Naming the "outsider within": homophobic pejoratives and the verbal abuse of lesbian, gay and bisexual high-school pupils

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Few studies have looked explicitly at the use of homophobic pejoratives among young high-schoolers and—not always an easy group to access, nor a comfortable subject to discuss. In this study, 377 14 and 15 year olds listed the pejoratives they heard at school and identified the ones they considered most taboo. As some of the most vitriolic items reported, homophobic pejoratives accounted for 10 per cent of the 6000 items generated. Significantly, however, homophobic verbal abuse was rated much less seriously than either racist abuse or other taboo slang. Boys reported more homophobic pejoratives than girls, but rated them more seriously. As further evidence of the increasingly well-documented daily assault on the psychological health of young homosexual people, this study confirms the prevalence of homophobic verbal abuse in high schools, its particularly aggressive nature, and the relative disregard with which it is used. As a contribution from Language and Communication Research, directions are offered for both sex(uality) education and language education.

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Introduction

It is a disturbing fact that homophobic verbal abuse is rife in many parts of the world, and runs largely unchecked in high schools (Epstein, 1994; Unks, 1995; Kitzinger, 1996; Fontaine, 1997). In the U.K., this has recently been borne out again by a series of surveys commissioned by Stonewall[1] which report that as many as 93 per cent of young gay, lesbian and bisexual people who are "out" at school suffer verbal abuse, but that as few as 6 per cent of high schools have any policy to deal specifically with homophobic bullying (Mason and Palmer, 1996; Douglas *et al.*, 1997; Stonewall, 1999). Not surprisingly, writers concerned with young lesbian, gay and bisexual high-schoolers describe them as an "invisible" minority and one of the most significant "at risk" groups of adolescents (Savin-Williams, 1990; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; O'Connor, 1995; Harris, 1997). Watney (1993 in Redman 1994:133) even goes as far as describing their institutional neglect as "nothing less than State-sanctioned child abuse".

The effects of homophobic bullying and verbal abuse
Concerned with the long-term, detrimental effects of homophobic bullying on mental health and social development, Rivers (1996 in Douglas *et al.*, 1997) has found that name-calling sits at the top of the list of a range of abusive practices reported by lesbians and gay men. Nayak and Kelly (1996) too have found this to be the most common form of homophobic

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bullying in schools. Certainly, not all homophobic name-calling is intentionally directed at young gay and lesbian pupils; for example, researchers have consistently found that terms such as "gay" and "poof" are often used to refer to anything deemed unmasculine, non-normative or "uncool" (Armstrong, 1997; Cameron, 1997; Duncan, 1999). Regardless of the object or intention, however, the perpetual degradation of these terms as hate-words pollutes the social-psychological environment in which young bisexual, gay and lesbian people must live.

Whether young people are out, coming out, or slowly and privately awakening to their homosexuality, the stigmatizing effects of homophobia on self-esteem are inescapable. Quite simply, "homophobic content becomes internalized and often causes protracted dysphoria and feelings of self-contempt—the juxtaposition of homosexual desire and acculturated self-criticism is inimical to healthy psychological development" (Maylon, 1981 in Savin-Williams, 1990: 177). The threat is therefore one of profound social and psychological alienation, rendering the "invisibility" two-fold as these young people cease also to exist even within, and for, themselves.

Adolescent pejorative slang and the naming of other
Abusive naming practices are indexical of social attitudes and mark delineations, whether latent or explicit, of ingroup and outgroup. Naming others is an indispensable contrastive resource for proclaiming identity—establishing who one is and who one is not (Valentine, 1998). Nowhere is this more evident than in adolescence, when the value of peer status is at a premium, and as young people rework the foundations of their unique, life-long project of identity construction. Like adults, language is the primary tool they use to constitute not only Self but also social categories and relations (cf., Brown *et al*., 1994; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1995). What is more, with its own conservative micro-politics (Johnson and Epstein 1994: 224) the school environment merely exacerbates this contrastive impulse. In his recent ethnography, Duncan (1999) sets the scene: "In the norm-bound social confines of the school and classroom, the comparative and competitive ethic propagates an informal peer rivalry: the rush begins to stake a claim on being normal." Of course, one of the ways this is achieved is through the continual, vocal branding of Other.

