Original research

Relationships between attitudes and norms with homophobic language use in male team sports

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ABSTRACT

Objectives

This study addresses a need for quantitative research examining factors supporting the frequent use of homophobic language (e.g., fag) in male team sports which has a range of negative health impacts on gay and bisexual males. Intervention methods are needed to stop this behaviour, but little is known about why this language remains common.

Design

Cross-Sectional survey.

Method

Male Rugby Union (n = 97; ages 16 -18 years) and Ice Hockey players (n = 146; ages 16 - 31 years) self-reported their use of homophobic language and completed measures of homophobic attitudes and descriptive and injunctive norms related to language use on their team. Bivariate and multivariate analyses examined factors associated with this behaviour.

Results

Over half of participants (53.8%) self-reported using homophobic language at least once in the previous two weeks. No relationship was found between homophobic attitudes and language use. In contrast, norm measures had a strong, positive relationship with this behaviour. In multivariate analyses, norms uniquely accounted for almost one-half of the variance in language use. The addition of descriptive norms into the full model led to the largest increase in R^2 of .340 ($F(1,200) = 130.816$, p < .001).

Conclusions

Homophobic language use was related to norms, rather than homophobic attitudes. Interventions targeting changes to these norms could be an effective method to change this behaviour. This finding contributes to a growing body of evidence that norms are associated with a range of negative behaviours by male athletes.

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Practical implications

- Frequent exposure to homophobic language in male team sport has a range of negative health impacts for gay and bisexual males.
- Over half (53.6%) of the teenage rugby union players, and mixed-aged hockey players participants self-reported they had used homophobic language at least once in the previous two weeks, and nearly two-thirds (69.1%) perceived their teammates to do the same.
- Social norms, rather than homophobic attitudes, were found to explain the use of this homophobic language.
- These findings indicate that current programs designed to reduce homophobic language in sport may be more effective if they focus

on changing social norms, rather than 'tackling' homophobic attitudes.

1. Introduction

Studies conducted over the last half-century have consistently reported the use of homophobic language, such as words like 'fag' or derogatory jokes about gay people, to be common in male team sport environments.[1-4] A recent position statement by the American Medical Society for Sports Medicine identified "consistent, good-quality" evidence supporting the need for effective interventions to stop the use of this language due to it being associated with a range of negative health outcomes for young gay and bisexual males.[5] Similarily, a recent systematic review[2] of this evidence described the need to stop this language as a "critical public health concern" because sport settings appear to be a prime community setting for members of this population to report discrimination experiences. Exposure to homo-

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phobic language is a key risk factor for gay and bisexual youth experiencing depression, anxiety, alcohol or drug abuse, self-harm, and suicidality.[6] Policy makers[4] and public health agencies,[7] including the American Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), have identified a need to address the range of discrimination-linked health disparities between heterosexual and non-heterosexual youth, for example, gay and bisexual male youth report attempting suicide at rates more than four times higher (4.1% vs. 18.3%) than their peers.[8]

The CDC has also raised concerns about large disparities in sport participation between LGB youth and their peers.[8] Canadian research has found gay youth play team sports at half the rate (32.8% vs. 67.6%) of heterosexual males.[9] Research indicates gay and bisexual males may avoid sport because they view the use of homophobic language as expressions of homophobic attitudes by teammates and feel unsafe and unwelcome.[1] A review by Greenspan and colleagues concluded, "there is ample data to suggest the prejudicial nature of (sport environments) can serve as a deterrent for athletic participation for gay males."[2] Playing sport has been found to generate a range of benefits to physical and mental wellbeing for young people, however, exposure to homophobic language may also impact the psychosocial benefits that gay and bisexual males receive. Research suggests these benefits may only be gained when participation occurs in a supportive environment.[10]

Together, these findings indicate a clear need for effective interventions to stop homophobic language in sport. Unfortunately, the reasons why this language remains commonplace, despite positive shifts in public attitudes toward the acceptance of gay and bisexual people in western societies,[11] remain poorly understood. There is a paucity of quantitative research investigating the psychosocial factors underpinning this behaviour in sport.[2] As such, it is unclear if current intervention approaches funded by public health agencies and governments, and adopted by major sporting organisations (e.g., National Hockey/Australian Football Leagues' 'Pride Games'; English Premier League's 'Rainbow Laces') are focused on the appropriate underlying mechanisms supporting the use of homophobic language.[7,12,13] The present study responds to the need for quantitative research on this topic.

