

The Role of Peers in Predicting Students' Homophobic Behavior: Effects of Peer Aggression,
Prejudice, and Sexual Orientation Identity Importance

V. Paul Poteat

Boston College

Ian Rivers

University of Strathclyde

Olivier Vecho

Université Paris Ouest - Nanterre La Défense

Corresponding author contact information: V. Paul Poteat, Boston College, Department of
Counseling, Developmental, and Educational Psychology, Champion Hall 307, 140
Commonwealth Ave., Chestnut Hill, MA 02467. Email: poteatp@bc.edu

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Abstract

Drawing from an ecological framework, there has been growing attention to the role of peers in accounting for adolescents' homophobic behavior. In this study, we considered whether individuals' homophobic behavior could be attributed to their peers' collective levels of aggression, sexual prejudice, and importance placed on their sexual orientation identity among 437 high school students (89% white; 61% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 15.72$ years) in 62 peer groups identified through social network analysis. Using multilevel modeling, we found that individuals in more homophobic and aggressive peer groups engaged in even more homophobic behavior than accounted for based solely on their own individual prejudice attitudes and aggressive behavior. Furthermore, individuals' sexual prejudice was a stronger predictor of their engagement in homophobic behavior for those in groups whose peers collectively placed greater importance on sexual orientation identity and were more aggressive. These findings begin to provide a fuller sense of how individual and peer attributes combine and interact in ways that account for individuals' engagement in homophobic behavior.

Keywords: Homophobia; Bullying; Sexual prejudice; Peer groups; Socialization; Social identity

The Role of Peers in Predicting Students' Homophobic Behavior: Effects of Peer Aggression, Prejudice, and Sexual Orientation Identity Importance

Given the continued prevalence and serious consequences of homophobic behavior and harassment in schools (Birkett, Russell, & Corliss, 2014; Collier, Bos, & Sandfort, 2013), more studies are aiming to identify factors that perpetuate this behavior. Though studies have focused on individual attributes and characteristics (for a review, see Rivers, 2011), emerging studies have begun to adopt a broader ecological framework, in greater alignment with the general bullying literature (Birkett & Espelage, 2015; Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Poteat, 2007). With this attention to larger social systems, an immediate focus has been on the roles of peers and peer group norms and dynamics related to this behavior. Attention to the peer context is highly relevant, as adolescence is a period during which peers exert a strong influence on individuals' behaviors through group norms and ongoing interactions (Berndt, 2002; Veenstra, Dijkstra, Steglich, & Van Zalk, 2013). There has been an expansive range of documented peer effects on various behaviors (e.g., academic achievement, substance use; Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011), though few studies have focused on discrimination or homophobic behavior, specifically. To provide a more comprehensive understanding of homophobic behavior (e.g., homophobic epithet use, derogatory jokes against sexual minorities, disparaging behaviors toward others based on their assumed sexual minority identity), research must consider how individual attributes and contextual factors combine and interact in ways to perpetuate this behavior.

As reflected in ecological theories (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), individuals are situated within proximal social contexts, one being peer groups. Because of the interdependence, mutual influence, collective beliefs, and shared experiences among individuals within these groups, individuals' behaviors can be partly attributed to characteristics of their peers

(McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Rusbolt & Van Lange, 2003). Ecological and social network theories thus have been applied in the general bullying literature to frame this behavior as a group-based process involving individuals in multiple roles and being influenced by various group norms (Salmivalli, 2010). In this same manner, in this study we consider peer group contextual effects that could account for adolescents' homophobic behavior over and above what could be attributed to individuals' own relevant attitudes and behaviors.

Contextual Effects of Peer Attitudes and Behaviors

Congruent with the general bullying literature, emerging studies show that peers engage in similar amounts of homophobic behavior and that peer groups are notably distinct from one another on such behavior (Birkett & Espelage, 2015; Poteat, 2007). In addition, individuals whose peers initially engage in more homophobic behavior later themselves engage in this behavior at greater rates (Poteat, 2007). Studies have also identified peer effects based on attitudes and behaviors held collectively among group members. For instance, collective beliefs about masculinity in all-male peer groups are associated with homophobic behavior, over and above what would be anticipated based on an individual's own masculinity beliefs (Birkett & Espelage, 2015). Similarly, the collective sexual prejudice (i.e., negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men) of individuals' peers has an added contextual effect in predicting even higher rates of homophobic epithet use (Poteat, 2008). In this study, we consider three variables at the individual and peer level that could account for individuals' homophobic behavior: level of aggressive behavior in general (e.g., hitting, exclusion, or rumor-spreading without explicit regard to the targeted individual's sexual orientation), sexual prejudice attitudes, and the importance that individuals place on their sexual orientation identity.

Homophobic behavior and generally aggressive behavior (e.g., physical or relational aggression and bullying) are strongly correlated in quantitative studies and students have noted their overlap in qualitative interviews (Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003; Poteat, O'Dwyer, & Mereish, 2012; Thurlow, 2001). For instance, students use homophobic epithets and engage in homophobic behavior to intensify the effects of their aggressive behavior (Rivers, 2001; Russell, Sinclair, Poteat, & Koenig, 2012). We expect that the generally aggressive behavior of peers (i.e., aggressive behavior not explicitly homophobic in nature and directed toward any youth regardless of their actual or assumed sexual orientation) will also contribute to individuals' own level of homophobic behavior. We base this premise on the findings of Salmivalli and colleagues that individuals can adopt multiple roles aside from the primary aggressor role as part of bullying (Salmivalli, 2010; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). Some students reinforce or support primary instigators of bullying, and in the context of the present study it seems likely that they too could engage in homophobic behavior when adopting these secondary roles. Thus, we expect that students most likely to engage in homophobic behavior are those who themselves engage in high levels of general aggression and whose peers also engage in high levels of general aggression.