The use of taboo slang can simultaneously mark one out as different or rebellious by breaking social norms or showing disrespect for authority, and can be used to reinforce group membership through verbal displays of shared knowledge and interests. According to de Klerk (1997), it is this very combination of distinguishing and bonding functions that makes slang and swear words an attractive linguistic resource for teenagers especially. Sutton (1995) and Garrett *et al*. (in prep.) also attest to the unusually high prevalence of pejorative slang among teenagers. The naming of Other is an ineluctable part of social identity development. Unfortunately, however, as Valentine (1998: 2·1) notes, "names are also ascribed, and can be forced on recipients against their will…unpleasant nicknames, focusing on deviations from the normal and "right", can stick to you, and can hurt".

In spite of being such a common, everyday occurrence, there are surprisingly few instances in the literature where writers deal as explicitly with abusive naming practices as, say, Lees (1983), Risch (1987) or Sutton (1995). What writing exists has also tended to focus on sexist or racist pejorative labelling. With the exception of Dynes (1990), Armstrong (1997), and Valentine (1998), one is hard-pushed to find writers dealing exclusively with homophobic pejoratives and certainly not in early adolescence. In fact, while writers such as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1995) have explored in great detail the (less "colourful") social labelling

practices of adolescents, one of the only relevant adolescent studies in the area of taboo slang is de Klerk (1997). Even though she uses a relatively small sample and considers teenage expletives rather than nominal or adjectival pejoratives (i.e. name-calling), de Klerk's study offers a useful backdrop for the current study.

The aims of the current study

As part of a much larger investigation into metacommunication and communication awareness in early adolescence, the current study sought to establish the prevalence of homophobic verbal abuse reported by young people themselves, and the quality they attached to this kind of abusive language. As such, the study was not about the world constructed by young gay and lesbian people themselves; instead it explored just one example of the way in which their life-world is constructed for them—or, more correctly, destructively constructed as a bad place to be. In a sense, then, the aim was to put a figure, however crude, on this particular aspect of the experience of young gay, lesbian and bisexual people.

Method

Sample

A total of 377 Year 9 pupils (Age=14–15) were drawn from a convenience sample of five co-educational high schools in either of two major Welsh and English cities.[2] There were almost equal numbers of boys (n=191, 51%) and girls (n=186, 49%). In terms of ethnic heritage, about a third (n=118, 31%) of the participants described themselves as coming from ethnic minority backgrounds (that is, they preferred to describe themselves in terms such as Black, Muslim, Asian or Somalian, rather than English/Welsh, White, or Christian).

Procedure

At the end of a much larger questionnaire considering various aspects of metacommunication and communication awareness, and in a question attracting a 100 per cent response rate, participants were simply asked the following: "What words do people at school use for slagging someone off? Write down as many words as you can".[3]

The participants were encouraged not to be shy and were reminded that their answers were confidential and anonymous. They were told that they could write down anything and everything they could think of but, to encourage individual responses, that they were not allowed to say the words out loud, suggesting that, "Although not everyone uses these words, or necessarily likes them, there are still things we hear about us all the time". Any teachers present while the questionnaire was administered respected the strict confidentiality of this exercise.

[2]Four of the schools were in the same Welsh city, the fifth in a large English city. As percentages of the total sample used, the schools constituted 13, 21, 26, 18 and 19 per cent, respectively.

[3]According to Chambers 21st Century Dictionary (Robinson and Davidson, 1996: 1315), *to slag someone off* means "to criticize or deride someone harshly or to speak disparagingly about them" and derives from *slag* as a "layer of waste material from coal mining or the smelting process". It was very important that this question was phrased in a way that was meaningful to these participants.

Having written down as many items as they wanted, participants were then given a second instruction: "Now put a tick next to the ones you think are the worst ones". ("Worst" was characterized for them as being "heavy-duty", "most offensive" or "really bad".) In this way, they were required not only to report as many pejoratives as they knew (not necessarily used), but also to express an attitude towards them by rating those which they considered to be especially pejorative or taboo—that is, carrying the sense of their being either antisocial or immoral, or both.

