition to being uncomfortable using HL and other taboo language, these students were also uncomfortable when discussing LGBT individuals that attended the school. As one non-religious participant described religious students: "They still don't like it [homosexuality], but they're gonna be nice about it for the most part. They won't be like, 'Oh, that's so gay.'" Furthermore, while most of these religious students appeared to be kind to everyone, they generally only spent time with their group of friends that had similar values. Therefore, they potentially excluded LGBT students. I did not directly observe this exclusivity, but perhaps because of their religion's proclaimed belief that homosexual behavior is sinful, their group was perceived this way by many of the students I interviewed.

The Language of Sexuality

Based on the observations conducted in this school, it seemed students at the high school level persistently talked and thought about sexuality. During the observations, I witnessed students engaged in titillating conversations, sexual playfulness, sexist remarks, pantomimed sexual activity, and sexual jokes. One may suppose that because students were inundated by a sexual atmosphere, that students would feel comfortable with their sexuality. However, after considering the interviews and observations, from our perspective this sexual atmosphere was highly specific, immature, and exclusive. Males and females were expected to be sexual in

specific ways according to social rules based on a person's gender and sexuality. Furthermore, sexual expression and exploration were socially constrained by the school's culture.

Repeatedly in conversations, students were evaluated sexually. However, they were evaluated differently, depending on their gender. Women were usually described and judged by their sexual attractiveness while men were described and judged by their physical prowess and their sexual dominance. Male students referred to female sexual body parts and degraded and reduced female athletes to sexual symbols. In contrast, male and female students referred to male students' muscular physique and sometimes ridiculed men who were not muscular. Male students also bantered about the size of each other penises, but this comparison was more about prowess than attractiveness. Additionally, to taut their social dominance, males jokingly described situations in which they imposed themselves sexually on both males and females.

In relation to sexually-themed humor, students most frequently joked about STDs. Given my observations, reasons for this frequency included advertising their knowledge and expertise about sexuality; making the implicit sexual atmosphere explicit; making adults uncomfortable; and using this language as an insult similar to HL, to degrade someone's sexual desirability.

Students not only frequently talked about sexuality but often physically mimicked sexual acts as well, such as highly suggestive dancing and aggressive sexual play. Furthermore, even when these behaviors were not overtly sexual, including prolonged hugs and back scratching, students linked any type of physical contact with sexual acts, either heterosexual or homosexual in nature. For example, one student was hugging his girlfriend while his friend waited for him to walk to class. Finally, in frustration, his friend left him and started walking alone. "I am coming," called the first student. "That is gross," his friend replied. The first boy called back,

"shut up," and laughed. Given the sexual context of the school and that this boy was embracing his girlfriend, it is logical to assume the boy's friend was making a joke about sexual release.

Students of the same gender also engaged in sexualized behavior. The majority of this behavior was playful, ironic, and at times sexually domineering. For example, same gendered students pretended to be involved romantically and/or sexually. Females made jokes about being romantically involved with other females and jested that they were "in each other's pants" by sticking their finger in the bottom cuff of another female's pant leg. These interactions, where females pretended to be gay, appeared to be more exploratory, gentle, and playful. These behaviors may have been a safe way for females to explore their sexuality. However, although this behavior may have been playful, it still implied homophobia because homosexuality was still portrayed as humorous and therefore not a viable, sincere option.

Boys, on the other hand, were more physically aggressive, violent, and violating, such as grabbing and squeezing each other's breast, poking each other with sticks in the anus, and backhanding each other in the crotch. Unlike the majority of female sexual play, these interactions placed the victim in a sexually submissive and therefore humiliating position. Therefore, while some of these interactions appeared to be playful and exploratory, the bulk of interactions expressed sexual dominance.

Using sexual humor, teachers appeared to acknowledge the school's sexual atmosphere. Although teachers rarely made sexual jokes, occasionally they used sexual innuendos. For example, class-specific quotes, some that were sexual in nature, were posted on one classroom wall. Several quotes that were apparently related to the choir teacher's comments included the following: "take out your gender pieces," "the longest boys," or "booty and the beast." In this instance, while the teacher may not have intended to make a sexual comment, by allowing

students to write these quotes on the wall, the teacher acknowledged the sexual atmosphere of the school. In another example, when a male student complained that a teacher's rule was "dumb," the teacher retorted, "that's what she said." Because "she said" jokes are generally sexual, the student then replied "That's not even a 'she said' joke." Although the joke failed, using a common derogatory sexual phrase still demonstrates this teacher's participation in the sexual atmosphere, even though possibly naïve in nature. Furthermore, this joke implied that the male student was a female and therefore, within this culture, positioned him in a sexually marginalized position.

