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Adolescents' Perceptions of Homophobic Language: Implications for Bullying Prevention

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Male Adolescents' Perceptions of Homophobic Language:
Implications for Bullying Prevention

Benjamin M. Bailey

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Educational Specialist

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ABSTRACT

Adolescents' Perceptions of Homophobic Language: Implications for Bullying Prevention

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Large scientific studies have recognized homophobic language as a national concern (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 2001; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). Concerning perceptions of homophobic language use, quantitative studies were mostly conducted in specific areas of the United States and qualitative studies have largely approached the issue with the theory of masculinity. The current study proposed to approach the study actively challenging all assumptions about homophobic language use. This study assimilated 20 adolescents' perceptions of homophobic language, using a hermeneutic qualitative methodology. This study found that in addition to policing masculinity, homophobic language was used to police sexuality, normality, and popularity. In regard to adolescents abstaining from using homophobic language, three themes emerged, including when in the presence of individuals perceived as being homosexual, when having a personal connection to a homosexual, and when associated with vulnerable populations. Participants self-identified with peer groups. These personal connections shaped how students abstained from and participated in using homophobic language. This study's findings are summarized, ending with implications for practice. Although interventions targeting groups of students may be helpful—ultimately a larger cultural shift towards engagement with and an understanding of marginalized groups must occur.

Keywords: homophobic language, adolescents, bullying, male perceptions, bullying intervention

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Hopefully I won't be too political by quoting President Barack Obama saying "I didn't build this" thesis alone. I have had generous amounts of help from numerous people. This is most apparent for the people who have been a direct help to the writing of my thesis, first and foremost my chair Melissa Heath, but also Aaron Jackson, Sarah Coyne, Marleen Williams, Paul Caldarella, Carol Ward, Sue Morrow, and many other fellow researchers who have patiently answered my emails involving this topic. I have also been helped along the way by the teachings of my mother, father, siblings and friends that taught me everyone has the right to be loved and respected. A few experiences come to mind such as my sister for correcting me when I asked her if she wanted to play *smear the queer* or my brother's gentle rebuke when I was nervous about the invitation of a supposed lesbian to a high school dance. There are countless other experiences that have led to me to be passionate about the topic of unjust treatment, many of which I believe divine providence played a part. So to all of these people and God I would like to express my most sincere gratitude.

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Introduction

Large scientific studies have recognized homophobic language as a national concern (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 2001; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). In a national school climate survey of 7,261 students from all 50 states, Kosciw et al. found that 72.4% of students heard the term *fag* or *dyke* frequently and 88.9% heard the term *gay* used in a negative way. The AAUW (2001) administered self-report questionnaires to 2,064 high school students from across the country. Of these students, 72% reported that they had been called *gay* or *lesbian* by their peers in school regardless of their sexual orientation (AAUW, 2001). Although some research has indicated a decrease in this type of language, a large majority of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students still report frequently hearing this language in school hallways, classrooms, and activities (Kosciw, Bartkiewicz, & Greytak, 2012; Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014). Students and teachers report that this type of language is often not corrected, and that frequently authority figures in the schools use homophobic terms (Kosciw et al., 2010; Pascoe, 2007; Phoenix et al., 2003).

Some researchers have indicated that term's such as *gay* often do not target sexuality and instead have a general meaning of negativity (Nicolas & Skinner, 2012; Pascoe, 2007). However, Nicholas and Skinner found that although this language is not thought to be explicitly biased or targeting, it has still been shown to contribute to a homophobic culture (Nicolas & Skinner, 2012). Sexual prejudice and other exclusionary ideological beliefs have been correlated with homophobic language use (Poteat & DiGioivanni, 2010; Poteat & Spanierman, 2010; Stones, 2006). Conservative religiosity has been shown to be correlated with homophobia, but its correlation with homophobic language is complex (Myler, 2009; Pascoe,

2007; Wilkinson, 2004). Students that are targeted with homophobic language report that these terms are more offensive and hurtful than other bullying terms (McCann, Plumber, & Minichiello, 2010; Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008).

Males have been shown to use homophobic language more commonly than females (Poteat & Kimmel, 2011; Poteat & Rivers, 2010; Poteat & Spanierman, 2010). Many researchers' have shown that males may use this language more frequently because they use the language to police masculinity, targeting boys for emotional expression and feminine interests (Oransky & Marecek, 2009; Pascoe, 2007; Phoenix et al., 2003). This type of language often targets heterosexual students (Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010). This type of language appears to be more common while playing sports or engaging in violence (Poteat & Kimmel, 2011; Poteat et al., 2012). Male students have reacted violently to this type of language; this type of victimization has been correlated with high school shootings and student suicides (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Meyer, 2010; Peet, 2010). When students belong to a group that endorses homophobic or masculine beliefs or that uses homophobic language frequently, individual homophobic language increases (Birkett & Espelage, 2015; Poteat, 2007)

In summary, researchers have identified several correlates of adolescents' homophobic language use. These correlates have included gender, individual and group beliefs, behaviors and environments (Poteat & Kimmel, 2011; Poteat & Rivers, 2010; Poteat & Spanierman 2010). These quantitative studies were limited by specific measures and were unable to incorporate new or unexpected data. Many of these studies utilized the Homophobic Content Agent (HCAT) scale which only examines the frequency of homophobic language use and may limit homophobic language to *homo*, *gay*, *lesbo*, *fag*, or *dyke*, since these are the only words found on

the survey (Poteat & Espelage, 2005). Furthermore, many of these studies were conducted in rural Illinois and may only represent the use of homophobic language in this area.

Of the qualitative studies that have been completed, few have attempted to expansively describe adolescent's perceptions of homophobic language among teenagers. Most qualitative studies have often approached the issue from the theory of masculinity and/or were focused on homophobic bullying rather than language specifically. Because these studies were done in different regions and countries, they represent many different social contexts. No such study has been conducted in the Mountain West region of the United States.

Thus the current study attempts to expansively describe homophobic language, actively challenging all assumptions about homophobic language use. The study was conducted within the Mountain West and used qualitative methods. Specifically, the following research questions were investigated. From an adolescent male's perspective,

1. What are the meanings adolescents associate with homophobic language?
2. Why are certain adolescents the target of homophobic language?

Literature Review

Large scientific studies have recognized homophobic language as a national concern (AAUW, 2001; 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 homophobic language 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 (Meyer, 2010; Peet, 2010). Both personal interviews and self-report surveys have reported that homophobic bullying harms teenagers more than other types of bullying (McCann et al., 2010; Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008). Recently the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) and the Ad Council, released a national *think before you speak* ad campaign, to target the phrase, “that’s so gay.” This campaign has received support from famous musicians, actors, and the National Basketball Association (*Think before you speak*, 2012).

Homophobic Language

In their 2003 study, Kimmel and Mahler explored the relationship between homophobic slurs and violent retribution, such as in the April 20, 1999 Columbine, Colorado school shootings. This highly publicized violent high school shooting involved two shooters—teenage boys from a suburban neighborhood. Prior to ending the rampage in a double suicide, these two adolescents killed 12 students and one teacher, wounded 21 others—three other individuals were injured while attempting to escape the school (Toppo, 2009).

In their study, Kimmel and Mahler (2003) examined demographics and newspaper reports of 28 high school shootings that occurred between 1982 and 2001. They found that all the shooters were male. The large majority were white males from suburban and rural areas

who were trying to assert their masculinity. Prior to committing acts of violence the shooters' high school peers had challenged shooters' masculinity by calling them homophobic epithets. According to Kimmel and Mahler (2003), evidence did not suggest that these shooters were actually homosexuals; instead the adolescents were bullied because they did not fit current masculine norms. In fact, antagonists frequently label heterosexuals with homophobic terms.

Although both homosexual and heterosexual students appear to be targeted with homophobic language (AAUW, 2001), specifically identifying who is targeted more frequently may be difficult. In a study of 290 high school students, Poteat and DiGiovanni (2010) found evidence that boys actually directed more homophobic epithets towards those they perceived as heterosexual rather than those they perceived as homosexual. A high school boy interviewed in Pascoe's ethnographic study explained he did not call homosexuals fags because he did not want to insult something he saw as biological (Pascoe, 2007, p. 58). Another boy in the same study further explained that a boy could be homosexual but would only deserve the title of fag if he could not do masculine activities like throwing a football (Pascoe, 2007, p. 58). However, Birkett, Espelage, and Koenig (2009) found that homosexual students self-reported more bullying and homophobic victimization than their heterosexual peers. Additionally, students who were questioning their sexuality reported more bullying and homophobic victimization than homosexuals or heterosexuals.