Analysis

All the items reported were transcribed and then assigned to semantic categories on the basis of their primary lexical content. (For studies using similar strategies with adolescent word lists, see Sutton, 1995; de Klerk, 1997; Garrett *et al.*, in prep.). Together with a small group of colleagues and with reference to several dictionaries of contemporary slang (e.g. Partridge, 1991; Thorne, 1996), the author identified the eight basic categories into which most of the items appeared to fall, with a ninth category for those items falling into none of the first eight:

(1) Homophobic (e.g. *queer, poof, ginger, lesbian*);[4]
(2) Racist (e.g. *nigger, Paki, Somalian*);
(3) Top-5 (i.e. *cunt, wanker, motherfucker, bastard*, and all *fuck* derivatives);[5]
(4) Sexist (e.g. *slag, slut, whore, cow, bitch, slapper*);
(5) Phallocentric (e.g. *dickhead, prick, sheepshagger*);
(6) Scatalogical (e.g. *shit, arse-wipe, turd, scatty*);
(7) Others—Social-Personality (e.g. *loner, sad, pompous, stupid*);
(8) Others—Physicality (e.g. *fat, ugly, smelly*);
(9) Uncategorized (e.g. *jackass, dustbinman/woman, paedophile*, and other unknown, local items not found in the dictionaries).

Each pejorative item was then assigned to one of these nine categories, as well as counting separately the number of items marked as "worst" in each category. All imperative or expletive items (e.g. *fuck off* and *fuck!*) which were neither nominal nor adjectival (e.g. *fucker* and *you're fucked up*) were omitted.

A clear system of guidelines was established for consistently assigning items to categories. Each item was counted only once whether it was a single-word item (*shit*) or a compound item (*shitface* or *stupid shit*). Categories were ranked in order of research priority so that items were assigned first on the basis of their homophobic or racist content (e.g. *queer bastard* assigned to the category "Homophobic" even though it contained a Top-5 reference; similarly, *Black bastard* assigned to "Racist" and not "Top-5"). All other Top-5 items (i.e. *bastard, stupid bastard, ugly bastard*, etc.) then took precedence over Sexist items which were assigned before Scatological items, Phallocentric items, and so on.

Following the same guidelines, an SPSS-generated random sample of 15 per cent of participants' responses was also categorized by a second independent rater. Strong inter-rater

[4]A definition for what constitutes "homophobic" is supplied by Armstrong (1997: 328): "any adaptation and extension of terms referring to homosexuals that can be interpreted as derogatory in the sense that the quality, action, attribute, or individual to which the term refers is being devalued".

[5]The Top-5 category was created, predicting that these commonly regarded taboo items would be reported frequently and rated much more highly than other items; as such, it was felt, they warranted a category of their own against which others might be compared later.

reliability (Scott's pi of 97·75%—see Krippendorf, 1980) further confirmed the consistency of the categorization protocol.

Results

Overall, a total of nearly 6000 ($n=5956$) individual pejorative items were reported by participants, about a third of which ($n=2111$, 31%) were rated as "worst". Figure 1 shows how these items were distributed according to the nine categories.

In spite of having such a wealth of information available for analysis and discussion, the focus here is kept on the occurrence of homophobic items only, albeit with limited reference to racist items and the overall patterns of reporting according to school, sex and ethnic heritage. Table 1 presents a summary of the results reported here, showing means, standard deviations, percentage counts and significant between-group differences for the average number of items reported and rated "worst". (For the straightforward purposes of the current analysis, a series of ANOVAs and t-tests was used.) A detailed breakdown of the range of homophobic pejoratives reported is given in Table 2.