Sport organisations appear to believe prejudice is the primary driver of this homophobic language given 'fighting homophobia' is consistently described as the objective of their current interventions.[4,13] Their approaches are supported by research that describese homophobic attitudes and behaviours as "central agents" used to construct male identities in sport settings.[14] Drawing on stigma theory, Herek and McLemore[15] have found homophobic attitudes and behaviours to be particularly common amongst men when their gender identity may be open to challenge by other men, such as may occur in male sport. Consistent with this hypothesis, studies have found male athletes are more likely than female athletes to use homophobic language,[2] and more likely than female athletes and members of the general population to express homophobic attitudes, as measured through agreement with statements contained in measurement scales such as ''I think male homosexuals are disgusting."[14,16] There is also recent evidence from non-sport settings (e.g., schools) that homophobic attitudes and language are related.[17] However, a growing body of qualitative evidence has raised questions about the association of homophobic attitudes to homophobic language use in male sport.

Qualitative studies of teenagers playing British football[18] and rugby union[19] as well as Canadian ice hockey[20] describe athletes regularly using homophobic language despite expressing generally positive attitudes toward gay people, including openly supporting same-sex marriage.

The athletes in these studies reported that they were aware this language could be perceived to be homophobic by a gay person but defended their language as harmless because it was being used around teammates they perceived to be heterosexual and not directed toward a gay person. This finding is consistent with studies conducted in school settings which have also found the meaning of homophobic slurs has broadened beyond expressing prejudice toward gay people.[21–23]

As has been found in schools, qualitative research conducted in sports settings[18–20] describes athletes homophobic language to express general displeasure or dissatisfaction with something or someone (e.g. about an unfair referee) or when a teammate isn't conforming to group norms and expectations, such as leaving a training session early (e.g. don't be such a fag). The authors of these studies suggest this language is not a product of overt homophobic attitudes (though they suspect subtle attitudes may still be a factor), but instead this language is part of normalised 'banter' or teasing which can play an important role in team cohesion and social connection. These findings, which need quantitative examination, support suggestions by some theorists that this language may be related to norms, rather than homophobic attitudes.

A 'multi-level model' developed by Cunningham[11] to understand the experiences of gay and bisexual athletes in sport describes heterosexuality in sport as the "norm or expected standard" and as a result, identities that vary from the standard may be cast as "other" and "subsequently marginalized." Cunningham posits that customs and practices, such as the use of homophobic language, are maintained by context-specific norms that have become entrenched in sport.[11] According to social norm theory, individuals tend to conform to the behaviours they perceive to be normal (descriptive norms) or that are approved/disapproved of by others (injunctive norms) in the groups (e.g., sport team) to which they want to belong.[24] Based on this theory, and previous research examining the influence of norms, if a young man joins a sport team and observes teammates using homophobic language, it is likely that he will adopt this behaviour to conform with the group.[24] Norms may also exert a uniquely powerful effect in team sport settings, where social acceptance is paramount and the behaviour of teammates and coaches is highly salient.[25]

Both descriptive and injunctive norms have also been found to be associated with a range of of negative behaviours in male sport, including on-field and off-field violence, and drug and alcohol usage, but research on the impacts of norms on homophobic language is lacking.[26]

The current study investigates the role of homophobic attitudes (overt and subtle) and norms (descriptive and injunctive) in explaining the use of homophobic language by members of teenage rugby union teams and semi-professional ice hockey teams. We hypothesized that norms and attitudes would be related to homophobic language use. However, in light of evidence that norms may exert a uniquely powerful influence on this behaviour in sport, we further hypothesized that in multivariate regression models, norms would have the largest association with this behaviour. Consistent with other research on this topic[1,22] we use 'homophobic' as an adjective to describe words that have historically been used to express prejudice toward gay people. We do not use this adjective to suggest intent. Some have suggested 'homonegative' might be a better adjective, however, this term also suggests intent and we agree with Shaw's argument[4] that the term homonegative is not used outside of academia, whereas homophobic "is the term used in everyday media and sport conversations" by the policy makers and practitioners we expect to benefit from our research.

2. Methods

The sample comprised of all six Under 18 rugby union teams (n=97) in the state of South Australia (age range 16 -18 years; mean age: 17.01 years, SD=0.73), and all eight semi-professional teams (n=146) that compete nationally in the Australian Ice Hockey League (age range 16 - 31 years; mean age: 25.31, SD=5.25).