In a similar manner, earlier investigations have shown that homophobic behavior is correlated with sexual prejudice, wherein individuals who express stronger negative attitudes toward lesbian and gay individuals are more likely to use homophobic epithets and engage in more homophobic aggression (Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010). We draw from the social psychological literature on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) to frame the connection between sexual prejudice and homophobic behavior. As noted in this theory, individuals engage in behaviors to differentiate themselves from outgroup members in order to create positive ingroup distinctiveness and to decrease any threat of being misclassified as an outgroup member

(Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Thus, students who express strong sexual prejudice may engage in more homophobic behavior because they are more averse to being misclassified into a group toward whom they hold strong negative attitudes, and they may also engage in this behavior to further denigrate sexual minorities and to elevate heterosexual identities.

From a broader context-based perspective, individuals who express strong sexual prejudice and whose peers also express strong sexual prejudice may engage in even greater homophobic behavior on account of banter occurring among the members of these groups. Past findings have shown that adolescents who are called homophobic epithets are also more likely to use homophobic epithets themselves when they are in peer groups that collectively hold stronger prejudice attitudes (Poteat, 2008). Such banter may occur less frequently among adolescents who hold prejudice beliefs but whose friends do not express as high a level of prejudice. Also, individuals in more prejudiced peer groups may use homophobic behavior as an overt way to emphasize their shared beliefs and reinforce their membership or status within the peer group (Rivers, 2011). Indeed, prejudiced peers may encourage other group members to engage in homophobic behavior for various other reasons (e.g., reinforcing the use of homophobic behavior against individuals outside the group).

Finally, linked to our observations above, social identity theory could also explain potential variability in individuals' homophobic behavior on account of how important they view their sexual orientation in relation to their overall self-concept. For individuals whose sexual orientation identities are salient and central to their overall self-concept, this may be a primary category that they use to classify others as either an accepted ingroup member or a highly derogated outgroup member. Similar to those expressing strong sexual prejudice, they may be especially averse to others misidentifying their sexual orientation group membership, in this case

because they ascribe high importance to this aspect of their identity. Individuals who identify more strongly with their ingroup are more likely to engage in differentiating behaviors (Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1997). Homophobic behavior may be one overt form of differentiating behavior among adolescents. Although this may apply mainly to heterosexual youth, to some extent this could also apply to sexual minority youth who have not disclosed their identity and may not want peers to suspect their sexual minority identity. Given that this fear is based on others' misclassification of one's group membership, individuals' homophobic behavior also may be connected to the importance that their peers place on sexual orientation identity.

Adolescents who are members of groups where this is a central part of everyone's sense of identity may feel pressured to prove their sexuality to their peers. In fact, a number of adolescents do report feeling pressured to prove their sexuality to their peers to avoid being the target of homophobic bullying (Pascoe, 2007; Phoenix et al., 2003; Plummer, 2001).

Interactions between Individual and Peer Attributes

While collective peer attitudes and behaviors may have additive contextual effects as described above, it is also possible that homophobic behavior is prompted by a dynamic interaction between individuals' own attributes and the attributes of their peers. In this case, certain individual attributes (e.g., sexual prejudice) may lead adolescents to engage in homophobic behavior particularly under certain social conditions (e.g., when there are certain collective attitudes or behavioral dynamics present within their peer group). Thus, the strength of association between individual attributes and homophobic behavior may vary across peer groups. We consider these potential interaction effects for exploratory purposes.

As one example of a potential interaction effect, the association between individuals' sexual prejudice and homophobic behavior may be moderated by the level of importance their

peers place on sexual orientation identity. Affiliating with peers who collectively place a high level of importance on sexual orientation identity as a way of categorizing themselves and others may magnify homophobic behavior among prejudiced adolescents in particular. Under these conditions, prejudiced adolescents may engage in much more homophobic behavior to constantly avoid being misclassified by peers who view this as a salient identity; prejudiced adolescents may be triggered to do this more so than less prejudiced adolescents because they hold negative attitudes toward the outgroup into which they would be misclassified. In this sense, peer-level sexual orientation identity importance may not simply predict greater homophobic behavior in and of itself (i.e., representing a contextual effect), but it may magnify homophobic behavior among particular individuals (i.e., individuals who express greater prejudice).

The Current Study

We used the current study to build on the emerging attention to the role of peers in accounting for adolescents' homophobic behavior. Specifically, we considered whether individuals' homophobic behavior could be partly attributed to their peers' collective level of aggression, sexual prejudice, and importance placed on sexual orientation identity. Further, we considered whether these collective peer attitudes and behaviors interacted with individuals' own attitudes and behaviors to magnify the extent to which they engaged in homophobic behavior.

As preliminary hypotheses, we expected to identify gender differences on sexual prejudice and homophobic behavior based on prior findings (Birkett & Espelage, 2015; Mata, Ghavami, & Wittig, 2010; Poteat et al., 2012). Specifically, we hypothesized that boys would report stronger sexual prejudice and more frequent engagement in homophobic behavior than girls, as documented in these past studies. Also, we expected that each of our variables (i.e.,

aggression, sexual prejudice, and sexual orientation identity importance) would have significant bivariate associations with homophobic behavior.