The sexual atmosphere of the school was also acknowledged by one substitute teacher who openly discussed sexually-themed topics with students to promote discussion. Sadly, perhaps because the teacher wanted to be relatable, she joked about the students' questions and the discussion was not purely academic. The teacher allowed the students to write anonymous questions about sexuality. Many of the students touted their prolific sexual activity through their questions, asking: "Can you get pregnant from pre-semen?" "Why are some people virgins?" or "Why did she bleed?" Questions such as these were so common that this classroom discussion led students to believe that everyone was sexually active. Despite joking that these questions were foolish, the teacher still read every question, adding her own comedic commentary. The manner in which the teacher led the discussion flirted with the academic boundary between an open discussion and a casual and disrespectful comedy routine. Therefore, while the teacher created a space to relieve some of tension associated with the school's sexual atmosphere, she also embarrassed some students and trivialized their sexual experience. After this classroom activity, perhaps self-conscious of her candor, this substitute teacher later approached me and told me that an earlier class discussion had been much more mature.

Last, teachers also implied their distrust of students' sexual behavior by creating rules that prevented boys and girls from intermingling. For example, on the senior trip to a local theme park, the adult chauffeurs insisted on having separate busses for girls and boys. This action implied that teachers believed students would be sexually irresponsible if allowed to freely interact with the opposite sex.

Perhaps because of sexual inundation, students I interviewed appeared to struggle when differentiating between their sexual identity and their entire identity. One example of this difficulty was when a student justified the reason a homophobic insult was more offensive than a racial one. He explained, "because it's not directed just to race, it's directed to like a person in general." This quote demonstrates the all-encompassing nature of HL. As previously discussed, one reason students may have felt so constrained by HL was because of the inherent association with a marginalized group. Additionally, adolescents were so inundated by a hypersexual atmosphere that they began to identify as primarily sexual. This primary identification made it difficult to ignore or compartmentalize their sexuality.

The only explicit dialogue that I observed about homosexuality was during a practice session with one of the popular sports teams. In what appeared to be a casual conversation, the team discussed a few LGB students in the school. During this conversation, the team appeared openly homophobic and naive about sexuality. They appeared openly homophobic because they were disgusted by homosexual actions such as kissing and implied that people who engaged in homosexual activity were archaic, referring to lesbians as "always traveling in clans." They also seemed naive because they reported that one person had become gay because he started living with a man. During this conversation, a student also expressed a common double standard in tolerance for male and female homosexuality, saying he was "fine with two girls making out, but

that two boys, that's the gayest." Sadly, male tolerance for female homosexuality most likely has more to do with the sexual objectification of women rather than a progressive and open view of their sexuality.

Another example occurred among a few friends in the library when one student was particularly crass. As the friends were leaving the library, this crass student openly announced to the library that he had better shut off his computer or people would know he was looking at "gay midget fisting" pornography. In this example, this particular member seemed to be labeling any type of shocking or taboo pornography that he could imagine. Similar to the sports team's dialog, he expressed homophobic and prejudiced attitudes by associating homosexuality with other taboo topics.

Furthermore, as explained in the section about taboo language, even though some groups of students refrained from using homophobic and other sexual language, they still admitted to feeling uncomfortable interacting with LGBT individuals in the school. In some ways, these students escaped much of the sexual atmosphere by avoiding sexual topics among their peers. However, they were still aware of and affected by personal beliefs that homosexuality was taboo and sinful. All three of these reactions reveal homophobic attitudes that underlie HL, by associating homosexuality with what could be considered outlandish, abnormal, and sinful behavior.

Although I observed homophobic attitudes during my observations, during the one-on-one interviews most students denied that these attitudes influenced their use of HL. However, as the examples above illustrate, HL was influenced by these attitudes. Furthermore, while interviewees denied bullying LGTBQ individuals, they did admit that openly gay youth and transgender youth were bullied because of their sexuality or gender expression. This disclosure

also reveals that HL was motivated by homophobic attitudes. While the frequency of this type of bullying was difficult to determine from this study, the emotional impact seems apparent. Students understood that sexually targeted HL was hurtful. Even if these students were not frequently bullied, the school's sexually saturated and exclusive atmosphere created an environment where sexually deviant behavior was social suicide and HL that targeted these individual was lethal.

Given the hypersexualized school environment and the immature and exclusive views on sexuality, students may struggle to keep a healthy and confident sexual identity. However, some of the students I interviewed believed that adolescents, in particular, struggled with their sexual identity because they were still developing and understanding their sexuality. Furthermore, they believed junior high school students had an even more difficult time than high school students defining their sexuality.

Most participants identified junior high as the first time they heard HL being used frequently. One student that I interviewed explained that adolescence was a period where students questioned "Do I like boys? Do I like girls? Do I like both? Do I like neither? So that can get very confusing and I think that's when it's... the terminology is starting to be used." Sadly, as this quote illustrates, students felt that these insecurities, rather than creating a more understanding sexual atmosphere, created a more hostile one where HL thrived in mainstream conversation. Students believed that sexual insecurity bred defensiveness and hostility that masked potential sexual vulnerability.