Players completed a paper and pen, 10-minute survey prior to their normal practice in the last month of the 2018 season. The estimated participation rate was 92% for rugby and 90% for ice hockey. This is based on average player numbers at this time of the season, which is typically different than the number of registered players due to injuries. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and ethical approval was obtained from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Participants reported being born in a range of countries, including Australia (n=132; 54.8%), Canada (n=32; 13.3%), United Kingdom (n=27; 11.2%), New Zealand (n=11; 4.6%) and the United States (n=7; 2.9%). Most (n=182; 75.5%) described their ethnicity as being Anglo-European and almost all (n=228; 94.6%) identified as straight with just one participant (0.4%) identifying as gay and 3 (1.2%) identifying as bisexual. The remaining participants (n=9; 3.8%) either did not answer this question or chose 'not listed.'

Homophobic language use by participants was measured using the Homophobic Content Agent Target (HCAT) measurement approach.[17] This approach does not ascribe homophobic intent to language, which is important in light of evidence that male athletes may not perceive their language to be homophobic.[20] The stem asks "Some people use words such as fag or poof. In the past two weeks how often have you used words like these, for any reason, with your teammates?" Response options were: never (0), 1-2 times (1), 3-4 times (2), 5-6 times (3), or 7+ times (4).

Homophobic attitudes were measured in two ways. The first method used five semantic-differential scale items designed to measure subtle forms of homophobia. This scale has been used in previous studies examining factors associated with adolescent homophobic bullying.[17] Each item is preceded by the stem: "When you think of gay men, as a group, what words describe your feelings?".

Participants indicated their responses on a series of six-point Likert scales which used the following labels: respect-disapprove, negative-positive (reverse-coded), friendly-hostile, trusting-suspicious, dislike-admire (reverse-coded). Responses were averaged to form a scale with good internal consistency (α=.85); with higher scores indicating more homophobic attitudes.

The second method used to measure homophobic attitudes was the three-item Attitudes Toward Gay Men (ATG) scale[15]. Items were: 'sex between two men is just plain wrong'; 'homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in men (reverse-coded)'; and, 'I think male homosexuals are disgusting.' A six-point Likert scale was used (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree).

Scores were averages to form a composite scale, with higher scores indicating more homophobic attitudes. Cronbach's alpha for the three-item scaled used in this study (α=.64) was acceptable.

Descriptive norms were measured by asking participants to report how often they perceived their teammates had used words like 'fag' in the previous two weeks. Response options were: never (0), 1-2 times (1), 3-4 times (2), 5-6 times (3), or 7+ times (4).

Injunctive norms were measured using two methods designed to measure both prescriptive (approved behaviours) and proscriptive (disapproved behaviours) injunctive norms. Prescriptive injunctive norms were measured using a single-item asking participants to indi-

cate what percentage of their teammates would agree "it is okay to make jokes about gay people, if no gay people can hear the jokes." Proscriptive injunctive norms were measured by asking "what percentage of your teammates do you think would be critical of you (think or act negatively) if you" and then two scenarios were provided 'made a joke about gay people' and 'called an opponent a 'fag' in a game.' These questions were adapted from a scale designed to measure norms in sporting contexts.[27] The two proscriptive items (correlation coefficient r=.64) were combined and averaged to form a composite scale. Response options for all injunctive norms measures were 0=0% to 10=100%.

Spearman's correlation coefficients were calculated to estimate bivariate relationships between variables. Hierarchical multivariate regressions were used to examine the extent to which demographic variables, homophobic attitudes, and norms (descriptive and prescriptive/proscriptive injunctive norms) explained variance in homophobic language use.

3. Results

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for all measures. Over half of participants (n=125, 53.6%) self-reported they had used homophobic language at least once in the previous two weeks, and the majority (n=161, 69.1%) also perceived their teammates to do the same.

Table 2 presents Spearman's correlation coefficients between all variables. Measures of homophobic attitudes were significantly related to each other, as were measures of norms. Playing rugby had a small-medium association with homophobic attitudes, however, the sport played and the age of participants were unrelated to the use of homophobic language. We also found no relationship between either measure of homophobic attitudes and language use. In contrast, we found both measures of injunctive norms had a small-medium association with this behaviour, and the measure of descriptive norms had a large association.

The results of the multivariate regression models are presented in Table 3. We examined the associations between all variables and the use of homophobic language. Variables were entered in four steps. In the first step, we included only demographic control variables (sport and age). In the second step, we added measures of homophobic attitudes. Step 3 added injunctive norms, and Step 4 added descriptive norms.

Measures of homophobic attitudes were not associated with language use in any model. Age was significantly associated with this behaviour, but only when homophobic attitudes and injunctive norm variables were added; this relationship was no longer significant when the descriptive norms variable was added to the final model. Injunctive norms were associated with language use in model 3, but this relationship was also no longer significant in the final step, when descriptive norms were added.