As our main hypotheses, we first expected that peer groups would be distinct from one another in their amount of engagement in homophobic behavior based on past findings (Birkett & Espelage, 2015; Potrat, 2007). Second, while accounting for the contribution of individuals' own level of aggression, sexual prejudice, and importance they placed on their sexual orientation identity, we hypothesized that there would be added peer contextual effects for these factors accounting for individuals' homophobic behavior. As an example, we expected that adolescents' own sexual prejudice would relate to their homophobic behavior, and that affiliating with prejudiced peers would relate to even greater homophobic behavior, over and above levels anticipated based on individuals' own attitudes. Finally, we considered whether these collective peer attitudes and behaviors might interact with individuals' own attitudes and behaviors in a way that could magnify their engagement in homophobic behavior. To do so, we first tested whether the strength of the association between individuals' homophobic behavior and their aggression, prejudice, and identity importance varied across peer groups. In those cases where there was significant variance, we tested these collective peer attitudes and behaviors as cross-level moderators of the association.

Method

Participants and Procedure

There were 618 students (85% of the total school population) in grades 9 to 12 who participated. Of the participants, 437 were identified as members of peer groups based on the social network analysis described below and were included in the current study. Most of these students identified as White (89%), then as Hispanic/Latino (3%), Asian American (2%), African

American (2%), biracial or multiracial (2%) and 1% self-reported other racial or ethnic identities; 1% did not report their race or ethnicity. Also, 93% of students identified as heterosexual, 2% as bisexual, 2% as questioning their sexual orientation, 1% as gay or lesbian, and 1% self-reported other sexual orientation identities; 1% did not report their sexual orientation identity. There was a slightly higher representation of girls (61%) than boys in the sample. Ages ranged from 14 to 18 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 15.72$ years, $SD = 1.18$). The demographics of this sample were comparable to the full participant sample.

Parent consent forms were collected for their children to participate in the current study. Parents returned the form if they did not want their child to participate. The school district and university Institutional Review Board approved a waiver of active parental consent and the use of child assent based on the deemed minimal risk of the study. Students were asked to provide their assent to participate after receiving a general description of the study. Each student was given a unique code number to use on their survey to ensure confidentiality of their responses and to facilitate the peer friendship nomination process. Students completed the survey during 45-minute homeroom class periods (these are not standard courses, but instead are held only for specific events throughout the year). Proctors monitored sessions to answer questions and to ensure confidentiality. All surveys were collected prior to the end of the period.

Measures

Demographics. Students reported their age, grade, gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation identity.

Aggressive behavior. Four items assessed students' physically and relationally aggressive behavior over the past 30 days: (a) I spread a rumor about another student; (b) I excluded others from my group of friends; (c) I hit or pushed another student; and, (d) I picked

on, teased, or made fun of others. These items are common indices of aggression in self-report and peer-nomination measures (e.g., Crick, 1996; Solberg & Olweus, 2003). Response options were *0 times*, *1 or 2 times*, *3 or 4 times*, *5 or 6 times*, and *7 or more times* (scaled 0 to 4). Higher average scale scores represent more frequent engagement in aggressive behaviors. The internal consistency estimate was $\alpha = .74$.

Sexual prejudice. Five semantic-differential items asked students about their attitudes toward lesbian and gay individuals (Vonofakou, Hewstone, & Voci, 2007). Items were preceded by the stem, “When you think about gay and lesbian individuals as a group how would you describe your feelings?” The items were *respect-disapprove*, *friendly-hostile*, *negative-positive* (reverse-coded), *admire-dislike*, and *suspicious-trusting* (reverse-coded), scaled 1 to 9. Higher average scale scores indicate greater sexual prejudice. The internal consistency estimate was $\alpha = .91$.

Importance of sexual orientation identity. The 4-item Identity scale of the Collective Self-Esteem Scale (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) assessed the importance of students’ sexual orientation identity (e.g., “My sexual orientation is an important reflection of who I am”). Response options range from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Higher average scale scores represent placing a greater importance on one’s sexual orientation identity. The internal consistency estimate was $\alpha = .76$.

Friendship nominations. Students were asked to list up to eight students in their grade who they considered their closest friends: “Who are your closest friends at school (peers who you spend the most time with, often outside of class)? Please name only students in your grade. You can list less than eight people.” They were provided a list with code numbers pre-assigned

to each student in the grade to be used. These nominations were used in the social network analysis to identify peer groups.

Homophobic behavior. Five items assessed students' homophobic behavior over the past 30 days, preceded by the general stem, "Some kids call each other names or use phrases like that's/you're so gay, no homo, fag, dyke, queer, etc. In the last 30 days..." The items were: (a) I called a friend one of these words; (b) I called someone I didn't like one of these words; (c) I used phrases like "that's so gay" or "no homo" in a conversation; (d) I made a joke about gays, lesbians, or bisexuals; and, (e) I spread a rumor about someone being gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Response options were *zero times*, *1 or 2 times*, *3 or 4 times*, *5 or 6 times*, and *7 or more times* (scaled 0 to 4). Higher average scale scores represent more engagement in homophobic behavior. The internal consistency estimate was $\alpha = .83$.