Homophobic language is common in schools and reportedly rarely corrected by school adults (AAUW, 2001; Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003). The AAUW (2001) administered self-report questionnaires to 2,064 high school students from across the country. Of these students, 72% reported that they had been called gay or lesbian by their peers in school (AAUW, 2001). 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 another study of 45 small group interviews, interviewees claimed teachers or other school staff did not reprimand them when they called their peers homophobic epithets (Phoenix et al., 2003). Furthermore, teachers and other school staff have also been observed using homophobic language themselves. According the aforementioned national survey, 60.4% of students recalled their school staff using these terms (Koswic et al., 2010). Pascoe (2007) also observed teachers directing homophobic insults toward boys they thought were *odd*.

Associated Beliefs, Behaviors, and Group Norms

Beliefs supportive of sexual prejudice against homosexuality, masculine norms, and violence all positively correlate with homophobic language use (Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010; Poteat, Kimmel, & Wilchins, 2011; Poteat & Spanierman, 2010). Although studies have found that homophobic language is often directed at heterosexuals, Poteat and DiGiovanni (2010), found that males with higher sexual prejudice towards homosexuals more commonly used this language. They reasoned this may be because teenagers with lower prejudice levels may find this language more offensive. Considering masculine role attitudes (MRA) and beliefs supporting violence (BSV), Poteat et al. (2011) administered homophobic language, MRA and BSV questionnaires to 288 teenagers who were attending a rural Illinois high school. Teenagers who self-identified as supporting MRA or BSV more commonly used homophobic slurs. When the two were considered concurrently, the likelihood of boys using homophobic language increased markedly.

Many factors have been found to be negatively correlated with sexual prejudice and bullying perpetration. In their 2013 study, Poteat, DiGiovanni, and Scheer found that empathy,

affirmative parent attitude, and having a gay or lesbian friend were all negatively correlated with sexual prejudice. Additionally, they found that classroom norms discouraging bullying and encouraging perspective taking of other students were negatively correlated with homophobic bullying. These results are encouraging because the findings suggest that by influencing preceding variables, homophobic language use could be decreased.

In a qualitative study of 11 to 14-year-old boys in England, Phoenix et al. (2003) found that young boys utilized homophobic language to police masculinity and prevent their peers from participating in feminine activities. Additionally, Pascoe found, in the high school she studied, that homophobic epithets were always directed at males and never at females (2007). Twenty-two out of twenty-three adolescent boys interviewed by researchers Oransky and Marecek (2009) stated that emotional expression, openness, and vulnerability were all characteristics that targeted males as being gay or girly. They further found that boys used these two terms interchangeably (2009). Along with these attributes, students may further target victims based on attributes they cannot control, such as their size and delayed signs of puberty (McCann et al., 2010).

The connection between religiosity and homophobic language appears to be complex. Self-report surveys identified ideological beliefs, such as right wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO), correlated with homophobic attitudes among college students (Poteat & Spanierman, 2010; Stones, 2006). Other studies have shown that commitment to various conservative protestant religions correlated highly with homophobia (Myler, 2009; Wilkinson, 2004). Although homophobic attitudes and language are highly correlated, the relationship between conservative protestant religions and homophobic language was not investigated specifically. Furthermore, these studies were done among college-age

students or professionals, not high school students. Thus, these studies should be considered with these two aforementioned caveats.

Although the correlation between homophobic language and ideological beliefs has not been investigated quantitatively, frequent homophobic language use has been shown to be negatively correlated with empathetic concern and perspective taking (Poteat & Espelage, 2005). This finding implies that students who value and/or practice empathy may use homophobic language less. Studies suggest religious people are more empathetic (Lee, Poloma, & Post, 2013; Saroglou, Pichon, Trompette, Verschueren, & Dernelle, 2005). On the other hand, empathy and perspective taking may be the antithesis of some ideological belief systems like SDO, which is anti-egalitarian, and RWA, which is hostile and punitive. In her study, Pascoe observed that Christian boys, particularly Latter-Day Saints (LDS), engaged in homophobic language significantly less than their peers. She hypothesized that they use less homophobic language because gender roles are more stable and established within Christian religions (2007, p. 113). Therefore, the relationship between religiosity and homophobic language appears to be complicated.

Behaviors such as fighting, bullying, masculine activities and other aggressive behaviors have correlated strongly with homophobic language use (Poteat & Kimmel, 2011; Poteat, O'Dwyer, & Mereish, 2012; Poteat & Rivers, 2010). Poteat and Kimmel (2011) found that male teenagers involved in the above behaviors used homophobic language more than their peers. Masculine activities such as playing sports also increased the likelihood that teenage females would use this type of language (Poteat & Kimmel, 2011). They may have used this language because as they participated in more masculine sports they tried to act more masculine by using homophobic language. Teenagers involved in bullying recorded more frequent homophobic

language use. In their longitudinal study, Poteat et al. (2012) observed that when individuals reported more bullying behaviors they also reported more homophobic language use.

Homophobic language 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).

In addition to individual beliefs and actions, group norms and attitudes often have augmented or diminished homophobic attitudes and language (Franklin, 2000; Poteat, 2007; Poteat & Spanierman, 2010). In her study of 489 junior college students, Franklin (2000) discovered that 163 had insulted and/or assaulted perceived homosexuals. Of these students, 35% described peer dynamic as their motivating factor. A longitudinal study conducted by Poteat (2007) showed that teenagers who socialized primarily with homophobic peers developed more homophobic attitudes and expressed more homophobic language common to the group over time.

Studies further found that there was also an interaction between individual attributes and group attributes. A multi-level model study conducted by Birkett and Espelage (2015) of adolescents ranging from 5th to 8th grade found that peer group masculine attitude was a more significant predictor of homophobic language use than individual masculine attitudes. However, homophobic victimization and bullying perpetuation were more significant predictors on the individual level than on the group level. Furthermore, homophobic language use was significantly higher when groups were predominantly male. Longitudinally, groups that previously used homophobic language or were victimized with homophobic language were more likely to use homophobic language a second time.

Adolescents may frequently use homophobic language because students so commonly use it. In their 125 interviews of Irish students, teachers, parents, and administrators, Norman and Galvin found that teachers rarely corrected homophobic language because it was so common among children. One teacher stated that this language was how students labeled anything negative. Students also explained that these terms were commonly used for teasing anyone from a close friend to someone they disliked (2006). Pascoe found that general negativity was associated with words like *gay* but that words like *fag* or *faggot* were often used to degrade someone's masculinity (2007, p. 56). However, Nicholas and Skinner (2012) found that while students didn't consider the term *gay* as explicitly biased or targeting, students who used this word were more likely to hold implicit negative attitudes about homosexuals.

Teachers have felt hindered by legislation that disallows teaching that homosexuality is an acceptable practice; they were further discouraged by the lack of school policy that addressed homophobic language use (Chambers, van Loon, & Tincknell, 2004). A study, conducted across six high schools, confirmed that when schools had an open policy against the harassment of homosexuals, students were less likely to use homophobic language and teachers were more likely to confront the behavior (Phoenix et al., 2006).

Purpose of Study

In summary, researchers have identified several correlates of adolescents' homophobic language use. These correlates have included gender, individual and group beliefs, behaviors and environments (Poteat & Kimmel, 2011; Poteat & Rivers, 2010; Poteat & Spanierman 2010). These quantitative studies were limited by specific measures and were unable to incorporate new or unexpected data. Many of these studies utilized the homophobic content agent (HCAT) scale which only examines the frequency of homophobic language use and may limit homophobic

language to *homo*, *gay*, *lesbo*, *fag*, or *dyke*, since these are the only words found on the survey (Poteat & Espelage, 2005). Furthermore, many of these studies were conducted in rural Illinois and may only represent the use of homophobic language in this area.

Of the qualitative studies that have been completed, few have attempted to expansively describe adolescent perceptions of homophobic language among teenagers. Most qualitative studies have often approached the issue from the theory of masculinity and/or were focused on homophobic bullying rather than language specifically. Because these studies were done in different regions and countries, they represent many different social contexts. No such study has been conducted in the Mountain West region of the United States.

