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Not "just words": Exposure to homophobic epithets leads to dehumanizing and physical distancing from gay men

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Abstract

We examined whether homophobic epithets (e.g., *faggot*) function as labels of deviance for homosexuals that contribute to their dehumanization and physical distance. Across two studies, participants were supraliminally (Study 1) and subliminally (Study 2) exposed to a homophobic epithet, a category label or a generic insult. Participants were then asked to associate human-related and animal-related words to homosexuals and heterosexuals. Results showed that after exposure to a homophobic epithet, compared to a category label or a generic insult, participants associated less human-related words with homosexuals, indicating dehumanization. In Study 2, we also assessed the effect of a homophobic epithet on physical distance from a target-group member and found that homophobic epithets led to greater physical distancing of a gay man. These findings indicate that homophobic epithets foster dehumanization and avoidance of gay people, in ways that other insults or labels do not.

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Not "just words": Exposure to homophobic epithets leads to dehumanizing and physical distancing from gay men

Despite their negative and hostile tone, homophobic epithets toward gay men such as *faggot* and *poof* are frequently used in everyday language (D'Augelli & Hersberg, 1993; Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009). For example, US participants who belong to sexual minorities experience about two homophobic hassles per week, most commonly in the form of verbal attacks such as homophobic epithets (Swim, Johnston, & Pearson, 2009). Even individuals who are neither targets of such slurs nor use this derogatory language themselves encounter homophobic epithets (e.g., heterosexuals overhearing a homophobic slur). This raises the question of whether, and in which ways, homophobic language may contribute to the persistence of homophobia.

There is initial evidence that exposure to homophobic epithets has evaluative consequences. Among heterosexuals, exposure to homophobic epithets (e.g., *faggot*) leads to the activation of less positive associations toward gay men compared to category labels (e.g., *gay*; Carnaghi & Maass, 2007; 2008). It thus appears that even though homophobic epithets may be commonly considered as "just words" that people encounter in their daily life, overhearing them dampens the extent to which gay men are seen in a positive light. The current work is to move beyond the role of mere evaluative association elicited by these terms. Homophobic epithets may not work as simply offensive terms, as they convey both a negative evaluation and point to a group in a disparaging manner. However, homophobic epithets, compared to category labels, combine a strong negative evaluation with a representation of gay men as deviant (see Carnaghi, Maass, & Fasoli, 2011; Plummer, 2001). Because of this, in our research, we examined whether homophobic epithets can contribute to consequences other than negative evaluative responses. Specifically, we first and foremost aimed to assess whether homophobic epithets contribute to the dehumanization of gay men. As a secondary aim, we examined whether these terms are

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associated with physical distance from gay men. We will discuss both aims in turn.

Consequences of homophobic epithets for dehumanization and physical distance

Derogatory group labels such as homophobic epithets are highly offensive terms whose purpose is to "negate a person or group's culture, heritage, and family in one word, by dehumanizing the person or group" (Simon & Greenberg, 1996; p. 1195). As the definition implies, derogatory group labels elicit not only a negative evaluation of the target, but achieve much more. Rather than functioning like a generic insult, homophobic epithets may serve to dehumanize their target.

Dehumanization occurs when people perceive others as belonging to a lower order of humanity (Haslam, 2006; Vaes, Leyens, Paladino, & Miranda, 2012). Instances of dehumanization of gay people emerge in hate crimes against sexual minorities (Herek, Cogan & Gillis, 2002), anti-gay rhetoric, and even in descriptions of aggression toward homosexuals (Herek, 2000). Homophobic language is a common expression of verbal aggression (see D'Augelli et al., 1992; Swim et al., 2008) that legitimizes and reinforces heterosexist norms and culture (Herek, 1990). Hence, as the definition suggests, homophobic epithets highlight a representation of gay men as deviant in a way that "negates" shared values and norms and contribute to their dehumanization.

Dehumanization involves the denial of human characteristics and attributes to others. It is often observed in intergroup contexts (e.g., Paladino & Vaes, 2009; Vaes & Paladino, 2010; Viki, Winchester, Titshall, Chisango, Pina, & Russell, 2006) and it is different to just holding negative perception of groups (Haslam & Loughnan, 2012). It has been shown to be distinct from in-group favoritism (e.g., Leyens, Demoulin, Vaes, Gaunt, & Paladino, 2007). Indeed even groups that are not negatively stereotyped can be targets of dehumanization (Leyens et al., 2000), and those who are targets of negative attitudes are not necessarily dehumanized (Cortes, Demoulin, Rodriguez, Rodriguez, & Leyens, 2005). Also, intergroup categorization is not *per se* a sufficient cause of dehumanization as shown by studies using minimal groups (Demoulin et al., 2009), in the context of