Perhaps, because of sexual inundation co-occurring with students' sexual insecurity, adolescents that I interviewed appeared to be genuinely afraid of being labeled as a LGBTQ. The inundation of sexual exposure had the potential to form the basis for defining one's

individual worth. In other words, if the topic of sex consumed the large majority of students' language and behaviors, then it is not surprising that students evaluated themselves and others based on their perceived sexual desirability and/or by their sexual prowess. The highly sexualized atmosphere of high school combined with the vulnerability of emerging adolescent identity amplified the power of HL to attack the whole person, rather than just their sexuality.

Students recognized that not all HL was actually intended to literally label someone as LGBTQ. However, when students perceived that they were being labelled as a LGBTQ, then they were much more likely to be offended. For this reason, students did not want their peers to call them homophobic terms in public places with strangers present, because observers might take the teasing at face value and perceive the targeted individuals as actual LGB individuals. In contrast, students reported feeling comfortable using HL among their friends because they reported feeling confident about each other's sexuality; therefore, their sexual identity was not under attack. Similarly, they were also more offended if they felt HL was actually targeted at their sexuality. Student's valued their sexuality. Given their circumstance, sexuality may have encompassed their entire worth, but at very least was a substantial social imperative in an environment where "people try to fit in more than anything."

The Language of Masculinity

As previously mentioned, the high school students in this study perceived clearly delineated masculine and feminine roles. Although certain groups in the school allowed some gender role flexibility, generally females and males acted differently. Generally, males were loud, active, emotionally limited, and sometimes vulgar. On the other hand, females were less boisterous, typically calm, and at times emotionally expressive. Furthermore, when students violated these standard roles, they were frequently corrected by peers' gendered or HL.

Overall, male students appeared to believe and align with traditional ideas about masculine roles. Males consistently reinforced the belief that men should not be sensitive or open about their feelings. They expressed ideas that men should be in control of every aspect of their life; that they should be strong and violent; and that men should be crass and rebellious. And last, men were expected to be sexually dominating and powerful. Obviously not all male students were able to consistently exhibit each of these gendered role expectations. When males failed to meet these expectations, peers ridiculed them, often using HL. Furthermore, because being strong and athletic was a masculine ideal, some male students were ridiculed because they were short or because they were not athletic.

From my observations, men touted and imposed a violent and domineering sexuality. For example, men disregarded personal sexual boundaries, inappropriately touching and hitting other male students. This behavior forced their targets into a sexually submissive position. For male students, being sexually domineering even appeared to be more important than appearing heterosexual. With the apparent homophobia that existed in the school, it may have been surprising that male students jokingly bragged about performing homosexual actions. However, these homosexual sexual actions were only appropriate, or perhaps masculine, if the speaker was the perpetrator and not the victim. Regardless of the victim's sex, those that were able to get someone to submit sexually appeared masculine, as men talked about asserting authority through sexual penetration. Therefore, because dominant and aggressive homosexuality was a way to assert masculinity, being "gay" in this context appeared more strongly associated with sexual submissiveness than sexual orientation.

Similarly, people who were rude or inconsiderate of other people's feelings often referred to themselves as the male sexual anatomy, "being a dick." Being a dick, perhaps the opposite of

homophobic or feminine terms, was frequently associated with being someone who said or did rude things without considering how these behaviors might affect other people. Male students in school touted these kinds of calloused feelings and behaviors proudly. In contrast, when something bad happened to someone, they used a metaphor such as "that sucks dick." So misfortune was described in sexually submissive terms. Similarly, students who were viewed as weak or submissive were referred to as a slang term for the female anatomy, "pussy." HL was similarly associated with misfortune and weakness.

Kimmel and Mahler (2003) suggest that high school shooters, trying to defend their masculinity, may have been provoked by HL. In the school where I did my study, the connection between violence and masculinity was apparent. One chilling example of this connection was when I observed two boys joked that crossing guards could be less like "fags" by carrying around fully automatic military weaponry. Furthermore, male students that were violent earned a certain level of respect from their peers. This respect for violence even appeared to cross popularity boundaries, meaning students who were violent or fighters earned the respect of more popular students. For example, in one conversation two students admired a less popular but violent peer, who they claimed was so vicious that in a fight "he would keep hitting you even if you were on the ground and then go get a rock and bash your head in." These boys appeared to both fear but also admire this boy for his violent nature, and there seemed to be no question of his masculinity.