Thus the current qualitative study attempts to expansively describe homophobic language, as it may be used within the Mountain West. Specifically, the following research questions were investigated.

From an adolescent male's perspective,

1. What are the meanings adolescents associate with homophobic language?
2. Why are certain adolescents the target of homophobic language?

Method

This study used a hermeneutic qualitative methodology (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Unlike quantitative research, which looks for generalizable laws that would apply to entire populations, qualitative research attempts to understand individuals' perceptions of themselves or a particular phenomenon (Ponterotto, 2005). Qualitative research does not seek universal truth because it largely ascribes to a constructivist understanding of reality, "[assuming] multiple, apprehendable, and equal valid realities" (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). From a hermeneutic perspective, individuals will negotiate with their social context to create their reality. Furthermore, an individual's social context is an inseparable part of his or her understanding (Schwandt, 2000). Reality then is not something ultimately discovered by an individual, but rather a process of negotiation between an individual and his or her social context. The process of an interviewer understanding an interviewee is similar. Understanding is reached as the interviewer and interviewee negotiate their shared reality. This process is part of the hermeneutic circle.

Rather than the broader, and somewhat shallower, focus of quantitative survey methods, this methodology allows me to delve deeper into personal perspectives and discover novel data (Morrow, 2007). The hermeneutic method allows for open-ended questions, inviting participants to speak from their experience. During interviews, current beliefs about adolescents' understanding of homophobic language were questioned, explored, and clarified.

Researcher as Instrument/Horizons of Understanding

Because of the personal nature of qualitative interviews, the interviewer actually becomes a participant in the conversations (Berger, 2015). Therefore, from this point forward, the primary investigator will be referred to in first-person language.

At the time of the study, I was a graduate student enrolled in Brigham Young University's School Psychology Program and had training and experience with qualitative methods. Because I matured in a religiously conservative environment where homosexual acts were considered sinful, I have struggled to reconcile my personal faith as I have accepted homosexual friends and family members. I believed homophobic language to be deleterious and common among high school boys regardless of their sexual orientation. This belief originated from personal experiences in high school and previous research. I accounted for my own bias or construction of reality through a process called *researcher reflexivity*: explicit self-aware analysis of how my own background and social context influences my findings (Finlay, 2002). The specific methods I used to account for this bias are discussed in the design section.

Participants

Twenty male 12th-grade students were randomly selected from a high school within the Mountain West to participate in the study. Participants were narrowed down to this specific gender and grade level to obtain a more in-depth look at this specific population's perception of homophobic language. Male participants were identified because studies suggest that homophobic language is more common among males (Poteat & Kimmel, 2011; Poteat & Rivers, 2010; Poteat & Spanierman, 2010). Studies further propose that homophobic language is more common among older high school students (Poteat et al., 2012). Students were randomly selected to obtain a variety of perspectives from this age group.

At the time of study, the high school had a population of approximately 600 students, grades 10 through 12, and 30 total teachers, 3 counselors, 1 vice principal, and 1 principal. The student body was approximately 80% White, 10% Hispanic, 1% American Indian, 1% Asian, 1% African American, and 1% Multi-racial. The randomly selected interview participants had a

similar race demographic: 80% white ($n=16$), 10% Hispanic ($n=2$), 1% Asian ($n=1$) and, 1% Multi-Racial ($n=1$). The high school was located in a rural city within the Mountain West. Religious statistics of the relevant county showed that there was approximately 53% affiliated with Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 20% affiliated with the Catholic Church, 6% affiliated with Protestant Churches, and 20% were not affiliated with any organized religion.

The number interviewed 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.

Design

The study included individual interviews in a private room provided by the high school. Because masculinity was frequently and highly correlated with homophobia, I was concerned about peer pressure and hypersensitivity to gender roles. Therefore I avoided group discussions, such as focus groups, because they may have discouraged adolescent participants from openly and honestly disclosing their perceptions of homophobic language use. Previous research supports this suspicion (Phoenix et al., 2003). Individual interviews also eliminated the possibility of participants sharing sensitive information about peers’ disclosures.

Instead of asking them direct questions about their personal experience, I started the interviews by discussing and interpreting their peers’ experiences. Exploring their peers’ experiences was an indirect and less threatening way to understand their own thoughts and prejudices. This indirect approach led to more honest disclosure and still allowed students to

project their own attitudes and beliefs about homophobic language (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Indirect questioning has been found to produce more truthful answers in numerous studies (Lusk & Norwood, 2010). I only explored their experiences when they voluntarily brought them up, assuming this indicated they were comfortable disclosing personal experience.

The interviews (Appendix A) were semi-structured, meaning I entered the interviews with interview themes and potential questions rather than committing to a strict list and order of questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I followed these themes and questions as a loose guide. This free structure allowed me to diverge and explore new topics as they came up. The informal nature of this approach encouraged participants' self-disclosure. Questions were designed using Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) model, which included a variety of questions (e.g., introductory questions, follow-up questions, probing questions, specifying questions, direct questions, indirect questions, structuring questions, and interpreting questions). A number of scholars have asserted that the information obtained from these types of interviews offered a more in-depth explanation of homophobic language (Levitt, 2005; Pascoe, 2007).

I conducted the interviews because I had a vested interest in the current 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. I accounted for my 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 me foster both an etic and emic perspective because themes were founded on both the interviewees' perspective and my expertise.

Procedures

Permission was first sought through local high school administrators. I first communicated with the high school principal through email and scheduled a preliminary meeting. In this meeting, we discussed the most appropriate way and time to implement the study. Our conclusions were also validated by the school district's superintendent.

After receiving approval from the International Review Board for Human Subjects at Brigham Young University and permission to conduct the study at the high school from the superintendent and high school principal, the high school counselors assisted me in identifying potential participants by sending a list of current male seniors and their home phone number. After assigning each of these students a unique number, I used a random number generator to determine which students I would invite to participate in the study. I first invited students to participate in the study by calling their listed home phone number. If there was no answer after three contact 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 homophobic language and emphasizing that participation was voluntary. I then asked if I could interview their child. After getting verbal parental consent over the phone, I sent a written consent form to the student's home with a self-addressed stamped envelope. Once I received the written consent form, the student was pulled from a non-academic class to be interviewed. Before beginning the interview, I explained the study to the student, emphasizing that participation was voluntary, and gave him a written assent form. If the student assented to the interview, we then proceeded with the interview.

I was given the contact information of all male high school seniors (74). I contacted and asked for permission from 41 parents, 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 approximately 20–45 minutes and were audio recorded. I then recruited an undergraduate research assistant to transcribe 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.

As proposed by O’Dwyer (2004, p. 403), I used participants’ direct quotes to add depth and *trustworthiness* to the narrative. However, there are some drawbacks in using participants’ verbatim quotes. There is less clarity and succinctness when presenting narrative; there are challenges in accurately presenting pauses and voice inflections; and colloquial speech patterns may make the participants appear less articulate. Nevertheless, in my opinion, the benefits of using direct quotes outweigh the drawbacks.

Transcripts were analyzed using the hermeneutic method: closely and repeatedly studying the transcripts for relations of parts to the whole until reaching a unity between the two (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I repeatedly read each transcript and looked for themes. Themes that I repeatedly discovered in each reading and that related to whole were retained (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This analysis was influenced by my knowledge of themes previously found in research about homophobic bullying and my own bias. I challenged this previous bias using *researcher reflexivity* (Morrow, 2005). I actively questioned my bias and explained my reasoning, until I 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 this process was complete, I presented my findings as well as my 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. The themes were retained when both the auditor and I agreed that the themes were valid.

I recognized that information obtained through the interviews was highly sensitive. In order to protect confidentiality, I changed names, places, and other revealing information in the transcripts. Furthermore, I destroyed audio recordings, demographic surveys and consent forms. All personal revealing information was kept confidential between interviewees and me. Information obtained from the demographic survey was used to inform the interview and create a summary of the group members. 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.