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gender-based relationships (Vaes, Paladino, & Puvia, 2011; Viki & Abrams, 2003) or ethnic intergroup comparisons (Bain, 2014). Critically for the present research, dehumanization is not inevitable in the context of sexual orientation (Brown & Hegarty, 2005). However, where it does occur it can result in reduced empathy and support, and greater tolerance of cruelty (see Vaes et al., 2012; Viki, Osgood, & Phillips, 2013). Finally, dehumanizing goes hand in hand with the exclusion from moral concern (Bastian & Haslam, 2010; Opotow, 1990). People excluded from moral concern tend to be judged as less human (Brandt & Reyna, 2011; Haslam, Bastian, Laham & Loughnan, 2011) and moral concern has been found linked to the extent to which a person is perceived as human (Bastian, Laham, Wilson, Haslam, & Koval, 2011).

We reason that homophobic epithets portray gay men as deviant, in ways that mere category labels or generic insults do not. Deviance is the consequences of the application of values and norms; individuals that are perceived at odds with this normative system are judged as deviants (Becker, 1963; Jetten & Hornsey, 2014). As far as male homosexuality as deviance is concerned, the norms are those of hetero-normativity (i.e., the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm and all other forms of sexual expression are, not just different, but deviant expressions of sexuality; that is something negatively evaluated and that should be condemned; see Kimmel, 1997; LaMar & Kite, 1998). There are several studies suggesting that homophobic epithets portray gay men as deviants. For instance, although both category and homophobic epithets activate gay stereotypes to the same extent, only homophobic epithets carry a negative affective connotation (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007; 2008). Moreover, when used by primary school children, these epithets typically point to individuals that do not appear to conform to peer norms (Plummer, 2001; Steinfeldt, Vaughan, LaFollette, & Steinfeldt, 2012; Thorne, 1993). Furthermore, interview (e.g. Phoenix et al., 2003; Renold, 2002; Stoudt, 2006), survey (Franklin, 2000) and experimental studies (Carnaghi et al., 2011) suggest that homophobic language goes hand in hand with the endorsement of masculine norms highlighting the deviant nature as well as a call for

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'punishment' of those individuals that are perceived to deviate from these norms (Pascoe et al., 2011; Plummer, 2001; Slaatten, Anderssen, & Hetland, 2014). In contrast to homophobic epithets (which carry an insulting and distancing motivation, Carnaghi & Maass, 2006; 2008; see also Allport, 1954; Mullen & Rice, 2003; Leader, Mullen, & Rice, 2009), category labels such as "gay" or "homosexual" are terms used to label a social group characterized by sexual orientation, carrying nowadays less evaluative weight than in the past. Hence, while category labels (for at least most people) have a primarily *descriptive/denotative* function (i.e. indicating men who love/have sex with other men), homophobic epithets have a *defensive* or *value-expressive* function (see Herek, 1990; Jewell & Morrison, 2010). Consistent with this, Carnaghi, Maass, and Fasoli (2011) have shown that exposure to the word "faggot" increases the tendency of heterosexual men to affirm their male identity, resulting in differentiating themselves from gay men, but not from women, to a greater extent than "gay" or a gay-unrelated derogatory label.

Individuals who are perceived as deviant (Vasiljevic & Viki, 2014) or as lacking in normative standards (e.g., moral values) are more likely to be the target of dehumanization (Brandt & Reyna, 2011; Haslam et al., 2011). Thus, we argue that homophobic epithets, compared to category labels and generic insults should elicit dehumanization of male homosexuals. That is, homophobic language does not only disparage gay men but also places the spotlight on them as deviants, exposing them to dehumanization. Those who are perceived as violating values, especially ingroup values (Greenhalgh & Watt, 2014), or behaving in an anti-normative manner are indeed appraised as less human (Vasijlieck & Viki, 2014).

In our work we test whether homophobic epithets lead to a denial of uniquely-human qualities (Haslam, 2006), a form of dehumanization associated with viewing others as more like animals. Specifically, we expect that priming participants with homophobic epithets should decrease the attribution of these uniquely human characteristics to gay men. While the impact of homophobic

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epithets (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007; 2008) on valence has been already shown, the prediction that they would have dehumanizing consequences has not been tested. If homophobic epithets lead to the dehumanization of gay men, this speaks to the capacity of homophobic language to have more severe consequences for gay men than those suggested by research to date.

We also tested the impact of homophobic epithets on physical distance. Maintaining social-psychological distance from derogated individuals has emerged in studies about derogatory ethnic labels (Leader, Mullen, & Rice, 2009), but has not been tested with regard to homophobic epithets and actual behavior. Previous research has shown that people tend to maintain physical distance toward individuals labeled as deviant, perceived as dissimilar and negatively stereotyped (Heinemann, Pellander, Vogelbusch, & Wojtek, 1981; Macrae, Bodenhausen, Milne, & Jetten, 1994; Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005; Snyder & Endelman, 1979). Moreover, physical distancing is a way to protect the self from physical and psychological contagion (Kurzban & Leary, 2001; Park, Faulkner, & Schaller, 2003). In this regard, it should be noted that some authors have argued that antigay prejudice is related to perceived threat to heterosexuals' health and values (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005). This fear of contagion at the psychological as well as at the physical level should be particularly salient in heterosexuals when gay men are labelled in a disparaging way. This is because homophobic epithets can stress gay deviance, and thus, the "threat" that gay's pose. Hence, compared to category labels or generic insults, we expect homophobic epithets to be more likely to induce physical distancing from a gay man.