Peer Group Identification

We identified peer groups based on reciprocated friendship nominations from the peer nominations data. Given the focus of the current study on collective peer attitudes and behaviors related to individuals' homophobic behavior, students who were not identified as members of a peer group were not included in the analyses. We used the Girvan-Newman algorithm (Girvan & Newman, 2002) within UCINET 6 (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002) to identify peer groups. This algorithm identifies groups of students who are highly connected within the group relative to individuals outside the group. Notably, students are not placed into multiple groups, making this method ideal for multilevel modeling analyses (Gest, Moody, Rullison, 2007). Also, a fit statistic (Q) is provided for each possible number of peer groups to aid in identifying the optimal solution. Larger Q values denote better fitting solutions, with good fitting group structures ranging from 0.3 to 0.7 (Du, Feldman, Li, & Jin, 2007). These analyses led to the identification

of 62 peer groups across the grade levels (15 groups each in Grades 9 to 11, and 17 groups in Grade 12; $Q = 0.83, 0.83, 0.85, \text{ and } 0.84$). A total of 437 students were identified as members of peer groups, which ranged in size from two to 19 students with an average of seven students per group. There were fifteen dyadic groups, seven groups with three members, four groups with four members, four groups with five members, three groups with six members, three groups with seven members, one group with eight members, three groups with nine members, three groups with ten members, nine groups with eleven members, four groups with thirteen members, three groups with fourteen members, two groups with seventeen members, and one group with nineteen members. When comparing students who were or who were not identified as members of peer groups on aggressive behavior, sexual prejudice, importance of sexual orientation identity, and homophobic behavior, the MANOVA was significant, Wilks' $\Lambda = .97, F(4, 556) = 4.34, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .03$. The follow-up ANOVAs indicated that there were two significant differences, though with small effect sizes: non-group members reported higher levels of sexual prejudice, $F(1, 560) = 15.07, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .03$, and more homophobic behavior, $F(1, 560) = 5.40, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .01$.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

A MANOVA to test for gender differences on our set of variables was significant, Wilks' $\Lambda = .81, F(4, 421) = 24.01, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .19$. Follow-up ANOVAs indicated that boys reported more aggressive behavior, $F(1, 424) = 8.91, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .02$, greater sexual prejudice, $F(1, 424) = 66.21, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .14$, and more homophobic behavior, $F(1, 424) = 57.41, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .12$, but there were no gender differences on sexual orientation identity importance, $F(1, 424) = 3.33, p = .07$. Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1.

As hypothesized, engagement in more homophobic behavior was associated with more aggressive behavior ($r = .59, p < .001$), greater sexual prejudice ($r = .40, p < .001$), and greater sexual orientation identity importance ($r = .17, p < .01$), though not with grade level ($r = .05, p = .31$). Bivariate associations among all the variables are included in Table 2.

Multilevel Models

We used HLM 7.0 to test our multilevel models. The fully unconditional null model indicated significant variability across groups in the amount of reported homophobic behavior ($\chi^2 = 203.05, p < .001$). The amount of variance within peer groups was 0.44 and the amount of variance between peer groups was 0.18; thus, the intraclass correlation coefficient indicated that 29% of the total variance in homophobic behavior was between peer groups.

In our multilevel model, our independent variables at Level 1 were individuals' gender and sexual orientation, as well as their own level of sexual prejudice, aggression, and importance of their sexual orientation identity. The continuous variables at Level 1 were group-mean centered around the average of the members of their peer groups for the multilevel analyses, which is beneficial when testing for proximal contextual effects at Level 2 (Kreft, de Leeuw, & Aiken, 1995). Though they represented only a small proportion of the participant sample, we included sexual minority students in the analyses (while including sexual orientation as a covariate) because their attitudes and behaviors contributed to the collective attitudes and behaviors of their groups. We also considered the interaction between sexual orientation and our other variables, but all effects were non-significant; thus, the interactions were excluded to present the most parsimonious models. The composite average sexual prejudice, aggression, and sexual orientation identity importance of students in each peer group served as indicators of that group's collective attitudes and behaviors and were included at Level 2 as predictors of the Level

1 intercept. The size of the group was also included as a covariate. We initially included the gender and sexual orientation compositions of the peer groups as covariates, but neither were significant; we thus present the more parsimonious models. At Level 1, stronger sexual prejudice ($b = 0.07, p < .01$) and engagement in more aggressive behavior ($b = 0.66, p < .001$) were associated with engagement in more homophobic behavior, and girls reported less homophobic behavior than boys ($b = -0.22, p < .001$). The amount of variance at Level 1 was reduced to 0.28; the pseudo- R^2 value, representing the proportional reduction in the amount of variance relative to the amount of variance in the original null model (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002), indicated that this model accounted for 36% of the variance at this level. At Level 2, there were significant contextual effects for peer sexual prejudice ($\gamma = 0.13, p < .01$) and peer aggression ($\gamma = 1.09, p < .001$). As hypothesized, the sexual prejudice and aggression levels of individuals' peers predicted their engagement in homophobic behavior over and above what was predicted by their own sexual prejudice and aggression. The amount of variance at Level 2 was reduced to 0.02; the pseudo- R^2 value indicated that this model accounted for 89% of the variance at this level. Table 3 includes all fixed effects estimates.