Results

I attempted to look at three major themes examining intentions behind homophobic language. When considering the extant research, these three selected themes were identified as the most relevant and novel. First, I explored how students use homophobic language to police one another's behavior and identity. While students identified multiple ways homophobic language was used to police one another, the most consistent themes were masculinity, sexuality, popularity, and normality. Second, I examined the reasons students refrained from using homophobic language around homosexuals and vulnerable populations or if they had an individual connection to a homosexual. Last, I examined how group values appeared to influence the use of homophobic language. Although this research included a variety of students who identified with various norms, the most pronounced values were associated with three groups: students that belonged to the debate team, students that belonged to a conservative religion, and students that participated in popular athletic sports.

Policing

The analysis of the interviews demonstrated that students used homophobic language to police one another's thoughts, behavior, affect, and appearance. However, it did not appear, as some feminist researchers have argued, that homophobic language was exclusively or even primarily used to police masculinity (Pascoe, 2007, Phoenix et al., 2003). Although students policed masculinity with homophobic language, they also policed sexuality, popularity, and normality. While these themes all had some overlap, especially sexuality and masculinity, I found value in pulling them apart and considering them separately.

Masculinity. The connection between homophobic language and masculinity was consistently found across the interviews. Supporting previous research findings, students that

were labeled with homophobic terms were often associated with perceived feminine attributes (e.g., expressing emotions, showing compassion, and appearing weak), appearance (e.g., cross dressing, long hair, and earrings), and behavior (e.g., cheerleading and crying). This expressed prejudice appeared to make some boys self-conscious about being kind or demonstrating a softer side, as expressed in the following quote:

I sometimes with just society, I wonder if like people think I'm gay, because I'm a nice person. And I'm really, I have feelings. I'm not heartless you know. I don't put on a tough guy act.... If you are not a hardcore kid, and you're not tough and whatnot, you're not really a guy.

This type of homophobic language appeared to be guided by the assumption that gay people are feminine. This prejudiced stereotype was even found among students who stood up to homophobic language, but only when they felt it targeted homosexuals. The following quote is from a student who confronted his peers when they were heckling a male cheerleader. I asked the student if the hecklers targeted the student because he was gay.

I believe yes. I believe they were because they didn't know anything about the kid beyond the fact that he was male and a cheerleader, so the stereotype immediately jumps to 'he's probably gay.'

This quote further demonstrates the complexity of intentions behind homophobic language. This student was offended by his peers' heckling because he believed that they were targeting the male cheerleader because of his sexuality. If the hecklers had been targeting the cheerleader for a non-sexual reason, the interviewed student implied he would have reacted differently. In the interview, he claimed that homophobic language was only offensive when targeting sexuality, more specifically when language explicitly privileged heterosexuality over

homosexuality. Therefore, targeting a homosexual male cheerleader would not be acceptable. Because masculinity and sexuality tend to intertwine, separating the intentions into two distinct themes proved difficult.

As is true in the previous case, students often discern the offensiveness of homophobic language by the context in which it is used. This attention to context may underlie students' reasoning for not admitting to being offended by homophobic language, even if it targeted gender or sexuality, when it was used among their close friends. Among close friends, students claimed their language was not offensive because their friends' sexuality was not in question; they knew their friends were heterosexual.

Sexuality. Surprisingly, researchers do not typically identify policing sexuality as a common theme in homophobic bullying. When this theme is discussed, it is subsumed within masculinity. However, sexuality may be policed for other reasons aside from violating a male code. In the current study, it appeared homophobic language was used to specifically police sexuality. This type of language was often used in relational bullying (e.g., gossiping about homosexual activity such as kissing, hand holding, and close male friendships; comparing homosexuality to bestiality; and pressuring peers into heterosexual sexual activity) and sexual objectification (e.g., warding off playful sexual advances and explicitly describing sexual behaviors). Homophobic language was also used to target students who displayed attributes stereotypically associated with the gay population (e.g., speaking with a gay lisp and dressing like gay characters in popular media).

Although students didn't appear to feel comfortable using homophobic terms around homosexuals, this apprehension didn't appear to stop many students from gossiping about conjectured homosexuals as shown in the following quote:

... you'll hear it in the hallways, like 'oh did you see those two lesbians'...or 'did you see what that gay kid did'....'Oh you see them, blah blah, can you see them like they're lesbians and stuff. Like why can't they be normal' or something like that?

I found this contradiction—avoiding direct and disrespectful language around homosexuals but participating in derogatory gossip about suspected homosexuals—to be a theme in many of my interviews. This contradiction was even upheld by students who could recall instances where they stood up to their peers and defended victims from direct homophobic bullying. However, they reported gossiping about homosexual activity among their friends.

When asked about homophobic language, students also offered more sexually explicit terms such as *fudge packer*, *butt pirate*, or sarcastically insisting another person *suck* their genitalia. One student described how this type of language is fairly common among those who play video games:

Even just playing video games online, that's where I hear a lot too. That just kind of came to me but, it's pretty bad there like, they'll start saying sexual slurs or like remarks or even whole phrases and scenarios of how they did this with who and like, that's another place that I hear it.

In these instances, homophobic language is explicitly sexual and demeaning. Beyond masculinity, these examples of sexual objectification may more generally be about power. While women have certainly been sexually objectified, this is also true about other marginalized groups (Hill Collins, 2004; Pascoe, 2007).

Another indication of sexuality being independent of masculinity is that students considered the term *gay* to be more offensive than *girly*. Calling someone gay may also be considered more offensive than calling someone a girl because the term gay has distinct

meanings aside from the gendered definition. Considering the context in which this research was conducted, homosexuality for many of the research participants was perceived as sinful, disgusting, deviant, and demeaning. Overall, being homosexual was associated with being “less than.” Furthermore, this type of homophobic language crossed gender lines and was used among both sexes. Therefore, when students were called gay, they may have felt more insult than when they were attacked on the basis of masculinity alone.

Further evidence that homophobic language was used to police sexuality was found in students’ defensiveness around perceptions of homophobic language. Commonly, students claimed that not being gay made homophobic language less offensive and assumed that the language would be more offensive to them if they were gay. Sometimes this assertion appeared to be an argument for context. In other words, personal connections to words make the language more offensive. However, this claim often appeared to be a way the students asserted their heterosexuality to the interviewer. The defensive assertion that homophobic language only bothers gay people counteractively implied that the students felt insecure about how the interviewer perceived the individual student’s sexuality.

Normality. Homophobic language was often used to police normality by protecting the general group norm. In fact many students considered normality to be a metatheme that overlaid sexuality and masculinity as well as other intentions behind homophobic language. Therefore, homophobic language was used to target and belittle anything that was out of the ordinary and could range from fashion choices (e.g., wearing overly large glasses, dressing up, wearing cowboy boots), lifestyle choices (e.g., vegetarianism, gothic, being a rocker, farmers, being outgoing, being *geeky*), and lastly belonging to a minority and/or vulnerable population (e.g., new kid, minority race, lower socioeconomic status, having a mental disability, having a

small stature, homosexual, transgender). The minority and/or vulnerable population may be the most tragic because many of these students did not belong to these groups by choice but rather by genetic endowment or inherited circumstance. They were born outside of the norm and then were bullied with homophobic epithets as a result. Homosexuality was one example of this, but students were also bullied because they belonged to other minority groups including those listed above.

In addition to the general population, students also policed normality through homophobic language within their group of friends. Similar to norms within the general population, within-group homophobic language was often used when a student's group didn't agree with group members' fashion choices, when a student violated group behavior norms, or when a student belonged to minority/vulnerable population. Policing within-group normality is shown in the following example:

Um, there was like kind of a personal instance like I was kind of, like I came to school in cowboy boots one day and you know that's alright but then if you like, if you normally don't like and you wear cowboy boots, like 'Oh you're that queer hick that lives down the road now.' Like that's kinda how I feel people take it. Like cause they're like 'Oh you look like a real Brokeback Mountain cowboy today,' just a comment I got and I'm like 'Oh thanks guys, not going to wear these again.'

In these instances students appeared to be enforcing a group expectation of what was considered normal by the group, so a *jock* was made fun of for wearing cowboy boots while this may be an appropriate choice for a *cowboy*. Furthermore, as in the above example, homophobic language worked for this group in policing someone's behavior. The individual stated he would not wear cowboy boots in the future.

This quote is also an example of policing sexuality, because the student's use of homophobic language referred to the movie *Brokeback Mountain*. The film *Brokeback Mountain*, is about the homosexual experience of two cowboys. Many critics believe the film was created, in part, to contradict stereotypical feminine roles ascribed to gay men (Cooper & Pease, 2008). However, although a cowboy may be a thought of as masculine, these students still use the film to make negative implication about the student's sexuality. This use of homophobic language may imply that their language specifically targeted the student's sexuality.