As Pascoe found in her study, female students were allowed to be masculine but only in certain ways. Perhaps because one of the women's athletic teams was successful, athleticism was almost a status symbol in the school for females. Girls who were athletes usually appeared to be popular. However, their popularity may also have been because being more physically fit

made students more sexually desirable. As discussed previously, in my observations female athletes were almost exclusively talked about as sex symbols and their athleticism was minimized. Furthermore, while athleticism made some females popular, other masculine behaviors diminished females' popularity. Females who dressed like men, aside from the traditional sportswear, or did not wear makeup were socially ostracized. Females who engaged in other aggressive behavior such as fighting or playing violent video games were unpopular. Furthermore, although not nearly as likely as males, these females were more likely to be targeted with HL.

Although religious males avoided overt sexuality, they still policed masculinity. Pascoe has theorized that Christian, specifically LDS students, feel less need to defend their masculinity because gender roles are well established within their religion. She assumes that Christian students abstain from HL for this reason. However, I observed religious groups commonly use language to police some masculine roles. For example, a choir composed of mostly LDS students joked about tenors being "girls," and these students still admitted feeling pressure to appear masculine, dressing casual and being athletic. However, masculinity among religious students did not always support HL. In fact, these students may have understood refraining from HL as masculine. One student demonstrated this idea when he tried recall a quote. "Vulgarity's a weak mind's way of expressing itself." In this quote, the student was able to both refrain from HL and affirm his masculinity, or mental strength, because the quote conceptualized vulgarity as weak. Although, this conceptualization appeared to be uncommon among most students, this boy was using a masculine ideal to refrain from HL. Thus, this student's affirmation of masculinity to refrain from HL challenges Pascoe's reasoning about Christian students. Instead,

this quote suggests that rather than refraining from HL because they did not need to defend their masculinity, they refrained from using HL to defend their masculine identity.

As many researchers have suggested, masculinity appears to be closely tied with HL. The students that I interviewed also appeared to understand this connection since students they identified as targets of HL were also identified as being feminine in some way. Furthermore, HL and feminine terms sometimes appeared synonymous. Male students were targeted for both their appearance (long hair, skinny jeans, makeup, etc.) and their behavior (expressing emotions, doing kind deeds, refusing to engage in risky behavior). However, this exclusivity was not true for all students. By understanding a more prosocial masculinity, some students were able to successfully affirm their masculinity and still refrain from HL and other taboo language. Although, they still appeared to carry many of the same harmful masculine ideals, these students were able to use their masculinity for kindness. This broader understanding complicates the relationship between HL and masculinity.

The Language of Closeness

Close groups of friends used HL within their group more frequently than with members outside their group. HL and other sexual language were observed in many close groups but were most commonly observed between members of a popular sports team. Furthermore, the more tight-knit a group of friends, the more likely they were to make sexual and gendered jokes. In the interviews, students reported that this language was used most frequently among their "best of best friends" and discussed HL as a sort of litmus test to understand the closeness of their relationships. This test of closeness was even used with authority figures and adult mentors.

One possible explanation for why students used HL so frequently among their close friends was that HL was a way to police their group's behavior. As previously mentioned,

students strongly identified with their group of friends, and this relationship appeared to influence their behavior more than any other factor. Groups then that were homophobic, strongly identified as masculine, and used vulgar language were probably the most likely to use HL to police their group's behavior.

However, another possible explanation for frequent HL use is that students explored their sexuality with this language. In the interviews, students frequently described HL used among friends with soft terms such as teasing, goofing around, and playing. Referring to HL with such soft terms may have been a rationalization. However, the majority of the interviewees were open about incidents, even among their friends, in which they felt HL, along with other taboo language, was offensive. Therefore, we assumed that their soft descriptions of HL among close friends were accurate descriptions of their experiences.

With the majority of HL and sexual language occurring within groups, we suggest that students were more likely to use this language when they felt safe to do so. In my interviews, students claimed to feel safe using HL because they assumed everyone in their group was heterosexual and therefore believed that no one felt threatened. Given that students needed to feel safe to use this language and that adolescence is a time of sexual confusion, using HL among friends may have been a form of sexual play and exploration. In other words, given their homophobic and hypermasculine school culture, students felt safer expressing their culturally deviant sexuality and femininity in an ironic and playful manner.

In her book, Pascoe discusses how HL disappears in drama performances. She describes these performances as a place where male students can freely explore their gender roles and sexuality. She appears to believe that this exploration is unique to these performances. However, while this type of performance may be unique with respect to the amount of freedom it

allowed for exploration, close friendships also appeared to serve this purpose for students. This freedom was even true for popular sports teams that were labeled by their peers as using the most HL. Members of the team, who also may have been one of the closest groups in the school, reported that this language, although vulgar and homophobic, was not offensive among team members and instead was playful. This language, when used among the team, appeared instead to normalize homosexuality, as teammates joked about each other's' attractiveness and private parts. This culture of sexual vulnerability, even if it was ironic, potentially allowed for other types of vulnerability as well where I observed the players talk respectfully about other sensitive topics such as teenage pregnancy and grief that comes from losing a parent. We do not mean to argue that this atmosphere was not homophobic or that it did not also reify some harmful sexual and gender stereotypes. Rather, we suggest that exploring sexuality, even when ironic and homophobic, may still create some space for vulnerability among the "best of best friends."

