

"As Common as Saying Hello"

Middle School Students' Perceptions of Homophobic Language

OCSWSSW
AMED
June 7, 2017
Toronto, ON

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Background & Rationale for Study

- **Knowledge gap:** Compared to high school, few studies explore homophobic language among middle school students, especially in Canada, and even fewer looking at homophobic and sexist language together.
- **Practice gap:** Teachers and school staff (including school social workers) engage in anti-bullying efforts, however the actual content of verbal bullying (i.e. name calling) remains relatively unknown at the middle school level

Research Question

What are the perceptions and understandings of grade 7 & 8 students about homophobic and sexist language use at school?

Recruitment & Data Collection

- ▶ Convenience sample of 4 TDSB middle schools
- ▶ A sample of Grade 7 and 8 homeroom teachers self-selected distributed information and consent forms to entire class; first 5 to 6 students to return with signed consent participated in focus group
- ▶ A large and quick response from one school led to conducting 2 focus groups in that school; remaining three schools had one focus group per school.
- ▶ Total of 5 focus groups
- ▶ Digital audio recorded focus groups produced 150 pages of transcript-based data

Description of Participants

Focus Groups (n=26)

- ▶ 5 mixed gender focus groups
- ▶ 16 girls (62%), 10 boys (38%)
- ▶ Age range: 12-14; average age 13 years

Where in school...



90% of students report hearing homophobic language at least once in the past week

54% report sexist language at least once in past week



85 % report hearing homophobic language at least once

63% report sexist language



79% report homophobic language

48% report sexist language

Themes

- ▶ Pervasiveness
- ▶ Not meant as homophobic
- ▶ Meant as homophobic
- ▶ Violation of Gender Role norms
- ▶ Teacher responses
- ▶ Homophobia & Sexism

Pervasiveness

“it’s like an everyday thing” (female)

“it’s almost a part of normal conversation” (male)

“It’s as common as saying hello” (female)

Not meant as homophobic (sub-theme of reason)

“I heard people say things are gay not because it is a homophobic thing, right.

It’s because it’s boring or they don’t like it” (male)

Meant as homophobic (sub-theme of reason)

“it’s kind of like saying you’re being brought down levels, that you are worse than us, that you are not as good as straight people” (female)

Violation of gender norms (sub-theme of reasons)

“when guys wear pink” or “skinny jeans” (male)

“Like if they’re hugging their guy friend people might say that’s so gay because guys don’t normally do that... [instead they] have like a handshake, like a pat on the back” (female)

Violation of gender norms (sub-theme of reasons)

“If it is seen as the girls hanging out with the guy, they are attracted to him, but if the boy’s doing more of the talking then people will think he’s gay because he’s either talking more...doing more hand movements...acting more like the girls...but if the girls are talking more, or flirting, people will think he’s just really good with girls” .
(female)

On the other hand, a male stated succinctly, “if a guy hangs with a lot of girls, isn’t that the opposite of gay?”

Trying to do more but giving up (sub-theme of teacher responses)

“The first few times they try to tell them to stop... but they keep going and going over again and they just ignore it because it’s too hard to handle... there’s nothing they can do, that’s what they think” (male)

Hearing & ignoring comments or not taking seriously (sub-theme of teacher responses)

“the teacher notices it but they don’t bother to respond because they think it’s like an inside joke”. (female)

Tacit and explicit endorsement of homophobic language

(sub-theme of teacher responses)

“We had to wear purple bracelets to support not saying remarks about like gay people and I think that triggered things even more... and like there were some teachers that said that this is strange, like ‘why are we even doing this?’ ” (female)

Homophobia & Sexism

“boys who call other boys who do girl things, gay, because when they were younger they were taught what normal boys like, like colours blue, black, brown, and green and not red, yellow, orange, pink; and boys are supposed to play Power Rangers or football and play with other boys and not girls”. (male)

“Men are to women what heterosexual people are to homosexual people... I think for the main part I think homosexual people and women would be sort of the main target of discrimination” (male)

Homophobia & Sexism

They compare gays to girls because I guess that they just think because if a man is interested in another man that makes them a girl because only girls are traditionally only supposed to be interested in men. And that's kind of what I think where the gay and homophobia comes from is that people are so traditional and they don't want anything to "like change" (female)

Discussion

Homophobic language is very much noticed by students noticing teacher reactions; reasons are varied and at times nuanced

Student insight into connection between sexism and homophobia (Pharr, 1997)

Emerging theme of 'homophobia and sexism' better described as 'sexist homophobia'; homophobia derived specifically from underlying rigid gender role stereotypes (in contrast to religious and racial based homophobia)

Implications for Social Work & Social Service Work

Knowledge

Middle schools are active sites of homophobic and sexist language

deeper understanding of middle school students' perceptions of homophobic language, the reasons motivating this language, the role of teachers, and the interlocking relationship of homophobia and sexism.

Practice

School social work and social service work on anti-bullying should include *specificity* on actual content of name calling

Addressing sexism in a meaningful way necessary to also address homophobia

Thank you