Homophobic items accounted for 10 per cent of all the items reported ($n=590$), which was very much smaller than the number of sexist items offered (28%), but significantly more than racist items (7%) ($t_{(376)}=3·796$, $p<0·001$). This proportion of all the items reported is strikingly large, especially given that looser analytic categories like Scatalogical, Others—Social—Personality, and Others—Physicality accommodated a wide range of common, socially generic abusive labels.[6] The homophobic items, by contrast, exclusively indexed a single social group. Most notably, these items also appeared to be especially vitriolic, with nearly 10 per cent of them occurring as compounds with Top-5 words such as *fucker, cunt,* and *twat.* These "transferred derogatory labels" (Wood, 1984) have the reciprocal effect of
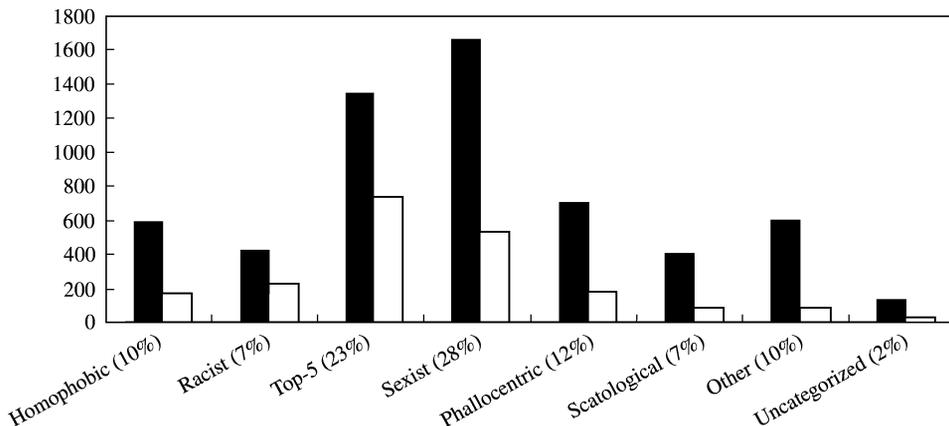

Figure 1. Number of items reported (■) and number rated "worst" (□) per category. Figures in brackets indicate percentage of total items reported ($n=5956$).

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[6]The mean number of homophobic items reported was also confirmed as significantly ($p<0·001$) higher than the mean items reported in each of these three categories.

Table 1 *Summary of mean results together with 2-tail significance of the differences between groups (where appropriate)*

	Mean reported items (S.D.)		Mean number items rated "worst" (as per cent of items reported by group)		Between-group differences: number items reported/*number items rated as 'worst'*
Total Items	15·79	(8·19)	5·59	(35)	
School					
School A	15·84	(6·84)	4·94	(31)	
School B	17·56	(6·89)	6·87	(39)	No significant difference
School C	17·45	(7·19)	6·39	(37)	*No significant difference*
School D	16·04	(10·29)	5·57	(35)	
School E	11·35	(7·93)	3·61	(32)	
Sex					
Girls	14·47	(6·14)	5·47	(38)	$t_{(324)}=3\cdot154, p=0\cdot002$
Boys	17·09	(9·62)	5·72	(34)	*No significant difference*
Ethnic heritage					
Ethnic majority	16·15	(7·98)	5·58	(35)	No significant difference
Ethnic minority	15·02	(8·61)	5·64	(38)	*No significant difference*
Homophobic items	1·57	(1·86)	0·44	(28)	
School					
School A	1·94	(2·08)	0·57	(29)	
School B	1·55	(1·83)	0·46	(30)	No significant difference
School C	1·72	(1·87)	0·46	(28)	*No significant difference*
School D	1·41	(1·91)	0·39	(27)	
School E	1·25	(1·65)	0·32	(26)	
Sex					
Girls	0·95	(1·38)	0·23	(24)	$t_{(332)}=6\cdot763, p<0\cdot001$
Boys	2·17	(2·07)	0·63	(29)	$t_{(309)}=4\cdot096, p<0\cdot001$
Ethnic heritage					
Ethnic majority	1·74	(1·93)	0·45	(26)	$t_{(261)}=2\cdot844, p=0\cdot005$
Ethnic minority	1·19	(1·65)	0·40	(34)	$t_{(375)}=0\cdot491, p>0\cdot1$
Racist Items	1·11	(1·75)	0·61	(55)	
Ethnic heritage					
Ethnic majority	0·92	(1·35)	0·49	(54)	$t_{(154)}=2\cdot707, p<0\cdot01$
Ethnic minority	1·54	(2·34)	0·87	(57)	$t_{(159)}=2\cdot432, p<0\cdot05$
Sex					
Girls	0·87	(1·41)	0·49	(57)	$t_{(342)}=2\cdot668, p<0\cdot01$
Boys	1·35	(2·00)	0·73	(54)	$t_{(355)}=1\cdot906, p=0\cdot057$

intensifying the homophobic insult. Although the common alliterative form *Black bastard* was predominant within racist/Top-5 compounds, racist items were at least 60 per cent less likely to appear as compounds in the same way as homophobic items.