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

During the course of this paper, we have examined multiple themes related to HL. Generally, students used HL as a tool to marginalize other students, symbolically placing them in a "less than" position. Their high school culture was saturated with strict social rules, especially concerning sexuality and masculinity, and therefore, students were frequently marginalized with HL. However, because sexist and HL/behavior were socially accepted and expected, students used this language/behavior as not only a way to marginalize other students, but also as a way to explore their emerging adult roles, such as how to "be a man" and how to incorporate sexuality into one's personal identity. Over time this language/behavior harms and marginalizes students, serving to perpetuate homophobic and sexist attitudes. In fact, this sexual culture is so all consuming that, after our analysis we are left wondering if these students have a viable alternative.

Students reported modeling admired adults that set immature examples. Students potentially did not have a safe place to discuss their sexual development and lived in a context where sexually deviant and feminine behavior was social suicide. Furthermore, among boys' rebellious language/behavior was expected so HL was not only a way to marginalize another person but also to reaffirm masculinity. Given this cultural context, students were socially enveloped into a homophobic environment that cultivated HL.

Context Provides Meaning

Providing an example of context shaping our language, the late author, David Foster Wallace (2009), prefaced a commencement speech with this joke:

There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, 'Morning, boys, how's the water?'

And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at

the other and goes, 'What the hell is water?' (pp. 3-4)

Similar to the fish, we are so inundated by our culture that we rarely recognize how much it

defines us.

Likewise, numerous students in my interviews were acclimated to the school's

hypersexualized language and tried to defend the idea that HL had lost its meaning. At best they

explained that HL was associated with general negativity. However, my observations did not

align with this explanation of HL. In the observations, HL was almost always associated with

one of our discussed themes and was rarely used without some implied meaning. Yet, this

discrepancy does not imply that those who were interviewed were being dishonest. Instead this

explanation may reveal a naiveté that most people experience when they are inundated in a

culture. Students were simply incapable of discerning the cultural forces and social expectations

that influenced their thoughts and actions.

We have similarly been influenced by our own culture and our immersion into the

research of HL. Although we do not fully agree with other researchers' interpretations of HL, we

are still largely using their language to describe the phenomenon of HL. While their research has

assisted us in better understanding this phenomenon, it has also primed us to pay attention in a

particular way. Therefore, we may have been blinded and have not understood HL in an

unbiased way.

Multiple contexts define HL. Perhaps, first and foremost, HL is homo-negative. This

negativity is inescapable as long as words used to describe homosexuality or LGBTQ individuals

are paired with unfavorable things and events. Beyond homo-negativity, there are other

meanings, such as masculinity and rebelliousness, paired with HL that are inherent in our

culture—both more broadly, generally defined by the national media we consume, and more locally, defined by peers. Last, there is an immediate context for HL, defined by the tone and circumstances in which a specific incident of HL occurs.

While students may not have understood all the cultural factors that influenced them, they seemed adept at interpreting the immediate context. When asked about the meaning of HL, the interviewed students commonly responded that their interpretation would depend on the context. We have tried to understand and explain the cultural context of this school's environment, and hopefully this endeavor offers novel insights that apply to other settings. However, these participants were not referring to the general context of the school but instead to the immediate context. Hopefully, even in our short explanations of particular situations, the reader would notice the richness of each situation and understand how dramatically the immediate context defines language. Because of the contextual richness of language, participants, perhaps correctly, were hesitant to offer a broad explanation for the meaning of HL. Immediate context matters. Therefore, while our broad description of HL hopefully adds novel insights, it also somewhat dilutes each student's individual interaction with HL. For students, the immediate context was the most critical, because this context was personal and helped the individual understand the gravity of their everyday interactions.

An Exploration of Themes and Extant Literature

While the immediate context was the most important to students, we are most interested in the cultural context. Cultural context matters in the same way the water matters to the fish in Wallace's (2009) commencement speech. This context helps us to interpret the meaning of language, including HL, even though we are not fully aware of all its potential meanings. For example, we submit that HL would not have been as potent for students if they had not lived in a

sexually-saturated culture. In this paper, we have observed and discussed several of these cultural themes that both support and add to the extant research on HL.

As suggested by Poteat et al. (2012) and Russell et al. (2012), our study found that HL is a form of marginalization and that students reported that it was harmful when used this way. Our study similarly illustrated how students used HL to marginalize other students, often targeting those who were already in marginalized groups. Perhaps most interesting to us was how students often used HL when positioning other students into a behaviorally servile role, invoking a symbolic master and slave relationship. Although, student interviewees didn't explicitly talk about behavioral servitude, they did appear to understand that HL threatened civil rights. They assumed that individuals who did not always have civil rights would be less likely to use HL. Furthermore, they reported being offended by this use of HL. They challenged their peers when they used HL in this manner.