Overview of the studies and hypotheses

The aim of the present research was to examine whether exposure to homophobic epithets would enhance responses observed in response to exposure to deviance: dehumanization and physical distancing. Across two studies, we manipulated the type of label heterosexual participants were

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exposed to (i.e., homophobic epithet, category label and generic insult), and investigated how this affected dehumanization assessed as the denial of human qualities (Studies 1 and 2). Moreover, the effects of homophobic epithets were assessed in two different cultural contexts (Italy, Study 1; Australia, Study 2), using different manipulations. Finally, in Study 2 we also included a measure of physical distance toward a gay person. We expect that, compared to category labels and generic insult, exposure to homophobic epithet would lead heterosexual participants to dehumanize gay men and to physically distance themselves more from a gay target.

Study 1

This study investigated the effect of homophobic slurs on the dehumanization of gay men, comparing the impact of a homophobic epithet with exposure to the category group label. Moreover, to establish whether the effect of homophobic epithets is caused by their homophobic content and not just by their negative valence, we included an experimental condition in which an equally negative but gay-irrelevant slur (i.e., generic insult) was presented. In this way we ensured that it was not the mere exposure to any offensive term, but rather to the specific representation elicited by this class of anti-gay labels, that produced any dehumanization.

We exposed participants to the different types of labels (homophobic vs. category vs. generic insult) and measured the attribution of humanness to homosexuals and heterosexuals. We predicted that, compared to the category label and generic insult conditions, when heterosexual participants have been exposed to homophobic epithets, they would show a higher level of dehumanization of homosexuals, by decreasing the attribution of human-related words to this group.[1] Similarly, we expect higher dehumanization (i.e., lower attribution of human-related words) of homosexuals after exposure to a homophobic epithet than to a generic insult. This would show that it is the homophobic content, and not the mere negative tone of these epithets, that decreases the attribution of humanity to homosexuals.

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Method

Participants

Ninety-five Italian students (59 males; M_{age} = 23.56, SD = 4.87) participated voluntarily in the study. Two male participants who identified themselves as homosexuals were excluded from analyses, leaving 93 heterosexual participants in the final sample. Participants were randomly assigned to and equally distributed (N = 31) across conditions.

Materials

Prime-words. The words *omosessuale* [homosexual] and *gay* were used as prime for the category labels, while *frocio* [faggot] and *culattone* [fairy] for the homophobic epithet condition. These labels have been used in previous research (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007; Carnaghi et al., 2011) and are differently perceived in terms of valence. Homophobic epithets are clearly more offensive than category labels (Carnaghi & Maass, 2008; Carnaghi et al., 2011), although they refer to the same sexual minority group, gay men (Carnaghi et al., 2011). We included a condition in which participants were primed with a generic insult that is *coglione* [asshole]. This slur does not differ from the homophobic epithets in terms of valence and offensiveness (Carnaghi & Maass, 2008) but it is unrelated to sexual orientation and does not activate a deviant representation of the target from heteronormativity. Moreover, it is a generic insult that in Italian, due to the grammatical gender, is applicable to male individuals.[2]

Human and animal related words. Ten human-related and ten animal-related words were used as stimuli for the dehumanization tasks. These stimuli have been used in other recent studies assessing dehumanization (i.e., Piccoli, Foroni, & Carnaghi, 2013) and were also pilot tested for the present study. A sample of university students (N = 15, 7 males, M_{age} = 22.33, SD = 1.65) rated these words and others on humanity and valence (7-points scale for humanity; 1 = very animal-like; 7 = very human-like and for valence; 1 = completely negative; 7 = completely positive, see also Viki et al., 2006; Study

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4). The 10 human-related words (M = 6.34, SD = .31) were judged on average as more human than the animal-related words (M = 2.45, SD = .61), $t(14) = 19.84$, $p < .001$, d = 10.60, 95% CI [3.472, 4.314]. Moreover, the mean rating of each of the 10 chosen human-related words were all significantly above the scale mid-point (all ts > 3.63, ps < .003). The mean of each of the animal-related word was below the scale midpoint (ts > - 2.51, ps < .02). Importantly, human and animal-related words did not differ in terms of their valence, $t(14) = .44$, p = .66, d =.23, 95% CI [-.230, .350] (animal-related: M = 4.53, SD = .47, and human-related: M = 4.59, SD = .60). The ten animal-related words were: pedigree [pedigree], natura [nature], animale [animal], specie [species], meticcio [mongrel], zampa [paw], selvaggio [wild], branco [herd], istinti [instinct], cucciolo [cub]); and ten human-related words: (i.e. cittadino [citizen], capelli [hair], bocca [mouth], gente [folk], persona [person], etnia [ethnic], cultura [culture], faccia [face],umano [human] and piede [feet]).[3]