In spite of containing so many Top-5 taboo words, only 28 per cent of the homophobic items were rated as "worst". This compares noticeably with racist items where 55 per cent were rated as "worst".

A paired-sample comparison of the mean difference between the percentage of homophobic items ($\mu=28$) and the percentage of racist items ($\mu=55$) rated "worst", confirmed a highly significant difference between participants attitudes towards homophobic

Table 2 *Breakdown of total Homophobic items reported* (n=589).

Items	Comments	Number
Gay	Also *gaylord, gay-boy*, etc.	131
Queer	*Queer, gay, bender* etc. compounds with Top-5 and other category items (n=54) such as *twat* (7), *bastard* (19), *cunt* (7), *fucker/fucking* (6), as well as various items such as *queerish motherfucker, queer prostitute, your dad is a bender, your dad is queer, your dad sucks dick, you're so ugly you pay gay men to have sex with you.*	98
Bent/bender		44
Cocksucker	Also *knobsucker, you suck dick* (from boys)	37
Homo/sexual		34
Poof/poofter		34
Ginger		24
Rent boy/hustler		14
Battyman/boy	(one school only)	11
Faggot		7
Pansy		4
All others	e.g. *Shit-stabber, knob-jockey, bum-bandit, bum-basher, bum boy, arse-bandit, bugger, turd-burglar, shirt-lifter, basher, knobjock*	57
Lesbian		55
Lez/lezzo		16
Fanny-basher	Includes *fanny-licker* (from girls)	18
Dyke		5

and racist pejoratives ($t_{(376)}=7\cdot385$, $p<0\cdot001$). Where racist items were rated on a par with Top-5 items as highly taboo (also $\mu=55$), homophobic items were, proportionally speaking, not regarded as being nearly as serious.

The only significant between-group difference found in the overall reporting of pejoratives was that boys reported significantly more items than girls ($t_{(324)}=3\cdot154$, $p=0\cdot002$), although there was no overall difference in the extent to which boys and girls rated items as "worst". Similarly, one-way ANOVAs revealed no significant overall differences between the reporting or rating of items in terms of school. Nor were there ethnic heritage differences.

As far as homophobic items were concerned, there were again no significant overall differences in the reporting or rating of items by the different schools or in terms of ethnic heritage. Once again, however, boys reported significantly more items than girls ($t_{(332)}=6\cdot763$, $p<0\cdot001$), with girls reporting just under a third ($n=176$) of the total of homophobic items. In this instance, boys also rated homophobic items as significantly more taboo than girls ($t_{(309)}=4\cdot096$, $p<0\cdot001$). Ethnic majority participants reported significantly more homophobic items than their ethnic minority peers ($t_{(261)}=2\cdot844$, $p<0\cdot005$).

Finally, for further comparative purposes, it was found that significantly more racist items were reported *and* rated as "worst" by ethnic minority than ethnic majority participants ($t_{(154)}=2\cdot707$, $p<0\cdot01$; $t_{(159)}=2\cdot432$, $p<0\cdot05$). Overall, boys reported significantly more racist items than girls ($t_{(342)}=2\cdot668$, $p<0\cdot01$) and, although not statistically significant, girls tended to rate racist items more highly (i.e. as taboo) ($t_{(355)}=1\cdot906$, $p=0\cdot057$).

Discussion

> . . . degrading homosexuality in public contexts serves to maintain the invisibility of homosexuals. . . . [and] usage of this kind of language, therefore, by disregarding the hurt that it may cause to some, indicates how unimportant the feelings of these people are (Armstrong, 1997: 362).