Popularity. Students would often use homophobic language to police popularity. This occurred both within groups and between groups. Between-group bullying occurs when one group of people, for example the *jocks*, use homophobic language toward another group, such as the *cowboys*. This type of bullying appeared to occur in a hierarchical fashion, meaning that a group that was more popular picked on a group that was less popular. Based on the students I interviewed, this type of homophobic language was also considered the most offensive. Students were offended by the between-group homophobic language because they felt unsure about the intentions of students outside their group and often assumed their intentions were negative. In contrast, within-group homophobic language was often viewed as friendly banter.

The popularity hierarchy not only existed between groups but within groups as well. This type of homophobic language appeared to be used to police the hierarchy within the group.

...like, out of my group of friends, like, we always have, like, there's always that one kid that like kind of gets picked on a little bit more, who might be a little bit more outgoing or just a little bit easier to pick on, like, kind of, like, just having fun messing around with.

In these instances homophobic language is used because the victim is easier to pick on. Furthermore, the intent behind homophobic language appears to be mildly sadistic, meaning that homophobic language is used because the perpetrators enjoy getting a reaction. Students also appeared to be targeted for being “more outgoing” or “think[ing] they did something cool.” In this case, homophobic language appeared to be a way of maintaining social order and/or rank. Students would demean their friends with a homophobic epithet to either regulate them to the group’s social norms or to devalue their prominence. Many students assumed that this type of homophobic language was safe because it was among friends. However, the quote about the cowboy boots in the normality section demonstrates that within-group homophobic language can be hurtful. This type of within-group hurtful language was reiterated across multiple students.

One student also suggested that students in the *middle* popularity group didn’t use homophobic language as frequently. He assumed that both popular and unpopular students used homophobic language because they could get away with it. The popular students were able to call others homophobic epithets as an assertion of social power because of their social status. The unpopular students were able to use homophobic slurs because they were social outcasts and didn’t associate with students who were higher up on the social ladder. Therefore they were not as affected by social pressure. In contrast, the *middle* popularity group didn’t have enough social status to call other students homophobic terms without risking their social status. Therefore, they had to be selective about their use of homophobic language. They were also more likely to associate with varied strata of students all along the social ladder. Thus, they were able to take on perspectives from a variety of standpoints and possibly have greater empathy for their peers. Although just one student’s theory, other student interviews supported his idea that the mid-popularity group used homophobic language less often. The popular

students and unpopular students were frequently cited as using homophobic language. Students in the middle group were not cited by other students and indicated they used homophobic language less often.

As stated earlier, students used homophobic language against suspected homosexuals. However, more popular students were bullied less frequently. In her book, Pascoe suggests that more masculine homosexual students are bullied less because they fit into the more generic masculine role (Pascoe, 2007). However, it appeared that popularity was also a significant protective factor from being targeted with homophobic language. Of the self-reported homosexual students and of those who were identified by their peers as homosexual, none described themselves or were described by others as exhibiting masculine traits. Rather, most of them had more stereotypical feminine traits. However, the frequency with which they were bullied appeared to depend on popularity. Popular students may have been less likely targets of homophobic language because they had more social power and tact, furthermore in group situations, their friends stood up for them against this type of language.

Not Using Homophobic Language

In addition to the reasons explored behind homophobic language many themes also - emerged about why students abstain from using homophobic language. Different students held a variety of beliefs regarding the definition of homophobic language. Their beliefs then impacted how they used homophobic language. Some students totally abstained from all homophobic language while other students only abstained from homophobic language in certain environments. The following themes are explored below, not using homophobic language around homosexuals, not using homophobic language if you have a personal connection, and not using homophobic language on vulnerable populations.

Not using homophobic language around homosexuals. Although homophobic language was often used against homosexuals, generally students viewed this use of homophobic language as offensive. Furthermore, students generally believed that their use of homophobic language wasn't homophobic unless they were talking about or directing it towards homosexuals.

Well I feel if you're calling a gay person a fag because they're gay, that's very homophobic... but I feel if there was a kid who was being annoying, obnoxious, rude something like that if you were to refer to them as a fag, that's not, as offensive, it's not homophobic in the way you're using it.

The above quote illustrates many students' approach to homophobic language. Homophobic language used against a homosexual was offensive but homophobic language used as a general insult was not. Furthermore, students who used homophobic language as a general insult often reported being accepting of homosexuals and even at times reported defending them against homosexual epithets.

As previously mentioned, homophobic language used within groups was often considered friendly banter, although at times those who were targeted perceived this language as hurtful. One reason students may have felt comfortable within their group of friends was because the students felt fairly confident about one another's sexuality. However, students became uncomfortable when homophobic language was used against a less familiar person or even used against a member of the group in an unfamiliar setting.

Yeah. Sometimes I do, like especially when it's in a public place or like not really at school, 'cause I'm pretty good with most of my friends on that like they know and I know they're just joking around, but then we'll get to a public place like even up at the mall,

like even just hearing it like even if it's not directed towards me but another person, I'm like 'k you don't really know the person, what if they are [homosexual], sort of thing.'

Like and that's the thing I look at like 'I'm not, but if you're going to call me that, people are going to think that and it just kinda causes a bunch of hell for both sides.'

In this quote, calling a stranger a homophobic term is potentially dangerous because they may actually be homosexual. Homophobic language used towards a homosexual was labeled as offensive and homophobic. Within groups, calling your friend a homophobic term in an unfamiliar environment, appears to violate an unspoken agreement. While using homophobic banter may be acceptable when among friends, because everyone knows your sexuality, using this language in a foreign environment exposes the individual to being perceived as a homosexual.

Not using homophobic language if you have a personal connection. Although some students claimed that homophobic language used as a general insult was not offensive, many did not appear to entirely believe this assertion. Students seemed to understand that their gay peers were still often offended by homophobic language, regardless of how it was used. These students admitted that because of this awareness, they would never use homophobic language around their gay friends and, furthermore, tried to avoid using homophobic language in general. For many students, this awareness appeared to create some dissonance. These students vacillated between positions. Although they understood that homophobic language was offensive, regardless of context, and they tried limiting their use of this language, at times they admitted using this language and defended its use around friends.

Students who had a family member or close friend who was homosexual were less likely to use homophobic language and more likely to police its use.

The fact that I have a family member that believes in it [homosexuality] and likes it. I take it offensive because I have a brother that's [gay]... so it's like basically you're calling me it, you're basically calling my brother it, they're calling my brother it, they're calling me it. It's just like one of those type of bonds we have together.

Because of this student's background, he personalized homophobic insults in a deeper way. This student's relationship with his brother appears to create a core part of his identity. In a limited way, it seems he assumed a part of his brother's gayness, although he himself was not attracted to men. Thus, homophobic insults became offensive to him as if he were gay. In this quote, the student personalized an insult directed at him, but this student, and others, also appeared to personalize homophobic language directed at others or used in general as well. At very least, having a strong personal connection to person who is homosexual appeared to increase students' empathy, so that homophobic terms were offensive no matter the context.

Not all students had a strong personal connection to individuals who were homosexual. However, students seemed to understand that having a personal connection to homophobic language made the language more offensive.

I have a sister that's in sixth grade, and I've heard her friends you know, flaunt that word out like nothing. And I don't think they truly understand the context, they just say it because it's been instilled in them for so long that it's just another word in their eyes, but to some, you know some people hold offense to that or some people have an emotional connection to that and take pride in that, and then when people use it as a shun or to defame somebody then they kinda take, take it to heart.

Connection appears to create a strong difference in how homophobic language is internalized.

The closer or more personal a student's connection, the more likely they were to be offended by

homophobic language. Furthermore, connection may be a matter of choice and maturity as well as in this circumstance. For example, the student who offered this quote had a gay family relative and this connection appeared to present him with a moral dilemma. However, he felt his sister didn't appreciate this connection in the same way he did, and assumes that is not yet able to empathize as fully. I am unsure why he projected these thoughts on his sister, but he may have been projecting how he used homophobic language when he was her age.