In the final model, which adjusted for all factors, only descriptive norms were significantly associated with language use. The introduction of descriptive norms in the final step also resulted in the largest R^2 increase of .340, $F(1,200)$=130.816, p<.001. The full model including all variables explained a statistically significant amount of variation in homophobic language use (R^2 = .480, $F(7,200)$=26.371, p<.001, adjusted R^2 = .462).

4. Discussion

The present study addressed a need for quantitative research on the psychosocial factors associated with homophobic language use in male team sport. This research provides new evidence that can be

Table 1
Descriptive statistics: Means and standard deviations and number/percentages for each scale point.

	Homophobic language			Homophobic attitudes			Injunctive norms	
	Self-used	Teammates used (Desc. Norms)		Semantic differential	ATG		Prescriptive	Proscriptive
M	1.1	1.4		2.3	2.6		3.4	2.9
(SD)	-1.4	-1.4		-0.98	-1.2		-2.9	-2.6
0	108 (44.8%)	72 -30.90%	1	85 -37.30%	72 -31.00%	0	46 -19.90%	59 -25.50%
01-Feb	60 -24.90%	74 -31.80%	2	70 -30.70%	72 -31.00%	10%	28 -12.10%	36 -15.50%
03-Apr	23 -9.50%	37 -15.90%	3	61 -26.80%	56 -24.10%	20%	32 -13.90%	37 -16.00%
05-Jun	16 -6.60%	19 -8.20%	4	10 -4.40%	19 -8.20%	30%	16 -6.90%	27 -11.70%
7+	26 -10.80%	31 -13.30%	5	2 -0.90%	15 -5.20%	40%	25 -10.80%	17 -7.30%
			6	0 0.00%	1 -0.40%	50%	36 -15.60%	17 -7.30%
						60%	13 -5.60%	19 -8.10%
						70%	8 -3.50%	6 -2.60%
						80%	9 -3.90%	5 -2.10%
						90%	12 -5.20%	2 -0.80%
						100	6 -2.60%	7 -3.00%

Note. n=241. Language: Use of slurs in past two weeks. Attitudes: Semantic/ATG = Negative statements about gay men (1=strongly disagree, 6=strongly agree). Scores on multi-item scales were rounded to the nearest whole number for presentation in this table.

Table 2
Spearman's correlation coefficients.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Sport (Rugby)[1]							
2. Age	-.71***						
3. Used language	0.01	-0.06					
4. Homophobic attitudes (Semantic differential)	.18**	-0.1	0.01				
5. Homophobic attitudes (ATG)	.18**	-0.09	0.01	.60***			
6. Prescriptive injunctive norms	-0.07	.18**	.28***	0.11	0.11		
7. Proscriptive injunctive norms	-.14*	0.05	-.28***	-0.11	-.16*	-.20**	
8. Descriptive norms (teammates)	0.05	-0.06	.70***	0.06	0.04	.32**	-.32***

Notes. *p < .05, **p < .01 *** p < .001.
[1] Sport is coded 0 = Hockey and 1 = Rugby.
ATG = Attitudes toward Gay Men scale.

used to support the development of targeted interventions to change this behaviour. Consistent with previous studies, which have described this language to be common, over half of the rugby and hockey players in our study self-reported using homophobic language and perceiving their teammates to do the same, at least once, in the two weeks prior to completing an anonymous survey. It is also noteworthy that just 1.6% of participants identified as gay or bisexual. Previous research has found gay and bisexual males may avoid sport or attempt to conceal their sexuality from others because they perceive homophobic language to be expressions of prejudice.[2]

The study found some evidence of homophobic attitudes amongst the athletes. This is illustrated by the descriptive data: less than a third (31%) of participants 'strongly disagreed' with all statements in the overt homophobic attitude scale (e.g. 'I think male homosexuals are disgusting'). However, contrary to our hypothesis, and recent research conducted in school (rather than sport) settings,[17] we found no significant bivariate or multivariate associations between homophobic attitudes and homophobic language use by participants. These findings provide quantitative evidence consistent with qualitative research with teenage British soccer and rugby union and Canadian ice hockey teams.[18–20] Participants in our study who expressed positive attitudes toward gay people were just as likely as those who expressed negative attitudes to use homophobic language.

As proposed by the model developed by Cunningham,[11] we found the use of homophobic language was associated with norms, rather than attitudes toward gay people. The hockey and rugby players were more likely to use homophobic language if they perceived their teammates viewed this behaviour as acceptable (injunctive norms), and even more so if they perceived others around them used this language (descriptive norms). In multivariate regression models, the norm variables together explained almost half of the variance in homophobic language use. These findings add to a growing body of evidence that norms are associated with a range of negative behaviours by male athletes.[26]

Thee results also extend previous research indicating that norms can influence people to adopt discriminatory behaviours towards a social group, even when those behaviours contradict their expressed attitudes about that group (e.g., racist language and African Americans).[28]

Table 3
Regression models reporting unstandardized (B) and standardized beta's (β) and standard errors (SE) for all variables and their relationship with homophobic language use with teammates.