Procedure

Participants were recruited in the libraries and public areas of an Italian university. They were told that the experiment comprised two distinct tasks. Specifically, they were informed that the researchers were investigating the way people freely associate concepts. As part of the cover story, they first received a *free association task*. Following the procedure outlined by Carnaghi et al. (2011), participants were presented with 5 stimuli-words and they were asked to write down the first three concepts that came to their mind. Participants first read 4 filler stimulus words (i.e., sun, American, crapper, table), after which they were exposed to the prime stimulus word. Depending on the experimental condition, the prime-word was either a category label (i.e., *gay* or *omosessuale* [homosexual]), a homophobic epithet (i.e., *frocio* [faggot] or *culattone* [fairy]) or a generic insult (i.e., *coglione* [asshole]). Once participants completed the task, they were instructed to return to each associated word they generated and rate how closely related it was to the stimulus-word on a 3-point scale from 1 (completely irrelevant) to 3 (completely relevant). Differently from Carnaghi and Maass

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(2008), participants rated the relevance, instead of the valence, of their associations with the stimuli-words to avoid enhancing the salience of the evaluative dimension of their associations.[3]

Next, participants were introduced to the *dehumanization measure*. They were told that the task examined the way people associated concepts with social categories. Specifically, they were told that each participant would rate two randomly selected groups, and in their case these groups turned out to be heterosexuals and homosexuals. Following Viki et al.'s (2006) procedure, they were presented with twenty words and asked to select at least 8-10 words that they would associate with heterosexuals and homosexuals (the order in which words had to be assigned to heterosexuals and homosexuals was counterbalanced). The twenty words comprised ten animal-related words and ten human-related words. Two randomly generated word orders were created and counterbalanced across participants. Note that this measure of dehumanization is ipsative (Viki, Osgood, & Phillips, 2013). Hence, the number of selected animal- and human-related words is related and analyses focused on attributions of human-related words.

At the end of the questionnaire, among other scales, we measured participants' frequency of contact with homosexuals (in their circle of friends, acquaintance, work/university colleagues and neighbors; Van Dick et al., 2004), as well as the number of homosexual friends. Finally, participants completed the *Inclusion of Other in the Self scale* (IOS; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). The IOS scale is a graphic measure used for representing the relationship between the self and a close other. The scale consisted of seven pairs of circles, with one circle representing the self and the other circle representing the homosexual person they knew best. The figures corresponded to different degrees of closeness, from two close but not overlapping circles, to two almost completely overlapping circles. Participants had to choose the figure that best represented their relation with the homosexual person they knew best.

At the end of the questionnaire participants indicated their gender, age, sexual orientation, and they were debriefed.

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Results

Preliminary analysis

Participants reported that they had 4 homosexual friends on average. No differences between experimental conditions emerged on frequency of contact, $F(1, 90) = 1.05$, $p = .35$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, and closeness (IOS), $F(1, 89) = 1.54$, $p = .22$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. Preliminary analyses revealed that participant gender did not affect the interpretation of any of the effects reported below.

Dehumanization

For each participant, human-related and animal-related words associated with heterosexuals and homosexuals were summed. Although participants were invited to choose between 8 and 10 words, there was variability in the total number of words they selected. We created an index for each group by dividing the number of selected human-related words by the total number of selected words. This index was entered in a 2 (Group: heterosexuals vs. homosexuals) x 3 (Condition: category label vs. homophobic epithet vs. generic insult). The first variable was treated as within-participants and the other as a between-participants factor.[4]

The expected interaction between Group and Condition was significant, $F(2, 90) = 3.98$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$. Pairwise analyses corrected for multiple comparisons (Bonferroni's correction) showed that words were differently attributed to homosexuals across conditions, $F(2, 90) = 6.75$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .13$. The proportion of human-related words attributed to homosexuals was lower in the homophobic epithet ($M = .52$, $SD = .17$) than in the category label condition ($M = .64$, $SD = .16$; $p = .003$, 95% CI [-.228, -.036]) and in the generic insult condition ($M = .63$, $SD = .13$; $p = .01$, 95% CI [-.212, -.020]). No difference emerged between the category label and generic insult conditions ($p = 1.00$, 95% CI [-.080, .112]). No significant differences between conditions emerged for the human-related words associated with the heterosexual target group, $F(2, 90) = .40$, $p = .67$, $\eta_p^2 = .009$), suggesting that the type of label

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did not influence the perception of heterosexuals' humanity (see Figure 1).