Even when students did not have a strong personal connection, many still used empathy to understand those being victimized by homophobic language. When asked how students reacted to homophobic language, students would often relate this victimization to other ways they or their peers had been mistreated.

Um, I just... I put, well I hate it when people call me like scrawny or weak or something because it's, and I could be wrong but I imagine it's the same thing. I just don't want to put someone else in the same position.

In addition to physical size, students also related homophobic victimization to harassment based on race, cultural background, and uniqueness. Creating this type of empathetic connection appeared to moderate against using homophobic language.

Not using homophobic language on vulnerable populations. As demonstrated earlier, homophobic language was often used against vulnerable populations. However, many students did not tolerate this type of homophobic language and actively took a stand against it. Students offered specific examples of when they intervened because student victims were homosexual, had a mental disability, represented a minority race, or were less popular. After using this type of homophobic language with vulnerable populations, some students appeared to express greater

remorse than when harassing students who were not considered vulnerable. In fact, at a later point in time, a few students offered examples of apologizing for their insensitive behavior.

The Interaction Between Homophobic Language and Group Values

A student's use of homophobic language often depended on their group values. Students frequently abstained from using homophobic language when the language contradicted personal and/or group values. These values, often religious and ethical, were reported to be common among the student's group of friends. Furthermore, in addition to these values being a dominant part of their group's identity, students individually identified with these values as a central part of their personal identity. This identification often made group values and personal values difficult to separate. These values significantly impacted how students discussed homophobic language in their interviews and how they reported using homophobic language.

Of the participating students, I interviewed a significant number of students associated with the high school debate team, conservative religious students (predominantly LDS and Catholics), and students on popular athletic teams. In comparison to others groups of students, students on the debate team and students who were religious appeared to have the strongest convictions about not using homophobic language. However, these groups were informed by differing values. Although these values overlapped, at times they were distinct, even contradictory. Therefore, these two groups selectively refrained from using certain types of homophobic language in different ways. However, they also selectively used homophobic language in different ways as well. In contrast to these two groups of students, students who belonged to popular athletic teams were perhaps most likely to use homophobic language and the least selective about how they used it.

Students on the debate team. The students that belonged to the debate team appeared to be feel adamantly opposed to any homophobic language that was used to target or bully perceived homosexuals. They viewed this language as discriminatory and therefore offensive.

One kid got almost kicked out because he was being very religiously oriented. And one of our former debaters who comes back to judge, um she lives with three gay guys... But he made a very derogatory remark towards that, and a lot of the debate class started having problems with him and he ended up dropping the class because... we as debaters, even though some of us might not agree with it, we don't like tolerate any discrimination. In this quote, the student assumed being religious implied that someone was homophobic. He may connect the two because the prominent religions in the area, Catholicism and the LDS Church, view homosexuality as sinful. However, although he appeared to hold a negative belief about religiosity, he implied that his group was hesitant to exclude other students from the group for their beliefs ("not agree[ing] with it"). His group waited until the discrimination was verbal, a "derogatory remark," before they excluded a member. However "being religiously oriented" is still important as context for the statement and turns a potentially meaningless homophobic slur into a meaningful one according to the group. In this school, a significant percentage of students self-identified as Catholic and LDS. This large component of religious students appeared to complicate how students viewed homophobic discrimination. Because of this religious majority more passive forms of discrimination (e.g., avoidance, social isolation, and derogatory beliefs) may have been more common. The students on the debate team did not appear to feel comfortable confronting passive discrimination, although they may have assuaged it by befriending homosexuals. However, when the students on the debate team perceived overt discrimination, especially motivated by religious belief, they vocally defended against it.

Furthermore because this student had violated a group value, he was excluded and no longer considered a debate student by the group. This reaction implies that violating group norms, in high school, often results in a major shift in group identity and therefore personal identity.

However, although this group of students appeared to be the most adamant about refraining from using *discriminatory* homophobic language, surprisingly they were also among the most adamant defenders that some homophobic language was, in actuality, not homophobic. After reading the assent form, which stated I was studying homophobic language, these students tried to persuade me that words such as *gay* and *faggot* were not generally homophobic. They appeared convinced that these words were currently only mildly associated with homosexuality and in the future these words would lose all connection with homosexuality. Therefore, they felt justified using this language as long as they believed there was no homophobic intention.

Students on the debate team also felt this language should not be used around homosexuals. An awareness that homophobic terms made homosexuals feel uncomfortable implies that these students were also mildly aware that this language was still prejudiced. However, they appeared unaware of this contradiction. Furthermore, despite defending this type of language, many of their “non-homophobic” or “empty” examples of homophobic language use still appeared to be policing sexuality and/or masculinity. Therefore, from my perspective, their purportedly non-homophobic language may still be considered homophobic because it prejudiced heteronormative sexuality and masculinity over homosexuality and femininity.

Conservative religious students. There appeared to be multiple reasons that conservative religious students abstained from using homophobic language. These included the inherent tension experienced from holding contradictory beliefs, affirming everyone’s ability to choose, avoiding offensive language, and having religious morals that affirmed respect and

kindness. Perhaps because of all these reasons, in contrast to the students who belonged to the debate team, religious students appeared more likely to believe that homophobic epithets were inappropriate regardless of the context. However, they were perhaps more likely to use homophobic language that they felt defended their beliefs about homosexuality while remaining, from their perspective, kind and respectful. Furthermore, perhaps because of religious convictions, they were also more likely to avoid individuals who they perceived as homosexuals and words and actions associated with homosexuality.

Often religious students appeared to subscribe to both their religious beliefs that homosexuality was immoral and popular social beliefs that homosexuality was justified, even though these beliefs contradicted one another. For these students, holding inconsistent beliefs created a moral dilemma. During the interviews, many of these students attempted to balance these views, often oscillating between the two. For example, one student explained his gay cousin “chose that lifestyle” but also described him as “expressing who he truly was” in the same response. Although these descriptions could coincide, the former implies the ability to choose while the later implies a more justified and inevitable position. For these students, the discomfort of trying to reconcile these beliefs may have heightened their sensitivity to using homophobic language. Furthermore, this awareness was potentially magnified by their own sensitivity of being viewed as homophobic because of their religious beliefs. This sensitivity may have created an even greater caution to avoid such language.

Perhaps to alleviate this tension, religious students often relied on other spiritual principles such as *free will* or *agency*, respecting an individual’s right to make their own choices. Religious students appeared to refrain from homophobic language because they did not feel it was moral to pressure others away from homosexuality through derogatory language.

I'm LDS. I'm very religious. I believe that it is morally wrong. But, with the way some family members are, two uncles out in California. One of them served an LDS mission then came home and you know. He's like 'I don't really believe this anymore' and just kind of went off. So with the way I see it, it's more you love the sinner but hate the sin. So, you still need to show the love to others or the kindness or the respect, but, you don't really let how they feel bug you, because people make their own choices.

In this quote, the student, who is LDS, describes an uncle who the student believes chose an immoral path. However, he attempts to contrast his disagreement with his uncle's decisions with a resolve that "people make their own choices." By affirming others' privilege to make their own choices, many religious students appeared to try to resolve similar moral disagreements about homosexuality. Furthermore, this student implied that if he were to try to alter his uncle's lifestyle, it would be through loving, kind, and respectful behaviors. Many religious students similarly affirmed these behaviors and avoided homophobic language because they believed it was not loving, kind, and respectful.

Conservative religious students also refrained from using homophobic language in general to avoid using derogatory or offensive language. Many of the conservative religious students found this language offensive, but the reasons the language was offensive varied depending on the student's beliefs.

Cause we're taught that, we're taught to have clean language. And so, using cuss words, it seems um...it seems unprofessional, it doesn't seem, it doesn't seem good. And so in the same way, you use gay and fag I mean, it just seems it's just not a, it's not a good way of describing people. It's not a good way of um... it's not uplifting. It usually makes somebody feel bad.

Multiple reasons are offered in this quote for not using homophobic language ranging from considering the language as unprofessional, analogous to a cuss word, and demeaning. Many religious students considered homophobic language to be analogous to a cuss word. This perception was especially strong among orthodox or devoutly religious students. As shown previously, all religious students appeared to find the language offensive because it was demeaning to others.