In terms of overall reporting, the results of the current study were consistent across the five schools which would suggest that the responses of these young people were reasonably representative of many young people this age in the U.K. Furthermore, since the reporting of homophobic pejoratives also held across schools, it is likely that this too was fairly representative. As such, homophobic references are strikingly represented in young people's reports of abusive naming practices and yet clearly not regarded as especially offensive. Even though these participants' reporting of pejoratives did not mean that they necessarily used them themselves, it does confirm that such words are in use. Furthermore, without making claims for the regularity or rate of occurrence, it is not unreasonable to expect that the incidence of their reporting reflects the incidence of their use. With apparently little concern for their antisocial ramifications, homophobic pejoratives, many of them vitriolic, constitute one of the most predominant categories of abusive language among young adolescents.

Of the large and varied repertoire of homophobic pejoratives reported, and as other writers (see introduction) have found, the most common of these was "*gay*" (along with "*gaylord*" and "*gayboy*"). In spite of its being one of the playground weapons of preference, this is ironically the very word that many young homosexual people will more than likely be choosing to use to describe themselves. Together with various derivatives and qualifiers, the other most commonly reported homophobic pejoratives were "*queer*", "*bent*", "*cocksucker*",

"*poof*" and "*homosexual*"—once again, even the most supposedly "neutral" of terms, "*homosexual*", is considered a suitable resource for slagging someone off. Evidently, to rephrase Cameron (1995 in Romaine, 1999: 309), in the mouths of homophobes, language can always be homophobic.

The homophobic pejoratives listed were also some of the most vitriolic. Male homophobic items included the expected, hostile collection of reductive, stereotypic sexualizations (e.g. "*shit-stabber*", "*shirt-lifter*" and "*bum-boy*"). In fact, the vast majority of all the homophobic items reported referred to male homosexuality; comparatively few (only 14%) specifically female homophobic pejoratives were reported, with "*lesbian*" being the most common of these. Interestingly, Sutton (1995) too reports no female homophobic items in her study of "ugly names" for women. This absence is possibly in keeping with the relative paucity of such terms more generally, and very likely related to broader issues of gendered inequality such as the even greater marginalization (or "silencing") of lesbians (Dynes, 1990; Hughes, 1998).

More consistently than any other category of abusive names in the study, homophobic items also appeared in conjunction with the five most taboo items ("*cunt*", "*wanker*", "*motherfucker*", "*bastard*" and "*fuck/ing*"). On their own, these highly taboo items were, not surprisingly, rated by participants as some of the "worst" words to be used at school (together with racist terms—discussed shortly). However, consistent with their overall low rating, homophobic pejoratives were still regarded as relatively inoffensive—in spite of being qualified with these highly taboo items.

Verbal derogation and outgroup evaluation

Whatever their reported attitude to homophobic words themselves, it cannot be assumed that this is necessarily indicative of young people's attitude towards the social group which these words apparently describe. It should be remembered that a word like "*gay*" can often be used loosely to describe anything undesirable such as a lack of interest in sport, academic success or a lack of aggression (Redman, 1994; Duncan, 1999). Even though, in the current study, specifically negative words were asked for, many supposedly pejorative words can also, depending on their context, be used with "variable force" (Garrett *et al.*, in prep.) to describe someone negatively or positively (e.g. when teasing). What is more, members of the social group referenced by homophobic verbal abuse often really are invisible in the way that overt tokens such as skin colour or religious practice confirm ethnic minority status. As such, unlike racist pejoratives, homophobic pejoratives often have a less clearly, less deliberately identified relation to their target. Notwithstanding this, as Valentine (1998: 10·2) says, "a name may be an utter fabrication, constructed out of falsehoods, and yet be a potent source of discriminatory identification and practice." It may well be that homophobic pejoratives are not always used with serious intent, but perhaps this is exactly where their vitriol lies: used with such carefreeness (or, rather, carelessness), young people are seemingly unaware of the damage their words cause. After all, they reason, these are not bad words—not like racist words. Homophobic pejoratives are certainly hurtful, though, if your *are* homosexual.