In our next set of multilevel models, we tested whether the strength of association between individual attributes and homophobic behavior varied across peer groups. There was significant variance across peer groups in the extent to which individuals' prejudice was associated with their level of homophobic behavior ($\chi^2 = 93.35, p < .01$). There was not significant variance across groups in the association between individuals' own aggressive behavior and their homophobic behavior ($\chi^2 = 44.34, p > .50$) or between individuals' own sexual orientation identity importance and their homophobic behavior ($\chi^2 = 59.50, p = .39$). To account for the variance across groups in the association between individuals' own prejudice and

homophobic behavior, we added peer identity importance as a cross-level moderator in one model, peer aggression as a cross-level moderator in another model, and peers' collective prejudice attitudes as a cross-level moderator in a final model. All other original variables from the initial contextual effects model were retained. The collective importance that individuals' peers placed on their sexual orientation identity magnified the extent to which individuals' sexual prejudice predicted their amount of homophobic behavior ($\gamma = 0.10, p < .001$), as did the collective aggression levels of individuals' peers ($\gamma = 0.20, p < .01$). Peer sexual prejudice did not moderate this association ($\gamma = 0.03, p = .14$). In effect, prejudiced students were especially likely to engage in homophobic behavior when they were in peer groups whose members collectively viewed sexual orientation as highly important to their identity and who were more aggressive. Table 3 includes all fixed effects estimates. The cross-level moderating effects are displayed in Figures 1 and 2.

Discussion

Just as research on bullying has come to recognize the need to address this behavior from an ecological framework, this same framework appears critical for efforts to address homophobic behavior. By considering individuals within their peer groups, the current findings underscore the relevance of peer attitudes and behaviors in accounting for individuals' own engagement in homophobic behavior. Individuals in more homophobic and aggressive peer groups engaged in even more homophobic behavior than accounted for based solely on their own prejudice attitudes and aggression. Furthermore, individuals' prejudice attitudes were stronger predictors of their homophobic behavior for individuals in groups whose peers collectively placed greater importance on their sexual orientation identity and whose peers were more aggressive. These

findings begin to provide a fuller sense of how individual and peer attributes combine and interact in ways that could explain how homophobic behavior is perpetuated.

Peer Contextual Effects on Individual Homophobic Behavior

Peer groups were distinct in their levels of engagement in homophobic behavior, similar to patterns of homophily identified in other studies (Birkett & Espelage, 2015; Poteat, 2007). This finding could inform certain intervention strategies, such as using targeted approaches to work with groups of students who may be most responsible for the majority of homophobic behavior in schools. Also as hypothesized, groups that engaged in more homophobic behavior could be characterized as collectively more prejudiced and more aggressive.

There are several explanations for why affiliating with more aggressive peers accounted for more homophobic behavior, over and above individuals' own reported levels of aggression. While the association between these variables at the individual level was expected (Phoenix et al., 2003; Poteat et al., 2012; Rivers, 2001; Russell et al., 2012), it is important to recognize and account for the multiple roles that individuals can adopt during bullying episodes (Rivers, 2012; Salmivalli, 2010). In addition to being the primary aggressor in certain instances of harassment, students in more aggressive peer groups may have also engaged in homophobic behavior when other aggressive members of their peer group took on this primary role.

The prejudice attitudes of individuals' peers also had contextual effects accounting for their homophobic behavior. This finding continues to highlight the need to consider the social context in which prejudice is expressed. Separate from engaging in this behavior as part of general aggression and harassment, some students may have engaged in homophobic behavior with the intent to express their negative attitudes against sexual minorities to their peers. Drawing on points of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), this association may also be

explained based on prejudiced individuals' greater aversion to being misclassified by their peers into a group (i.e., sexual minority groups) toward which they held strongly negative attitudes. This motivation also could have been prompted by several interpersonal dynamics among peers in these groups. First, this finding could align with prior reports from some adolescents that they use homophobic epithets as part of banter among friends (Korobov, 2004; Pascoe, 2007; Phoenix et al., 2003), or other findings that some adolescents and adults express prejudice attitudes through humor (Guerin, 2003; Hodson, Rush, & MacInnis, 2010). Indeed, many of these studies have highlighted the occurrence of homophobic banter particularly among boys, which could also relate to our finding that boys reported more homophobic behavior than girls, as in other prior studies (Mata et al., 2010; Poteat et al., 2012). Our findings would further suggest that these interpersonal exchanges may occur more frequently when members collectively report higher levels of prejudice. These distinct interpersonal processes that emerge based on multiple members' prejudice attitudes, as opposed to a single individual's prejudice attitudes, could explain the added contextual effect of peer prejudice that we documented.

Contrary to our expectations, the collective importance that peers placed on their sexual orientation as part of their overall self-concept did not have added contextual effects on individuals' own homophobic behavior. Peer prejudice and aggression may have simply been stronger and more relevant than this factor. The importance that an individual or group places on their sexual orientation identity may not inevitably lead them to engage in homophobic behavior as part of differentiating behavior (e.g., to avoid misclassification; Jetten et al., 1997), especially when controlling for their own and their peers' level of prejudice. As we later discuss, however, identity importance did emerge as a significant cross-level moderator.

Cross-Level Interactions between Individual and Peer Factors

Two cross-level moderating effects captured additional complexity in how individual and peer factors interacted to account for individuals' homophobic behavior. Specifically, prejudice was a stronger predictor of homophobic behavior for individuals whose peers collectively placed greater importance on sexual orientation identity and were more aggressive. In the general literature on prejudice, individuals are more likely to express or condone discrimination when they believe that the circumstances or context could be used as justification (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003; Dovidio, Brigham, Johnson, & Gaertner, 1996). In this case, students expressing strong sexual prejudice may have been especially likely to engage in homophobic behavior among aggressive peers or peers for whom sexual orientation was salient because they may have perceived that these peers would be more likely to approve of this behavior or they may have felt more pressured to engage in this behavior.