Sexual prejudice also appeared to influence students' use of HL. Similar to other studies we found that adolescent culture is saturated with sexuality and that students are evaluated on the basis of their sexual attractiveness (Duncan, 2013; Francis, Skelton, & Read, 2009; Hill & Kearl, 2011; Williams, 2013). This sexual atmosphere was observed in student-to-student interactions and student-teacher interactions. Based on findings from previous literature and from our own study, we theorized that because sexual language is so common and students are still developing their sexuality, students have difficulty incorporating their sexuality into their identity. By overemphasizing this part of their identity, they have difficulty keeping other aspects of their identity in proper perspective. Based on student interviews and dialogue, we found that many students considered homosexuality aberrant and disgusting. Furthermore, even students that

were not explicitly homophobic still expressed homophobic attitudes through ironic sexual play. Considering this sexual saturation and prejudice, HL is particularly threatening for students.

Similar to previous researchers' findings, we also found that HL was used to police masculinity and was often used synonymously with terms such as *girl* (Pascoe, 2007; Phoenix et al., 2003). We also found that students specifically used this language to pressure other males into compulsive sexual behavior. Furthermore, in our study, male students appeared to feel more threatened by sexual submissiveness than sexual orientation, since many males would jokingly refer to themselves as perpetrating homosexual acts. However, unlike Pasco (2007) and Phoenix et al. (2003), we saw examples in which masculine ideals of particular groups, specifically religious groups, were used to avoid HL.

Furthermore, we explored several novel themes regarding how students used HL to sound more adult, to be more rebellious, and to build intimacy. Interestingly, students appeared to us HL both as a way to model adults that they admired and to challenge adult power. After noticing this language being used by adults they respected, they then emulated this language. However, HL also allowed them to challenge school rules and oppose social standards created by adults. Furthermore, because this language was taboo and because of government regulations precluding teachers from discussing sex in school, adults did not know how to talk about sexuality with students. Therefore, students used shocking sexual language to catch teachers off guard, creating discomfort and shifting the power dynamic.

Students also used rebellious and taboo language to claim power over other students, especially students already designated to marginalized groups. Taboo language offered a tool for students with more social capital to push social limits, further marginalizing individuals and groups. When taunted with cruel and intolerant language, marginalized students or groups

typically acquiesced. Not wanting to lose precious social status, they felt pressured to just laugh. Unless you were at the very bottom of the social strata, students had the power to marginalize others they considered beneath them. However, all students that used HL employed this language's power to shock and demand attention.

Last, because this school cultivated a homophobic and sexist culture, HL was socially accepted and offered as a way to build group uniformity and closeness. Students used HL as part of their group's common language that strengthened group uniformity. This uniformity created the parameters in which students were pressured to adhere to within-group norms. Ironically, HL was also used to reign members back in if they wandered outside the group's designated parameters. However, HL also built an intimacy between group members because it allowed students to talk about the school's sexual culture and to express their own sexuality, even if only homophobically and ironically. Although presumably not a healthy way to explore sexuality, this may have been the only socially accepted form of sexual expression.

The relationship between religiosity and HL remains a complicated one. Many of these students still openly viewed homosexuality as sinful and taboo and appeared to avoid LGBTQ students. However, religious students also appeared to avoid HL, mostly likely because they considered HL to be vulgar and unkind. Furthermore, for some religious students, their religious teachings (such as showing kindness to others) encouraged them to befriend and defend LGBTQ students. More research needs to be done to examine the differences among religious students.

Implications

Based on our findings, adolescents used HL to marginalize other students. Students quickly recognized and attacked differences. Research demonstrates that empathy and

perspective taking are negatively correlated with HL (Poteat, DiGiovanni, & Scheer, 2013). Furthermore, researchers have observed that mixed group discussions about prejudice have increased individuals' capacity to empathize with others (Aboud, 1989; Aboud & Doyle, 1996).

In addition to marginalizing others, students may also use HL as a way to explore and understand their sexuality. As multiple interviewed students mentioned, adolescence is a period of sexual development and therefore sexual confusion. Therefore, adolescents may benefit from adult role models who offer examples of more mature ways to understand sexuality. This type of adult-to-adolescent communication is predictive of more mature sexual behavior and therefore may also encourage a more mature way to talk about sexuality (Guzmán et al., 2003). Future research needs to examine how sexual education affects HL and other sexist language.