As demonstrated in the previous two quotes, religious students often struggled with the moral conflict between believing homosexuality was immoral and believing that they needed to be kind to others, including homosexuals. Kindness appeared to be a defining group attribute for many religious students. One student, who described his friends as the “good LDS group” made the following comments:

I say good because of the ones that aren't LDS but they are, they're good, they're respectful, they show respect towards everyone around them....Showing respect, showing kindness, like if somebody is belittling somebody else, we will step in, tell them to back off. Just leave him alone and help lift up the one that's being bullied.

Although not all of the students in this group belonged to the LDS faith, and in fact some were gay, this student still considered them to be a part of the LDS group, and therefore still identified them as LDS. He included the word *good* to try to include his non-LDS peers, perhaps meaning LDS and/or good, and because he recognized that not all LDS students follow the same morals. He included his non-LDS peers because they subscribed to what he implied were LDS morals: being kind, showing respect, and sticking up for people who are picked on. Many religious students similarly described their religions as teaching them these types of morals. Furthermore,

when these students gave into social pressure and used homophobic epithets, they considered their behavior as a violation of their religious standards.

While all religious students appeared to think that the language was offensive because it was demeaning, some of these students also appeared to find homophobic terms offensive because these words represented something immoral. These students may have felt it was more appropriate to use language that affirmed their own belief: "...go back to the Bible one man, one woman. Or yeah, marriage between a man and woman is ordained of God." More aggressively some also expressed their distaste for homosexuality. For example, a group of religious students reportedly targeted a homosexual student, saying "your [deceased] mother would be disappointed [in your sexual preference]." In such instances, religious students who denounced homosexuality, although their denouncement may have been potentially hurtful to others, felt justified in making such declarations because they were professing their belief. Although the statement about the deceased mother was especially hurtful, students felt justified because they viewed themselves as defending the mother's religious beliefs as well as their own.

Some religious students also found any language associated with homosexuality inappropriate and "uncomfortable." Although in the minority, these students appeared to not only want to avoid homophobic slurs but to avoid the topic of homosexuality and homosexual students completely. These students appeared to feel that because both homosexuality and homophobic terms were offensive and immoral, the best strategy was to stay away from both. This tendency to avoid implies that while these students did not target others with homophobic terms, they also did not interact with or include homosexuals and perceived homosexuals as much as other students.

Students who elected to oppose their previous traditional religious beliefs (left their faith) were observed by non-religious students (those who did not identify with religious organizations or religious beliefs) as using homophobic language more frequently than groups of religious students. Non-religious students assumed that students who opposed their previous beliefs no longer felt restricted by religious tenets such as kindness and/or no longer felt pressured to represent their prior religion. However, they still believed that homosexuality was wrong. These students were described as “more willing to actually show that they don’t like it [homosexuality]” in comparison to religious students who “still don’t like it, but they’re gonna be nice about it for the most part. They won’t be like ‘Oh that’s so gay’... [so they can] be good in God’s eyes.”

Although students that left their faith were described as using homophobic language more, it would be logical to assume that not all students who left their faith would follow this same pattern. Some students may continue to value kindness and respect but stop believing homosexuality was sinful, perhaps limiting their use of homophobic language even more. As evidence of this, some religious students reported that they would probably use homophobic language less if they didn’t believe homosexuality was immoral. These convictions probably will largely depend on their current group of friends and the group’s beliefs.

Students that belonged to popular athletic groups. Most of the students I interviewed were involved in some type of sporting activity. While sporting teams and events often came up in examples of homophobic language use, not all sports were equally represented. Students most often identified members of the more popular sports teams as using homophobic language most frequently. Even the actual members of these teams admitted that the use of homophobic language was pervasive among their social group, especially during sporting activities. The more

popular sports were defined by the students as football, baseball, and occasionally basketball.

Although students were able to offer a few examples of homophobic language use while playing other sports (e.g., soccer, track, and golf), members of these sports teams were not identified by others as using homophobic language frequently as were members of more popular teams.

There may have been several reasons for this increased frequency of homophobic language among popular student athletes, as discussed below.

The masculine and physically aggressive nature of popular sports may increase its use. In the context of sports, calling someone gay or demeaning their sexual prowess is another way of calling them weak. Students also reported using homophobic language as a way to call another student *girly* or *soft*. Students reported that this type of language increased dramatically during sporting activities.

As previously discussed in policing popularity, these athletes were popular and therefore may have been more likely to police others' into their group norms. However, this policing behavior appeared to be more consistently enforced within the group than without. Popular students appeared to follow more stringent social rules (e.g., brand name fashion, hypersexuality, masculinity, and normality) and were likely to impose these social expectations on their peers. Interestingly, popular athletic students were thought of as being able to "say whatever [they] wanted... and... have people who back [them] up." Yet, of all the students I interviewed, these students believed that violating social rules would lead to being targeted with homophobic language.

Compulsive heterosexuality appeared to be a common group value among students who belonged to popular athletic teams. Homophobic language was reported to be commonly used among this group to pressure members of the group into casual sexual experiences.

Furthermore, students who were able to have multiple sexual partners were considered to be “the jock of the century.” This compulsive heterosexuality can also be seen in the dominant masculinity discussed above. For example, students appeared to use homophobic language with opposing team members as way of calling them weak, invoking images of being sexually dominated.

In comparison to the students on the debate team and conservative religious students, members of popular athletics teams appeared to have the least amount of conviction about refraining from homophobic language. Although they reported to have a similar rule as most students, not directing the language at actual homosexuals, they were more casual about this rule. As evidence of this casual attitude, unlike the two previous groups, none of the popular student athletes offered examples of standing up for perceived homosexuals. Furthermore, they offered examples of their peers targeting other students, potentially homosexual, who they considered *girly* or *soft*, as previously mentioned. So while they claimed to not direct homophobic language at homosexuals, they did not offer examples to support this statement.

Student athletes were also most likely to describe homophobic language as a sort of litmus test for closeness. They described using homophobic language most with their closest friends. In this context, use of homophobic language may have been a playful way to be vulnerable or may have offered an opportunity to act outside of the group’s stringent social norms by acting out their femininity and/or pretending that they or their friends were gay. One student described this process with his coaches, reporting that some of them liked to maintain a professional distance and others were more like friends. One way he determined closeness was his ability to use homophobic language with the coach.

Discussion

This study utilized semi-structured interviews that were analyzed using a hermeneutic method. The research was conducted in a rural town within the Mountain West. Due to the method and interview location, this study has some inherent weaknesses, which may limit the generalizability of the data. The themes found in this study are, in part, constructs created by the researcher, but they are also informed by student interviews and previous research. In order to establish the validity of these themes and to avoid bias, I used researcher reflexivity and relied on an expert external auditor to validate these themes. However, the authority of these themes relies primarily on my interpretations and not on the reliability and validity of a specific instrument.

Nevertheless, the location and method also have some specific strengths. Because qualitative research is not constrained by specific questions and a defined set of quantitative response options, this type of research allows for richer data. Semi-structured interviews allowed the participant and researcher to explore and discover novel data together. In comparison to other qualitative studies, I was able to analyze the data without the limiting influence of an explicit theory and therefore discover novel themes. The location of the interviews was also an advantage because, to the researcher's knowledge, other research studies have not examined the use of homophobic language in the Mountain West. Furthermore, the area where the interviews were conducted offered a dominant population of students belonging to conservative religious groups, primarily from the Catholic and LDS faith. This unique setting allowed researchers to thoughtfully interpret the influence of these religions on the adolescent use of homophobic language.

Although the previous results were divided into different themes, I would like to note that pulling separate individual themes from the research was a difficult task. As the reader may notice, many of the themes often overlapped with one another. For example, teenage sexuality may be strongly influenced by teenage masculine roles. However, several researchers involved in previous qualitative research have made the mistake of assuming that sexuality falls under the umbrella of masculinity (Pascoe, 2007, Phoenix et al., 2003). This research varies from previous qualitative research because it assumes that sexuality is an equally valid construct, and therefore sexuality and masculinity mutually influence each other. I recognize that both masculinity and sexuality are constructs that in part, were redefined by me, informed by existing research and the interviews conducted with students. Hopefully this process of redefining constructs facilitated a better understanding of the intentions behind homophobic language.