In relation to the cross-level moderating effect of identity importance, prejudiced adolescents may have been especially triggered to engage in homophobic behavior when among peers who collectively viewed sexual orientation as a highly salient referent category. This elevated homophobic behavior among prejudiced adolescents could have stemmed from a greater aversion to misclassification by their peers, in part because of their own more negative views toward sexual minorities. Peers in this context may have more frequently questioned or sought to confirm others' sexual orientation through overt or subtle means; this could be especially likely during adolescence when sexuality and sexual orientation identity continue to develop for many individuals (Floyd & Stein, 2002; Mustanski et al., 2014). Also, relative to other social identities, sexual orientation identity is not as readily visible or as easily or accurately assumed by others (Rivers, 2011; Stern, West, Jost, & Rule, 2013), which also could

have prompted prejudiced individuals to engage in more homophobic behavior when among peers who placed an emphasis on this identity.

The cross-level moderating effect of peer aggression on the association between individuals' sexual prejudice and homophobic behavior could be tied to the group-based process of bullying. Again, individuals can adopt multiple roles during instances of bullying (Salmivalli, 2010). Prejudiced adolescents who affiliated with more aggressive peers may have had more circumstances that could have prompted their greater engagement in this behavior (e.g., as part of reinforcing their aggressive peers). Further, prejudiced individuals may have been especially likely to use homophobic behavior to intensify their peers' aggressive actions in these circumstances.

In contrast, individuals' homophobic behavior was associated with their own aggressive behavior and sexual orientation identity importance similarly across peer groups. It appears that these individual-level associations may be less context-dependent than the association between sexual prejudice and homophobic behavior. For instance, individuals who view their own sexual orientation identity as highly central to their overall identity may have a strong internal motivation to engage in differentiating behavior, regardless of how their peers view their sexual orientation identity. Nevertheless, because this is still a relatively unexplored area, future studies should continue to examine the relations among these variables.

Strengths and Limitations

The current study extended research on homophobic behavior by adopting an ecological approach. Beyond a focus on individual attributes, we also considered how the collective attitudes and behaviors of individuals' peers could further account for greater engagement in homophobic behavior. Consequently, in addition to finding basic patterns of peer homophily, we

were able to characterize peer groups that engaged in more homophobic behavior than others along several indices. We found evidence of contextual and cross-level moderating effects of these peer-level factors that provided a broader account of this behavior.

There are several limitations to the study. First, the data were cross-sectional and correlational, thus limiting the ability to infer causality. Longitudinal research should consider whether individuals' homophobic behavior changes over time based on peer interactions or collective norms held by their peers. Second, all peer groups were within a single high school. Other studies should seek to include multiple schools, which would provide the opportunity to consider broader effects that could contribute to variability in homophobic behavior. Similarly, friendship nominations were restricted to be within the same grade level for practicality reasons; yet, naturally occurring friendships can include peers in different grade levels and outside the school. Third, it should be noted that our measure of homophobic behavior assessed verbal forms of behavior (e.g., using epithets, making jokes, spreading rumors). Future research should consider a broader range of behaviors, as it is possible that physically extreme forms of homophobic behavior may be even more localized to selective peer groups. Also, the items comprising the assessment of homophobic could have shared some degree of overlap with those assessing general aggression. Future studies should give careful consideration to how these behaviors may overlap in some ways and may be distinct in others. Fourth, although scores on the homophobic behavior measure covered the full range, the average score across our sample was relatively low. Future research should give more attention to individuals and groups that do express high levels of homophobic behavior for an even greater understanding of how and under what conditions homophobic behavior is expressed. In addition, the range of scores for aggressive behavior was relatively restricted, which could have attenuated its association with

other variables. Finally, although our initial tests for interactions between individuals' sexual orientation and our set of independent variables as well as group compositional effects based on sexual orientation were non-significant, our statistical power was limited and it would be important to consider these effects in samples with a larger number of sexual minority students and more peer groups. These studies should also consider the extent to which sexual minority students have disclosed their identity to others, as this could be a potential moderator of any sexual orientation-based effects in this area of research.

Implications for Practice

These findings carry several implications for programming and intervention efforts. First, recognizing that the peer context plays a key role in the acceptability of homophobic behavior, there is a need for clear and unambiguous statements about the unacceptability of homophobic or any form of bias-based bullying both in class and across the whole school. At the class and school level regular monitoring of the classroom climate using short assessments can be useful in identifying students who are isolated or who are experiencing victimization. Additionally, schools can include statements about the unacceptability of homophobic name-calling or sexual orientation-based discrimination in their nondiscrimination policies, as well as school and student handbooks; ensure that there is a mechanism for students or parents to report such experiences to the school and have procedures for the school to address this behavior; and, provide resources for teachers and students in the library that represent LGBT individuals and issues (see Rivers, Duncan & Besag, 2007 for examples). In the U.S., a number of national and local community organizations can provide support and resources to schools and students (e.g., GSA Network, GLSEN, or PFLAG). Similarly, Gay-Straight Alliances within the school can offer support and opportunities to address discrimination in the school and community. School

psychologists could also play a central role in these efforts by providing in-service training for teachers and administrators on effective ways to intervene during instances of homophobic behavior and ways to affirm and support LGBT students.