Sadly, many adults struggle to discuss and talk about sexuality even among other adults. One reason for this difficulty is that sexuality is a taboo topic in general. However, while many adults seem to refrain from sexual language because it is forbidden, teenagers are inundated with immature and often harmful sexual language/behavior. One reason for this inundation may be their own developing sexuality. However, another reason may be that by making this topic taboo and forbidden, we also make sexuality more titillating and controversial. Conversely, students then are more likely to become obsessed with sexuality, because it is exciting and they can use this topic to take power from adults by making them uncomfortable. Therefore, while students are learning to start discussing sexuality more maturely, adults need to practice learning to talk about sexuality so that this topic is less taboo.

Male students in particular appeared to use HL as way to explore and police masculine behavior, and as a way to increase male bonding. Often this meant that male students policed

each other into emotional inexpression, compulsive sexual behavior, and other dangerous behavior. Therefore, students may benefit from male role models that can emulate a different type of masculinity, one that demonstrates responsible emotional vulnerability, respects women's sexual autonomy, and emulates responsible and thoughtful decision making.

Perhaps overarching many of these themes are adolescents' desires to be tutored into adulthood. However, given adolescents' emerging adulthood, this only appears to work when they feel that they are being respected as adults. Overall, during my observations I saw copious amounts of sarcasm from adults. Adult sarcasm appeared to have some benefits and allowed students to sometimes be vulnerable when they would not have otherwise been. However, this sarcastic attitude appeared to create defensiveness and increase student sarcasm. Perhaps, teachers may benefit from more training on how to sincerely and authentically communicate with students.

Even though I observed multiple negative examples, I also observed multiple examples of positive role models. In my observations adults had a powerful impact on students' lives when students respected them. While apparent with teachers, this was perhaps most apparent with coaches. One coach I observed appeared to help shape the entire culture of the team. As all humans, this coach had human foibles, but he also had strengths and was able to create a culture where team members relied on and supported each other, especially on the field. Perhaps if this coach had devoted the same energy and passion to teaching his players how to respectfully talk about sexuality, how to be kind to others (especially marginalized populations) and modeled how to have emotional integrity, he could have changed the culture of the team. Furthermore, because these team members were among the most popular students in school, perhaps this could have changed the entire culture of the school.

Limitations

      Overall, we were the sole interpreters of this data. Although our themes were validated by an external auditor, we were not able to perform member checks to cross validate our interpretations of the data. Furthermore, as discussed previously, because of the nature of this study we were only able to do non-participant observations, and aside from interviews completed before the observations, we were not able to get the students' and staff's perspective on our observations.

      Although we tried to be balanced and report on both the positive and negative aspects of the observed culture, at the outset we were looking for homo-negative language and not homo-positive language. Therefore, because we were trying to understand a problem, our report may have a negative bias. Admittedly, I, as the observer, understand that plenty of students and teachers enjoyed themselves at school and interacted in positive ways. Often, for the students and teachers that just wanted to continue on as usual, having an observer in the corner copiously taking notes was the most negative part of their day. Overall, we have left this analysis impressed by the resiliency and character demonstrated by both the students and teachers.

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APPENDIX A

GUIDING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

What do you enjoy doing in your free time?

INTRODUCTION: I want to talk with you today about some language you may hear in school, such as "gay."

What are the different words someone uses to call someone gay?

Can you recall a time that you heard someone use the words (insert words offered me by the interviewee)?

Tell me about this experience?

I want you to think of a few reasons why teenagers say words (insert words offered by interviewee). What are some reasons teenagers use these words?

Can you think of other reasons?

Where do you usually hear (insert words offered by interviewee)?

How do teenagers respond when these words are used to personally describe them?

How commonly are these words used?

Where do you typically hear these words?

How do teenagers feel when these words are directed at them?

When using these words, what reasons are there for teenagers singling out one specific kid? Give me an example of when someone used these words with a specific kid.

Do you think these words are directed more at boys or girls?   Why?

APPENDIX B

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

How old are you?
What is your race?
       White
       White (Non-Hispanic)
       American Indian or Alaska Native
       Asian
       Black or African American
       Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
       Hispanic
What math class are you currently enrolled in?
What if any extracurricular activities are you currently involved in?
How long have you attended (insert school district) Schools?

APPENDIX C

PARENTAL PERMISSION FOR A MINOR

Introduction

My name is Benjamin Bailey. I am a graduate student from Brigham Young University working with Melissa Heath Associate Professor in the School Psychology program. I am conducting a research study about homophobic language. Homophobic language being defined as any derogatory comment made in reference to sexual orientation, although the intent may or may not be sexual discrimination. I am inviting your child to take part in the research because I would like to understand homophobic language from a teenager's perspective.