With their vernacular repertoire inevitably representing existing stereotypes and outgroup evaluations, the attitudes of young people towards the use of homophobic words may, at the very least, be used as something of a social-distance yardstick (cf. Eckert and McConnell-Ginnet, 1995; de Klerk, 1997; Garrett *et al.*, in prep.). This becomes apparent when comparing the ratings of racist and homophobic pejoratives. Racist pejoratives were clearly

regarded as especially taboo—proportionally speaking, as offensive as even some of the most taboo (i.e. Top-5) items. The intention with this comparison is not to be drawn into a futile, and politically counter-productive, comparison of the plight of oppressed minorities—not least because the divisions are always only artificial and belie the inevitable complexity of the situation (see Mac an Ghaill, 1994). Nonetheless, what these young people's responses do confirm is a relative, and widely shared, disregard for the feelings of lesbian, gay and bisexual people. As Unks (1995: 3) comments, "Picking on persons because of their ethnicity, class, religion, gender, or race is essentially taboo behaviour, but adults and children alike are given licence to torment and harm people because of their sexuality." In fact, it has been the case for some time now that even the accusation of racism is itself regarded as a serious pejorative (van Dijk, 1987).

Ultimately, it is the intersection between young high schoolers' understanding and evaluation of these words and the shared values in wider circulation that is of real interest—in particular, differences between their socially inculcated sensitivities to, say, sexism, homophobia and racism, and the particular sexual and social politics of the playground. School communicative practices simultaneously have locally distinctive features and reflect the influence of broader societal and historical norms and values (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1995). To an extent, this school-society interplay can also be seen in the different reporting and rating of homophobic pejoratives by boys and girls in the current study.

Sex differences and gendered naming practices

There is no doubt that girls do use abusive language and that traditional gender stereotypes have long since changed (Risch, 1987; Sutton, 1995; de Klerk, 1997). Although not reporting as many as the boys and granted that this is no guarantee of actual use, what is interesting here is that such a number of homophobic items were reported by the girls. It is also noteworthy that the vast majority of these terms referred to male homosexuality. In her study of women's derogatory terms for men, Risch (1987) found that almost 300 participants reported not a single homophobic item. Whether this represents a shifting sociolinguistic pattern of use is unclear. As is true of all slang (cf., Hughes, 1998), both Risch (1987) and Waksler (1997) have commented specifically on the shifting patterns of use (in terms of both user and subject matter) with previously gendered slang.

Notwithstanding their use of abusive language, girls and women are nonetheless thought to be more politically tolerant than boys and especially with regards homosexuality (Sotelo, 1999). Certainly, in the current study, it was the girls who also showed a tendency towards greater sensitivity for racist pejoratives. What was notable, however, was that the girls did not rate homophobic items as seriously as the boys. Given the preponderence of male homosexual terms, this may have much to do with the relative "vulnerability" of recipients to different categories of abusive names, and be in keeping with shifting priorities for social categorization/comparison (see Turner and Giles, 1981). For example, just as girls have a heightened sensitivity to sexist slurs (Lees, 1983), the ethnic minority participants in the current study showed a greater sensitivity to racist terms—these two groups no doubt appreciate better than others just how damaging and hurtful these terms can be. In other words, it may be that the girls in the current study were rating homophobic items less seriously because, unlike the boys, they are simply not as susceptible to the gendered slur which these words seemingly entail.

With all its connotations of masculinity and toughness, boys stereotypically use more abusive (swearing) language (de Klerk, 1997); they also like to foster this reputation and be

seen to report more swear words (cf., Sutton, 1995). The boys in this study were certainly no different, reporting more pejoratives overall and, in some cases, more than willingly. That they reported so many more of the homophobic words is also not surprising (cf., Wood, 1984; Sutton, 1995; Armstrong, 1997; Cameron, 1997;). This is even less so when one also considers that, particularly amongst boys, homophobia is often considered "natural" by both teachers and pupils (Nayak and Kehily, 1996). Duncan (1999) has recently commented on "the centrality of sexual reputation for desired social status" amongst boys in high school education. It is perhaps for this reason, therefore, that boys showed themselves to be more sensitive to homophobic slurs. Perversely, even though they are more prone to using homophobic verbal abuse, they are very aware how reputation-damaging these pejoratives can be. Having said which, this concern has little to do with the feelings and sensitivities of gay, lesbian and bisexual people. On the contrary, they fear being the recipient of such abuse precisely because they regard these people so poorly.