Second, we argue that programs that focus on social-emotional learning are most likely to succeed especially where they encourage students to collectively understand the impact of homophobic behavior. Some programs such as Second Step[®] have been shown not only to have an effect in reducing homophobic bullying but also sexual violence perpetration by breaking down some of the assumptions young males have around the concept of masculinity. For example, among 6th and 7th graders, Espelage, Low, Polanin, & Brown (2015) reported a 56% reduction in homophobic name-calling victimization following the introduction of the Second Step[®]: Student Success Through Prevention (SS-SSTP) Middle Schools Program. SS-SSTP offers direct instruction to students of social emotional skills development (i.e. empathy, assertive communication skills, emotional regulation and problem solving skills) together with instruction on recognizing bullying and bystander intervention at 6th grade, or instruction on responding to bullying, cyberbullying and sexual harassment at 7th grade.

Finally, with respect to the use of epithets that are or may be construed as homophobic, there is a need for teachers to engage with students in discussions about the meaning and appropriate use of language and particularly phrases such as “that’s so gay,” which are viewed by some to be artifacts of youth culture and not prejudiced. At the classroom level, teachers might integrate inclusive curricula that are representative of LGBT individuals and issues (Russell, Kosciw, Horn, & Saewyc, 2010). Doing so could help counter stereotypes, contribute to improving classroom and school climates for LGBT youth, and signify the school’s affirmation of LGBT students.

Although key advances have been made to better ensure the safety of sexual minority youth and to reduce bias-based bullying (e.g., passage of enumerated anti-bullying policies; Russell et al., 2010), studies over the past decade show the continued perpetuation of homophobic behavior and harassment within schools. There is a need for more research in this area to adopt an ecological approach that addresses the broader social factors and conditions that lead to and perpetuate this behavior. These efforts will be critical to provide empirically-based recommendations for the development and effective implementation of prevention and intervention efforts to address this behavior and to promote respectful and affirming climates in schools.

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Table 1
Descriptive Data Based on Gender

	Boys	Girls
	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)
Aggressive behavior	0.41 (0.66)	0.25 (0.42)
Sexual prejudice	4.16 (2.10)	2.68 (1.64)
Sexual orientation identity importance	3.92 (1.63)	3.63 (1.52)
Homophobic behavior	0.86 (0.97)	0.32 (0.51)

Note. Sample size for boys with complete data across all measures $n = 161$; sample size for girls with complete data across all measures $n = 265$.

Table 2
Correlations among the Variables

	H. behavior	Sexual prejudice	Identity importance	Aggressive behavior	Grade level
H. behavior	—				
Sexual prejudice	.40***	—			
Identity importance	.17**	.27***	—		
Aggressive behavior	.59***	.21***	.08	—	
Grade level	.05	-.06	.07	.05	—

Note. Sample size $n = 427$ to 437 across associations. H. behavior = level of homophobic behavior; Sexual prejudice = negative attitudes toward lesbian and gay individuals; Identity importance = sexual orientation identity importance; Aggressive behavior = level of aggressive behavior; Grade level = student's current grade level in school.

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3
Multilevel Models for Contextual and Cross-Level Moderating Effects

	Contextual Model	Moderation Model: Peer Identity Importance	Moderation Model: Peer Aggression	Moderation Model: Peer Prejudice
Level 1: Individual Level				
Gender	-0.22*** (0.05)	-0.20*** (0.05)	-0.19*** (0.05)	-0.20*** (0.05)
Sexual orientation	0.10 (0.06)	0.10 (0.06)	0.11 (0.06)	0.11 (0.06)
Sexual prejudice	0.07** (0.02)	-0.33*** (0.09)	0.00 (0.03)	-0.05 (0.07)
Aggressive behavior	0.66*** (0.05)	0.65*** (0.06)	0.63*** (0.06)	0.64*** (0.06)
Identity importance	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Level 2: Intercept				
Group size	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Peer sexual prejudice	0.13** (0.04)	0.12** (0.04)	0.13** (0.04)	0.14*** (0.04)
Peer aggressive behavior	1.09*** (0.13)	1.07*** (0.13)	1.12*** (0.13)	1.06*** (0.12)
Peer identity importance	0.05 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)	0.02 (0.05)	0.01 (0.05)
Level 2: Cross-Level Moderation				
Indiv. prejudice × Peer id. importance	—	0.10*** (0.02)	—	—
Indiv. prejudice × Peer aggressive beh.	—	—	0.20** (0.07)	—
Indiv. prejudice × Peer sexual prejudice	—	—	—	0.03 (0.02)

Note. Sample size $n = 421$. Gender = dichotomized gender (0 = boys, 1 = girls); Sexual orientation = dichotomized sexual orientation (0 = sexual minorities, 1 = heterosexuals); Sexual prejudice = sexual prejudice attitudes; Aggressive behavior = aggressive behavior; Identity importance = sexual orientation identity importance; Group size = size of the peer group; Peer sexual prejudice = collective levels of sexual prejudice among peers in the same peer group; Peer aggressive behavior = collective levels of aggression among peers in the same peer group; Peer identity importance = collective levels of importance placed on sexual orientation identity among peers in the same peer group; Indiv. prejudice × Peer id. importance = cross-level interaction between individual sexual prejudice and peer

level of sexual orientation identity importance; $\text{Indiv. prejudice} \times \text{Peer aggressive beh.}$ = cross-level interaction between individual sexual prejudice and peer level of aggressive behavior; $\text{Indiv. prejudice} \times \text{Peer sexual prejudice}$ = cross level interaction between individual sexual prejudice and peer level of sexual prejudice.