Procedures

I would like to conduct an interview with your child that would last for 20 – 45 minutes. The interviews will be conducted in a location acceptable to both parents and participating youth. I will interview and audio record your child to understand his perspective of homophobic language. During the interview your child will be asked to recall a time they witnessed homophobic language and describe that experience. They will be asked such questions as: *I want you to think of a few reasons why teenagers say words like gay? What are some reasons teenagers use these words?* and *When using these words, what reasons are there for teenagers singling out one specific kid? Give me an example of when someone used these words with a specific kid.* If you would like additional information about the questionnaire, please contact me. At the conclusion of the interview your child will be asked to fill out a short demographic survey asking for his age, race, amount of time attending school and extra-curricular activities. The interviews will be written out and then studied for common themes and interesting perspectives. All personal information will be removed from the transcripts.

Risks

There is a risk of loss of privacy, which the researcher will reduce by not using any real names or other identifiers in the written report. The researcher will also keep all data in a locked file cabinet in a secure location. Only the researcher will have access to the data. At the end of the study, data will be destroyed

There may be some uneasiness caused by being asked some of the questions. Your child may answer only those questions that your child wants to, or your child may stop the entire process at any time without affecting his standing in school or grades in class. At any point, students have the right to discontinue the interview. In the event youth or parents have concerns during or following the interview, they may contact a licensed psychologist (Melissa Heath – 801-491-8386) who will answer questions and offer direction as needed.

Confidentiality

The interview recordings, surveys and transcripts will be kept in a secure location that is password protected. Only the researcher and his auditor will have access to the data. All identifying information will be removed from the transcript. At the conclusion of the study all the information will be destroyed.

Benefits

Research will offer a more in depth understanding of homo-negative language. Understanding homophobic language will allow more targeted interventions for bullying and homophobic epithets.

Compensation
There will be no compensation for participation in this project.
Questions about the Research
Please direct any further questions about the study to Benjamin Bailey at (435) 820 0635 and/or thebenbailey@gmail.com
You may also contact Melissa Heath at 801-422-1235 and/or melissa_allen@byu.edu
Questions about your child's rights as a study participant or to submit comment or complaints about the study should be directed to the IRB Administrator, Brigham Young University, A-285 ASB, Provo, UT 84602. Call (801) 422-1461 or send emails to irb@byu.edu
You have been given a copy of this consent form to keep.
Participation
Participation in this research study is voluntary. You are free to decline to have your child participate in this research study. You may withdraw you child's participation at any point without affecting your child's treatment, or benefits, etc.
Childs Name: _____
Parent's Name: _____
Signature: _____ Date:_____

APPENDIX D

YOUTH ASSENT (15-17 YEARS OLD)

<u>What is this study about?</u>
My name is Benjamin Bailey. I am from Brigham Young University researching with Melissa
Heath associate professor in the school psychology program. I would like to invite you to take
part in a research study. Your parent(s) know we are talking with you about the study. This
form will tell you about the study to help you decide whether or not you want to be in it.
In this study, we want to discuss your thoughts about homophobic language. Homophobic
language is language that uses words like gay or fag but is also any derogatory comment made in
reference to sexual orientation, although the intent may or may not be sexual discrimination.
<u>What am I being asked to do?</u>
If you decide to be in the study, we will ask you to recall a time you heard homophobic language
and describe that experience. I will also ask you about some more of your thoughts about
homophobic language. I will audio record these interviews so that I can write them out and
compare them to other's answers. At the conclusion of the interview you will be asked to fill out
a short survey asking for your age, race, amount of time attending school, and extracurricular
activities. This whole process will take 30 – 45 minutes of your time.
<u>What are the benefits to me for taking part in the study?</u>
By participating in this study you can help us understand homophobic language better and also
ways to prevent it from happening.
<u>Can anything bad happen if I am in this study?</u>
We think there are a few risks to you by being in the study, but some kids might become worried
or sad because of some of the questions we ask. You don't have to answer any of the questions
you don't want to answer. If you become upset, let us know and we will provide some
information about counseling services to help you with those feelings.
<u>Who will know that I am in the study?</u>
We won't tell anybody that you are in this study and everything you tell us and do will be
private. Your parent may know that you took part in the study, but we won't tell them anything
you said or did, either. When we tell other people or write articles about what we learned in the
study, we won't include your name or that of anyone else who took part in the study.
<u>Do I have to be in the study?</u>
No, you don't. The choice is up to you. No one will get angry or upset if you don't want to do
this. You can change your mind anytime if you decide you don't want to be in the study
anymore.
<u>What if I have questions?</u>
If you have questions at any time, you can ask us and you can talk to your parents about the
study. We will give you a copy of this form to keep. If you want to ask us questions about the
study, contact Melissa Heath at 801-422-1235 and/or melissa_allen@byu.edu
You will receive no form of compensation for being in this research study. Before you say yes
to be in this study what questions do you have about the study?
If you want to be in this study, please sign and print your name.
_____ Check this line if you offer permission to be voice recorded.

Name (Printed):_____
Signature: 	_____ Date:_____