Several additional effects were identified which were not critical to hypotheses. A significant main effect of condition, $F(2, 90) = 3.89$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$, indicated that participants chose less human-related words in the homophobic epithet ($M = .57$, $SD = .11$) than the category label ($M = 65$, $SD = .13$; $p = .04$, 95% CI [-.155, -.002]) and generic insult condition ($M = .62$, $SD = .13$; $p = .06$, 95% CI [-.149, .003]). A significant main effect of Group, $F(1, 90) = 5.22$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, suggested instead that participants attributed overall more human-related words to heterosexuals ($M = .64$, $SD = .14$) than homosexuals ($M = .60$, $SD = .16$; 95% CI [.005, .071]). However, these effects were qualified by the interaction discussed above.

Discussion

Results of Study 1 showed that exposure to homophobic epithets fostered dehumanization of homosexuals. When participants were confronted with a homophobic epithet (compared to a category label or a generic insult), we found a significant decrease in the proportion of human-related words attributed to homosexuals. Thus, dehumanization of homosexuals was unique to the homophobic epithet condition, and not to generic insult or category labels, suggesting that it is the specific anti-gay content and not only the offensiveness of the label or the categorization itself that influenced the dehumanization of the target group. The current results highlight that the effects of homophobic epithets go beyond the mere negative evaluation of the target as they affect the extent to which heterosexuals see homosexuals as human beings.

Study 2

In Study 2 we aimed to consolidate and extend the results of Study 1 in several respects. First, to broaden the generalizability of the dehumanization findings beyond a single linguistic and cultural context, this study was conducted in Australia (and in English). Second, one weakness of Study 1 was

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that explicit exposure to a homophobic label may have signaled that anti-gay attitudes were tolerated, if not promoted, by the experimenter (Lehavot & Lambert, 2007). In order to provide greater assurance that dehumanization specifically arises from exposure to homophobic epithets rather than to other contextual variables, participants in Study 2 were subliminally presented with a homophobic epithet. In addition, at the end of the questionnaire, for exploratory purposes we added questions to examine whether the homophobic epithet affected the perception of the context or the tendency to "get along" with the researcher. Third, as we aimed to establish the effect of homophobic epithets on dehumanization, controlling for valence, in Study 2 we directly tested the attribution of both positive and negative human-related and animal-related words to describe homosexuals and heterosexuals. That is, words were selected so that the human-animal and the positive-negative dimensions were orthogonal (see Wittenbrink, Judd, & Park, 2001).

Moreover, we examined whether homophobic epithets, compared to category labels and generic insult, increase physical distancing, often observed as a reaction to deviant people (see Heinemann et al., 1981).

Method

Participants

Sixty-one participants (28 males and 33 females) took part in the study in return for10 Australian dollars. Their age ranged from 17 to 50 years (M_{age} = 22.90, *SD* = 5.20). One homosexual participant was excluded from the analyses, leaving a sample of 60. Participants were randomly assigned to and equally distributed (N = 20) across conditions.

Materials

Prime-words. Three different prime-words were used: *gay* as a category label, *faggot* as a homophobic epithet and *asshole* as a generic insult. As in Study 1 no differences between labels of the

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same category were found, we relied here on the most common label of each type (i.e., *gay*, *faggot* and *asshole*).[5]

Human and animal related words. Ten human related and ten animal related words were used as stimuli for the dehumanization tasks. In this case both positive and negative human and animal related words were included. These stimuli-words were exactly the same as those used by Viki et al. (2006; Study 4).

Procedure

Participants were recruited through advertisements posted on the university website and they were informed that the study consisted of three separate tasks that were combined for time reasons. They were told the study included a computer task to assess ability in estimation of even and odd quantity of dots in a speed task, a discussion with another student about a topic suggested by the researcher, and a short questionnaire about attitudes and beliefs towards different groups.

In particular, participants were first introduced to a computer task in which they had to indicate if the number of circles presented on the screen was even or odd. Following Chen and Bargh (1997; see also Carnaghi et al., 2011) this task served as the experimental manipulation. Depending on the condition, participants were subliminally primed (13 ms) with a category label (i.e., *gay*), a homophobic epithet (i.e., *faggot*) or a generic insult (i.e., *asshole*). The task consisted of 40 trials. On each trial the subliminal prime was followed by a first mask (a series of 13 black cross-hatched) and by a second mask (a number of circles randomly presented on the screen) for 13 ms each. Then, participants were asked to indicate as quickly and accurately as possible if the number of circles (randomly varying between 5 and 25) presented in a target picture was even or odd, pressing one of two response-keys on the keyboard. Reaction times were not recorded as the task served only as a manipulation.

Next, participants were informed that the following task involved a discussion with another student.