		B	SE	β	sr2
1	Sport (Rugby)	-.25	.26	-.09	.00
	Age	-.03	.02	-.13	.01
	R^2	**.01**			
2	Sport (Rugby)	-.26	.27	-.09	.00
	Age	-.03	.02	-.13*	.01
	Homophobic attitudes (Semantic diff)	.02	.12	.02	.00
	Homophobic attitudes (ATG)	.00	.10	.00	.00
	R^2	**.01**			
3	Sport (Rugby)	-.39	.25	-.14	.01
	Age	-.05	.02	-.20*	.02
	Homophobic attitudes (Semantic diff)	-.02	.11	-.02	.00
	Homophobic attitudes (ATG)	-.05	.10	-.05	.00
	Prescriptive injunctive norms	.11	.03	.24***	.05
	Proscriptive injunctive norms	-.12	.03	-.24**	.05
	R^2	**.14***			
4	Sport (Rugby)	-.33	.20	-.12	.01
	Age	-.03	.02	-.13	.01
	Homophobic attitudes (Semantic diff)	-.08	.09	-.06	.00
	Homophobic attitude (ATG)	.00	.08	.00	.00
	Prescriptive injunctive norms	.03	.03	.07	.00
	Proscriptive injunctive norms	-.03	.03	-.07	.00
	Descriptive norms	.64	.06	.64***	.34
	R^2	**.48***			

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$. ATG = Attitudes toward Gay Men scale.

Previous research has found age is positively associated with homophobic attitudes[15], but less research has examined if age is associated with use of homophobic langue. Our study was not designed to thoroughly examine this relationship (our sample only included only participants between 16 and 31). However, in two of the four models examined, we found age was significantly negatively associated with homophobic language use after adjusting for homophobic attitudes and injunctive norms (the relationship was not significant after adding descriptive norms to the model). This finding indicates that older players may be slightly less likely to use homophobic language, but this relationship needs to be confirmed in larger studies of participants from a wider range of ages.

Our findings have important implications for sport administrators, government, and public health officials who are tasked with developing effective interventions to boost sport participation rates by LGB young people and mitigate harm from exposure to homophobic language in sport. Evidence from the present study and qualitative research described earlier[18–20] suggests male athletes do not consider words like 'fag' to be 'homophobic' behaviour unless these words are used with the explicit intent of expressing prejudice and directed toward a gay person. This may explain why the current intervention approaches used by sport organisations globally to change this behaviour, which focus almost entirely on 'ending homophobia in sport'[12,13] seem to be ineffective. In order to stop this language, the current body of evidence[21–23] suggests intervention methods (e.g. 'Rainbow Laces,' 'Pride Games') may be more effective if sport organisations shift their focus away from trying to change attitudes, and instead focus on correcting misperceptions that the language athletes use is harmless. There is also a need to change the norms that support this language. Intervention developers may want to explore approaches shown to change norms and discriminatory language in school settings, such as one evaluated by Paluck and colleagues.[29]

The intervention approach in this study identified the most influential (popular) students at a school (using social network analyses) and then trained these 'social referent' students to actively challenge the discriminatory language being used by their peers. This intervention approach would likely be amenable to sport given the most influential individuals (i.e. captains, highest scorers) can be quickly identified and researchers[30] have found these individuals already play a central role in regulating the behaviour of others.

There are limitations to our study. First, it remains possible that findings may differ in sporting contexts outside the specific ones studied here (Australian youth Rugby Union and Australian Ice Hockey). Second, the cross-sectional design used here limits the extent to which causality can be inferred. This means that it remains possible that the association between norms and homophobic language may causally operate in the opposite direction (homophobic language influencing norms), or be explained by a third factor not explored here. These limitations could be overcome through similar empirical studies in other countries/sports or, ideally, through randomised, controlled studies that examine the effectiveness of interventions that specifically target norms.

5. Conclusion

Notwithstanding the limitations just noted, this study provides important quantitative evidence that norms, rather than homophobic attitudes, largely explain the use of homophobic language in male team sport. This adds to a growing body of evidence that norms influence a range of negative behaviours in male team sport. These findings have substantial implications for designing interventions to reduce homophobic behaviour in sport. They indicate that interventions targeting social norms, rather than homophobic attitudes, are needed.

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