Context, meaning and the power of language

The current study admittedly adopts a largely formalist approach to language—which is to say, it examines language removed from its natural context (Schiffrin, 1994). There is, therefore, a certain "artificiality" to the strings of words listed by these young people, in as much as they reflect passive (i.e. reported) use rather than active (i.e. recorded) use or actual linguistic behaviour (de Klerk, 1997). Without immediate contextual information such as the nature of the relationship of the interlocutors, the likely motivation for using a pejorative, the vocal force with which it is uttered, and so on, one can never be absolutely sure of the seriousness of intent or the accuracy of the accusation. Although relating to comments already made here, this certainly raises issues which would be better revealed in a more ethnographic study. Such a study might also be able to examine more precisely the frequency of homophobic verbal abuse in terms of the regularity and rate of occurrence.

Notwithstanding the question of context, it is established opinion within Language and Communication Research and elsewhere that words are not simply neutral containers of meaning or mere reflections of social "reality". Although commonly misunderstood and contested by reactionaries (invariably resorting to the notion of "political correctness" as both rhetorical weapon and war cry), language is unquestionably complicitous in the reproduction of social inequalities and power relations.[7] It is not surprising, then, that homophobic language is a major psychological stressor in the lives of young bisexual, gay and lesbian people (D'Augelli, 1996) and one of the key objectives in creating a safer school environment for them (Treadway and Yoakam, 1992). As Armstrong (1997: 327) argues, language can be "violent, exclusionary and coercive". The kind of homophobic verbal abuse reported here and elsewhere is surely hate-speech as harmful as any other (cf., Whillock and Slayden, 1995; Leets, 1999) and deserves an appropriate response.

None of which is to deny the structural or institutionalized face of homophobia. Redman (1994: 148) quite rightly points out that, "to combat homophobia, it will not be enough to tell pupils that "poof" is an unacceptable word". In the U.K., the most obvious example of structural homophobia in education is the notorious Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act which has often stifled what little willingness there has been to support young bisexual, lesbian and gay pupils (Douglas et al., 1997). Nonetheless, within the context

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[7]Within the field of language and gender, this argument has been recently and clearly covered by Cameron (1998), Romaine (1999) and Talbot (1998).

of a comprehensive approach to homophobia in schools, language change offers a crucial line of attack: "organizing to bring about change is not a futile activity, whereas waiting for "the language" to change itself is" (Cameron, 1998: 13). Whether this change is discussed through critical language education (see Clark and Ivanic, 1999) or sex(uality) education, it is ultimately the encoding of a presumed heterosexuality into language and other social practices that is the problem, and the primary focus really should be on the attitudes and reactions of the abusers not the abused (Savin-Williams, 1990; Johnson and Epstein, 1994; D'Augelli, 1996; Kitzinger, 1996).

Conclusion

It is not surprising to know that homophobia abounds in schools. Even the U.K. government has now very tentatively acknowledged this problem (DfEE, 1999: 4·29), while, in the U.S.A., legal precedents have now been set which oblige state schools to protect young lesbian and gay people (see Logue, 1997). What is disturbing, however, is to find just how predominant homophobic pejoratives actually are—also to be reminded how aggressive they can be—and the relative disregard young people attach to this genre of derogation.

According to Stonewall's (1999) recent report on homophobic bullying, as many as 73 per cent of the adults they surveyed had already known that they were lesbian, gay or bisexual when they were at high school. These, then, are the predecessors of the young gay, lesbian and bisexual people currently in our high schools, the "outsiders within" (Valentine, 1998: 3·3) who suffer daily verbal abuse not actually regarded as abuse.

Sticks and stones may be more likely to break their bones but the relentless, careless use of homophobic pejoratives will most certainly continue to compromise the psychological health of young homosexual and bisexual people by insidiously constructing their sexuality as something wrong, dangerous or shameworthy.

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