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Specifically, they were told they were going to meet a person to talk about issues at the university that are of relevance to gay people and that, because of the topic, they would discuss these issues with a gay man whose name was Mark, a student of the same age as the participant. The room in which the experiment took place contained a number of chairs stacked close to a table. The researcher mentioned that he had to call Mark in and asked the participant to prepare the room for the interaction. Participants were asked to take two chairs, one for themselves and one for Mark, and to place them in the room wherever they wanted. The initial positioning of chairs and furniture was arranged in such a way that there was free space in the center of the room to create a setting for the interaction. Following Novelli and colleagues' (Novelli, Drury, & Reichen, 2010) procedure, measures were taken of each of the four leg-to-leg distances plus the distance between the middle of the front edge of the base of the seats. Then, a physical distance index was formed based on the mean of the five measurements.

While the researcher went outside the laboratory to supposedly find Mark, participants completed a questionnaire. Participants were first asked to report demographic information (i.e., age, gender, and sexual orientation) and then to complete the *dehumanization measure* (Viki et al., 2006).

At the very end of the questionnaire, among other scales participants were asked to indicate their number of homosexual friends and to indicate their closeness to the homosexual friend they knew better on the IOS scale (Aron et al., 1992). To assess tolerance of discrimination towards gay men (*social norms*), participants were asked to indicate how much they thought it was socially acceptable to use certain labels to describe people. Three of these labels were similar to the primes used in the study (i.e., *gay*, *faggot*, *asshole*) and two other labels were fillers (i.e., *bitch* for women and *boong* for Australian Aboriginals). Participants provided their responses on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1(not at all) to 5 (very much). We also assessed participants tendency to get along with the researcher using 5 items adapted from Lun, Sinclair, Whitchurch and Glenn (2007; e.g., "How friendly was the researcher?", "How smooth was the interaction with the researcher?" and "How much have you tried to

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agree with the researcher's opinion?", α = .88). Another item was aimed to assess the perceived homophobic attitudes of the researcher (i.e., "How important do you think not being homophobic is to the researcher?"). Participants answered on 7-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). Finally, they were thanked and debriefed.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Participants reported to have between 3 and 4 homosexual friends on average. Across conditions, no difference on frequency of contact was observed, $F(1, 55) = 2.52$, $p = .09$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$, nor for closeness (IOS), $F(1, 55) = 1.91$, $p = .16$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. Findings reported below were not affected by participants' gender and gender will therefore not be examined further.

To test whether homophobic epithets affected the perception of context, we conducted a 3 (Term: gay vs. faggot vs. asshole) x 3 (Condition: category label vs. homophobic epithet vs. generic insult) analysis of variance on the measure assessing the social acceptability of labels, where the first was a within-participants and the last two between-participants factors. Analysis yielded a main effect of Term, $F(2, 114) = 52.83$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .48$. Pairwise multiple comparison (Bonferroni's correction) showed that *gay* ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.14$) was rated as more acceptable than *faggot* ($M = 1.72$, $SD = .99$; $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.332, 2.034]) and *asshole* ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 1.25$; $p < .001$, 95% CI [.402, 1.098]). Condition did not affect participants' evaluation and no significant interaction was found (Fs < 1.83, ps > .13).

The tendency to get along with the researcher was also analyzed in a 3 (Condition: category label vs. homophobic epithet vs. generic insult) analysis of variance. Results revealed no significant effect of condition, $F(2, 57) = .90$, $p = .41$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, suggesting that exposure to a homophobic epithet (compared to a category label or a generic insult), did not differently affect perceptions of the researcher.

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Dehumanization

As in Study 1, we divided the number of positive and negative human-related words associated with each group by the total number of selected words. A 2 (Group: heterosexuals vs. homosexuals) x 2 (Word Valence: positive vs. negative) x 3 Condition (category label vs. homophobic epithet vs. generic insult) repeated measures analysis of variance was performed on participants' human-related words attribution. The first two factors were treated as within-participant factors, whereas the last one was a between-participant factor.

The predicted interaction between Group and Condition was significant, $F(2, 57) = 5.14$, $p = .009$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$. Pairwise analyses corrected for multiple comparison (Bonferroni's correction) revealed that labels affected participants attribution of human-related words to homosexuals, $F(2, 57) = 4.92$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$. Less human-related words were attributed to homosexuals in the homophobic epithet ($M = .26$, $SD = .04$) than both the category label ($M = .32$, $SD = .07$, $p = .01$, 95% CI [-.121, -.009]) and the generic insult ($M = .32$, $SD = .09$, $p = .04$, 95% CI [-.113, -.002]) condition. No difference emerged between category label and generic insult condition ($p = 1.00$, 95% CI [-.048, .063]). No differences emerged in attribution of human-related words to heterosexual across conditions, $F(2, 57) = .33$, $p = .72$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$.