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Figure 1. *Cross-level moderating effect of peer-level sexual orientation identity importance on the association between individuals' sexual prejudice and their homophobic behavior.*

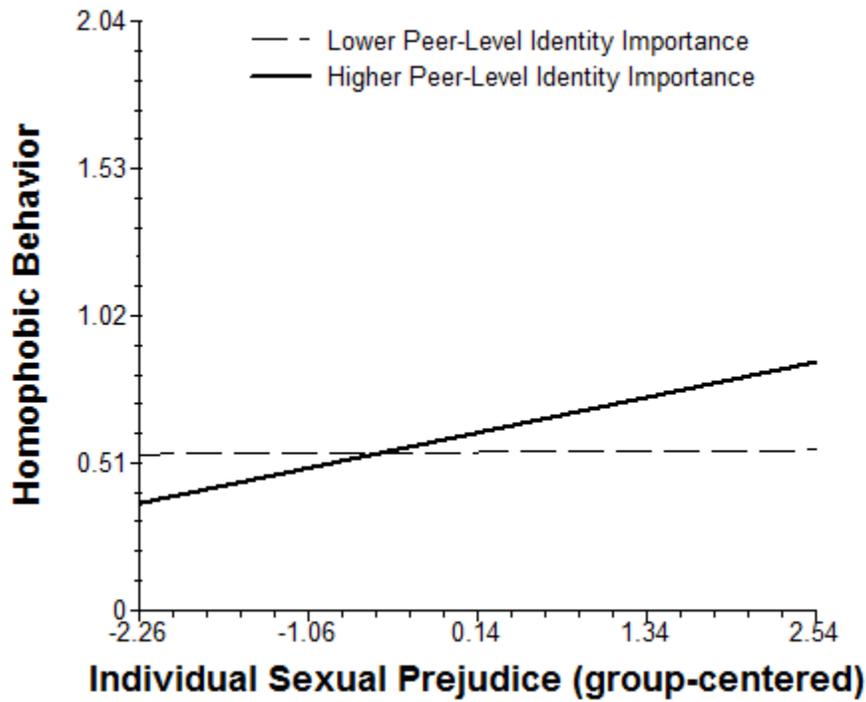
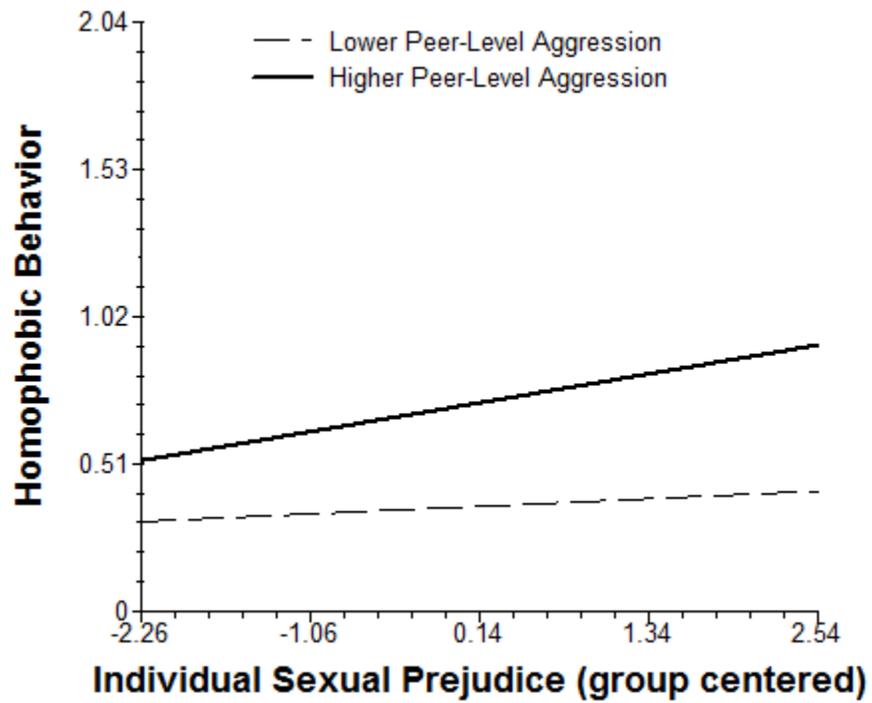


Figure 2. *Cross-level moderating effect of peer-level aggression on the association between individuals' sexual prejudice and their homophobic behavior.*



Author Biographies

V. Paul Poteat is Associate Professor in the Department of Counseling, Developmental, and Educational Psychology at Boston College. His research examines predictors and consequences of bias-based harassment and prejudice during adolescence. His work also examines the ways in which Gay-Straight Alliances promote resilience among youth and how they flexibly meet the needs of their diverse members.

Ian Rivers is a professor within the School of Education at the University of Strathclyde. He has previously held chairs in Education and Psychology. He is a fellow of the British Psychological Society, the American Psychological Association and the Academy of Social Sciences.

Olivier Vecho is Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at the Université Paris Ouest - Nanterre La Défense (France). His work examines gay and lesbian parenting, including children's development within these families, marriage and parenting of same-sex couples, and attitudes toward gay and lesbian parenting and marriage, as well as homophobic attitudes during adolescence.