In order to consider homophobic language use at a more local and contextual level, I examined and discussed group values and how they influenced homophobic language. These groups were chosen because I had a significant number of students from these groups and because they seemed to have fairly consistent values around homophobic language use. However these groups were not as discrete as the results may lead the reader to believe. Students were not limited to one group. For example, some of the students I interviewed belonged to both the debate team and to a conservative religion. This dual membership complicates the understanding of group values because groups were made of individuals with varying values due to their dual allegiance. However, I chose to look at groups distinctly to try to understand the core values of specific groups. Students belonging to multiple groups were more likely to vacillate between positions than more loyal members. Individuals that were more loyal to their group more consistently aligned their values with their group.

In the past, the majority of qualitative studies on homophobic language have been guided by feminist theory, primarily finding homophobic language was used to police masculinity (Oransky & Marecek, 2009; Pascoe, 2007; Phoenix et al., 2003). However, in these interviews, additional themes beyond masculinity emerged from the data. For example, I found that sexuality, popularity, and normality were all policed through homophobic language. What these themes all have in common is social power. Perhaps one student described homophobic language most succinctly by describing homophobic terms as another way to call someone “less than.” Therefore, by calling someone *gay* or a *queer*, a student is saying more than you are less than masculine, but also saying you are less than a heterosexual, less than popular, and less than normal. Consequently, students who had more masculinity, heterosexuality, popularity, and normality were also more protected against homophobic language. This finding may indicate that homophobic language use is highly related to other types of bullying where targets, regardless of other circumstances, are singled out because they are socially rejected and isolated (Rodkin, Espelage, & Hanish, 2015).

The implications of such findings indicate that homophobic language could potentially decrease if not for the explicit and implicit hierarchy of assigned values and attributes that exist within high schools. Additionally, these interviews also evidenced the tenacity of students who so adamantly monitor these entrenched hierarchies. Students often defined the most offensive context for homophobic language as when more popular groups targeted less popular groups. A recent review of the literature found that bullies often target other groups of students to modify other students’ behavior and establish group boundaries (Rodkin et al., 2015). By decreasing the focus on social hierarchies and increasing the focus on valuing student diversity, educators may assist students in tempering the use of and offensiveness of homophobic language.

Empathy and perspective taking were associated with decreased use of homophobic language in the current study and previous research (Poteat, DiGiovanni, & Scheer, 2013). One way to encourage these skills and challenge the explicit social hierarchy within schools may be to lead mixed-group discussions about the use of discriminatory language. Mixed-group discussions among individuals who hold varying levels of prejudice have been shown to decrease bigotry among more prejudiced students (Aboud, 1989; Aboud & Doyle, 1996). These discussions may include explicitly teaching values such as kindness, respect, and valuing others' ability to choose, values that underlie morals which appear to help students refrain from using homophobic language.

However, this study also indicated that while religious values may decrease homophobic language use, they may not decrease students' discomfort around, avoidance of, and exclusion of homosexuals or perceived homosexuals. This finding may describe one of the reasons for religious (specifically LDS) people using less homophobic language, while scoring higher on measures of homophobia (Myler 2009; Pascoe, 2007). Therefore, discussions with students must be closely monitored to create a safe space for students to express how they have been affected by this type of language, including how they have been affected by social avoidance. Furthermore, discussions may be most helpful if some heterosexual students were able to express how they have been targeted with and hurt by homophobic language or homophobia. This suggestion is especially important because it appears that students still believe that homophobic language is only harmful towards people who are homosexual.

As demonstrated in the results section of this paper and other research, homophobic language polices sexuality as well as masculinity, and sexuality appears to have a distinct identity beyond masculinity (McCormack & Anderson, 2010). Therefore, it may be beneficial

to direct future research more specifically at how homophobic language is sexual and interacts with a student's sexual identity. From one perspective, it appears that within-group homophobic language may be a form of sexual play where students have an excuse to explore sexuality and their intimacy with the group. Pascoe (2007) explored this use of the language among the drama students, but this possibility should be further explored among different groups of students (p. 78). Future research should further examine how even though this type of language may have some social benefit, the language also yields the power to be hurtful and demeaning.

A recent review of the bullying literature indicates that classroom and school attitudes and policies have been shown to moderate bullying (Bradshaw, 2015). These findings imply that teachers and coaches attitudes appear to be a meaningful predictor of students' behaviors. Although fairly infrequent, students in the current study could identify teachers that did not tolerate homophobic language in their classes. These adolescents believed that this prevented students from using such language. These findings should empower teachers to more actively address and curb students' use of homophobic language.

The underlying motivation and the expression of homophobic language were unique to each group of students. Furthermore, beliefs about and frequency of homophobic language use appeared to vary from group to group. Therefore, in addition to having mixed-group discussions, schools may also benefit from having within-group discussions among group members, so that each group could address their own specific challenges.

Within-group discussions may be more appropriate for those groups that are specifically tied to the school. With adolescent male groups, identifying respected adult leaders to conduct these groups may be more effective than solely relying on peer-to-peer discussion, as male peer

led interventions have been shown to be less effective (Salmivalli, 2001). These groups could be led by supervising school staff, such as a coach or the debate team teacher.

Students who are heavily influenced by their religious affiliation may more fully benefit from having discussions led by religious leaders outside of the school. Leaders who are familiar with the specific religious perspective may be better able to understand the student's context, but may also be blinded by their shared biases. Therefore, all within group discussions may further benefit by including outside leaders who are able to offer different perspectives.

Issues addressed would vary from group to group. Specifically, based on the results from the current study, a coach may benefit from addressing more appropriate forms of competitive language; the debate coach may benefit from addressing how homophobic language is always discriminatory, regardless of context; and a religious leader may benefit from addressing how social avoidance and exclusion are just as harmful as directed homophobic language. Further studies should be completed to examine the effectiveness of within-group discussions.

Other research, in addition to this research, has shown that context is important for understanding the meanings for homophobic language (McCormack, 2011). Some researchers have recognized this and explicitly explored homophobic language use among athletes, because they recognized that homophobic language is commonly used in sports (McCormack & Anderson, 2010). Although Pascoe's study examined homophobic language use across high school groups, her findings are limited because she primarily examined how homophobic language polices masculinity, rather than exploring other ways in which the language was used (McCormack & Anderson, 2010; Pascoe, 2007). The current study examined three peer groups of students. To more fully consider multiple contexts, future research needs to look at how

homophobic language is used within a variety of groups, specifically more in depth studies of peer groups within high schools.

One caution in creating group discussions is that boys may be less willing to self-disclose potentially embarrassing information (Phoenix et al., 2003). Males' lack of self-disclosure may be one reason that peer led bullying interventions are effective among females but not males (Rodkin et al., 2015). Group discussions were recommended because of their ability to help students decrease prejudice (Aboud & Doyle, 1996). However, if group discussions appear to inhibit candid responses of group members, groups may be modified to include a smaller number of participants or even a one-on-one, in-depth discussion between an influential leader and a student.

In her recent review of the literature in an article for *American Psychologist*, Bradshaw found that bullying prevention programs that encouraged bystanders to intervene were generally effective (2015). In the current study, many students offered examples of times that they prevented others from being targeted by homophobic language. They further reported that their interventions were often effective. These students often intervened when they felt empathy for a targeted student and/or because they had an individual or group value of being kind to others. Students often learned these values from religious institutions, influential adults, and school programs. Many such students in the current study belonged to the school club called the Friends of Rachel Club, a club named after a victim of school shooting (Rachel's Challenge, 2015). These students prided themselves on defending and befriending less popular peers. Therefore, adults, religious institutions, and school programs should emphasize the power of bystanders.

Previous research supports the claim that lower prejudice and more inclusive ideologies correlate with lower homophobic language use (Kosciw, Bartkiewicz, & Greytak, 2012; Poteat et al., 2013). The current study indicates that adolescent males' perceptions of homophobic language are highly influenced by the general culture. As such, students learn the rules about masculinity, sexuality, popularity, and normality from the media, their peers, peer groups, influential adults, religious teachings, and other cultural influences. Although interventions targeting groups of students may be helpful—ultimately a larger cultural shift towards engagement with and an understanding of marginalized groups must occur.

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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 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)

What is this study about?

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.

What am I being asked to do?

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.

What are the benefits to me for taking part in the study?

By participating in this study you can help us understand homophobic language better and also ways to prevent it from happening.

Can anything bad happen if I am in this study?

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.

Who will know that I am in the study?

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.

Do I have to be in the study?

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.

What if I have questions?

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: _____