Additional effects were found, but they did not affect the expected interaction. A main effect of Valence, $F(1, 57) = 69.10$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .55$, showed that participants selected overall more positive ($M = .37$, $SD = .10$) than negative human-related words ($M = .21$, $SD = .08$; 95% CI [.118, .193]). No other significant effects or interactions emerged (Fs > 2.57, ps < .11).

Physical distance

We conducted a univariate analysis of variance on the physical distance index with Condition (category label vs. homophobic epithet vs. generic insult) as between-participants variable. A main effect of Condition, $F(2, 56) = 3.67$, $p = .03$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$, was found. As shown by pairwise analyses

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corrected for multiple comparison (Bonferroni's correction) participants tended to sit further away from the gay man when they were primed with the homophobic epithet (M = 107.72, SD = 15.71) than with the generic insult (M = 97.61, SD = 9.16; p = .04, 95% CI [.312, 19.907]). The same non-significant trend emerged between homophobic epithet and category label (M = 99.63, SD = 11.23; p = .13, 95% CI [-.652, 16.83]) condition. The category label and the generic insult condition did not differ (p = 1.00, 95% CI [-7.78, 11.82]).

Correlation Analyses

For exploratory purposes, we examined the relationship between dehumanization and physical distance. Correlational analyses between the indexes of positive and negative human-related words, for both groups, and sitting distance were not significant (rs < .06, ps > .17), suggesting that the two measures were not strongly related.

Discussion

Study 2 provided further evidence of the consequences of exposure to a homophobic epithet on dehumanization and physical distance. Results of Study 1 were replicated in a different cultural context. As in Study 1, compared to a category label or a generic insult condition, when homosexuals were portrayed in a homophobic way, heterosexual participants decreased their attribution of human-related words to homosexuals – indicating a tendency to dehumanize them. In fact, dehumanization of homosexuals emerged only when participants were subjected to target-specific slurs (i.e., *faggot*) rather than a generic insult (i.e., *asshole*), showing again that it the specific nature, and not the negative tone of the labels *per se,* that induced the denial of humanness to homosexuals. ~~This tendency disappeared when participants were exposed to a homophobic epithet. This result was not found in Study 1, and it may be explained by the differences in the two cultural contexts especially in terms of attitudes toward gay men between countries as Australia is a less homophobic country than Italy (Kelly, 2001)~~. Finally,

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as we did not find any interaction with valence of words, we suggest that homophobic epithets seem to have an impact on group perception that goes beyond the mere negative evaluation of the target.

Study 2 showed also that the exposure to a homophobic epithet affected heterosexuals´ non-verbal behavior in a way consistent with that toward deviants. When encountering homophobic slurs participant tended to maintain greater physical distance from a gay man. Importantly, these effects emerged even though participants were not explicitly primed with homophobic labels.

General discussion

The use of homophobic epithets is one of the most common ways to point out homosexuals' deviance from heteronormativity (Plummer, 2001; Preston & Stanley, 1987). The present research extended previous findings by showing such responses to deviance on two indicators: dehumanization and physical distancing. Results showed that after exposure to a homophobic epithet, compared to a category label or generic insult, heterosexual participants were more likely to deny humanness to homosexuals. Importantly, dehumanization of homosexuals emerged both when the homophobic epithet was supraliminally (Study 1) or subliminally (Study 2) presented. These results highlight the possibility that homophobic language can affect heterosexuals' reactions even when it is not explicit. Moreover, in Study 2 we found evidence that homophobic epithets impacted on heterosexuals' actual behavior, increasing tendency to physically distance themselves from a gay man they expected to interact with.

Our work extends previous literature in several respects. First, our findings show that homophobic epithets are more than just negative words that promote less positive perception of homosexuals (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007; 2008). Homophobic epithets, but not category labels or gay-unrelated insults, seem to function as indicators of deviance, and this contributes to perception of homosexuals as belonging to a lower order of humanity. In doing so, homophobic epithets potentially expose gay men

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to a range of severe consequences (see Vaes et al., 2012) such as excluding homosexuals from moral concern, enhancing tolerance for gay stigma and discrimination (see Viki, Fullerton, Raggett, Tait & Witshire, 2012), and even for violence against them (Viki et al., 2013).

Second, homophobic epithets seem to prompt behavioral distancing. This finding contributes to the idea that physical distance is associated with deviance (Heinemann, 1981). In our study, physical distance was particularly elicited by homophobic epithets rather than general insults, suggesting that it is the homophobic, deviance-marker contents of these labels, rather than the negative tone, that led participants to distancing from an outgroup member. Furthermore, to our knowledge, this was the first time the non-verbal behavioral consequences of homophobic epithets have been tested. This second finding highlights how subtle but also far-reaching the effects of homophobic epithets can be.

Third, these findings not only contribute to the understanding of the consequences of homophobic epithets, but also to the understanding of factors that elicit dehumanization. Besides factors like intergroup boundaries (i.e., status and power), ideologies (i.e., justification of wrongdoing), and intergroup relations (i.e., conflict, in-group identification; see Vaes et al., 2012), we suggest that linguistic factors, such as derogatory group labels, can similarly be a source of dehumanization of the target of such slurs. Hence, we could refer to homophobic epithets as a "language of dehumanization".

Limitations

Although dehumanization and physical distancing may both be triggered by representing homosexuality and homosexual as deviant, the two measures were not related. The absence of a relation may be due to the fact that these two measures differed in many respects. One mostly refers to deviation from "moral" values and was assessed as perception of the target by attributing words. The other is a non-verbal behavior measured as distance from the target in centimeters. To better understand the relation between dehumanization and physical distance, in future research it may be fruitful to use measures that can be directly compared. Moreover, although our findings support the rationale of

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homophobic epithets as deviance-markers, the link between dehumanization and the representation of gay men as deviant prompted by homophobic epithets needs to be experimentally tested. In this regard, other motivational processes could be examined. The representation of gay men elicited by homophobic epithet may activate self-protection motives as well as emphasize group boundaries and ingroup identification, especially in heterosexual men (see Bahns & Branscombe, 2010; Carnaghi et al., 2011). In this regard, homophobic epithets may enhance fear of contagion in heterosexuals (see Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005), that in turn leads to protective reactions such as physical distancing (see Kurzban & Leary, 2001; Park et al., 2003). In doing so, heterosexuals avoid to be seen as related to gay men and as accepting the deviance they pose. Moreover, homophobic epithets may elicit disgust. Disgust is likely to emerge when a group values threat is observed (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005) and is an emotion related to dehumanization and avoidance (Buckels & Trapnell, 2013; Hodson & Costello, 2007; see also Navarrete & Fessler, 2006; Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2000).

Another point that remains to be seen is whether these effects of derogatory labels might have a similar (or distinct) impact when examined in relation to lesbians or other minorities. Addressing these issues can be fruitful avenues for future research, as well as replicating these finding with larger sample sizes and a more balanced number of male and female participants.

Conclusion

Homophobic language is common. We demonstrate here that homophobic epithets impact the extent to which heterosexuals perceived homosexual men as human beings and how they act towards them. Our findings show that homophobic epithets are more than just common slurs as they are deviance markers. Their impact is not merely increasing negative attitudes toward and evaluation of a target. It goes beyond that as their specific nature induces heterosexuals dehumanizing and maintaining distance from gay men, with all the risks that this implies for discrimination and both intergroup and interpersonal relations. In so doing, homophobic language may be important ways in which

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homophobia is reinforced and maintained.

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Footnotes

[1] Throughout, the term *homosexual* is used to refer to gay men.

[2] In Italian, different words are used to refer to the body-parts (e.g., hair, feet) of human beings and animals. For instance, the term *capelli* refers exclusively to the hair on a human head, whereas the term *pelliccia* refers exclusively to animal hair. Consistent with this, Vaes, Paladino and Puvia (2011), showed that Italian participants rapidly categorize these Italian words as human or animal characteristics.

[3] *Gay* and *homosexual* are words that can refer to both gay men and lesbian women. Epithets like *faggot* and *fairy* refer exclusively to male targets. To ensure that the category labels we used were processed as gender specific, similar to the homophobic epithets, a pilot study was conducted. Heterosexual participants (N = 40; 37 females, M_{age} = 21.25, *SD* = 3.70) were asked to indicate whether the terms *gay*, *homosexual* and *lesbian* would normally be associated with men or women on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all likely) to 6 (very likely). Although not present in our experimental design, we included the term *lesbian* as it is commonly used to describe female sexual minorities. Both the word *gay* (*M* = 5.55, *SD* = .64) and *homosexual* (*M* = 5.00, *SD* = 1.01) were rated as more likely to refer to men than women (*M* = 1.95, *SD* = 1.04, $t(39) = 15.51$, $p < .001$, $d = 4.97$, 95% CI [3.132, 4.068] for *gay* and *M* = 1.98, *SD* = .83, $t(39) = 12.96$, $p < .001$, $d = 4.15$, 95% CI [2.553, 3.497] for *homosexual*). In contrast, the word *lesbian* was judged as more likely to be used for women (*M* = 5.88, *SD* = .52) than for men (*M* = 1.08, *SD* = .27; $t(39) = -46.81$, $p < .001$, $d = 14.99$, 95% CI [4.593, 5.007]). Thus, despite the fact that the dictionary suggests that the terms *gay* and *homosexual* can be used to refer to both male and female homosexuals, in common language, these terms refer more to men than to women.

[4] No differences emerged when comparing different labels of the same category. Participants exposed to the label *gay* or *homosexual* attributed the same number of human-related words to heterosexual,

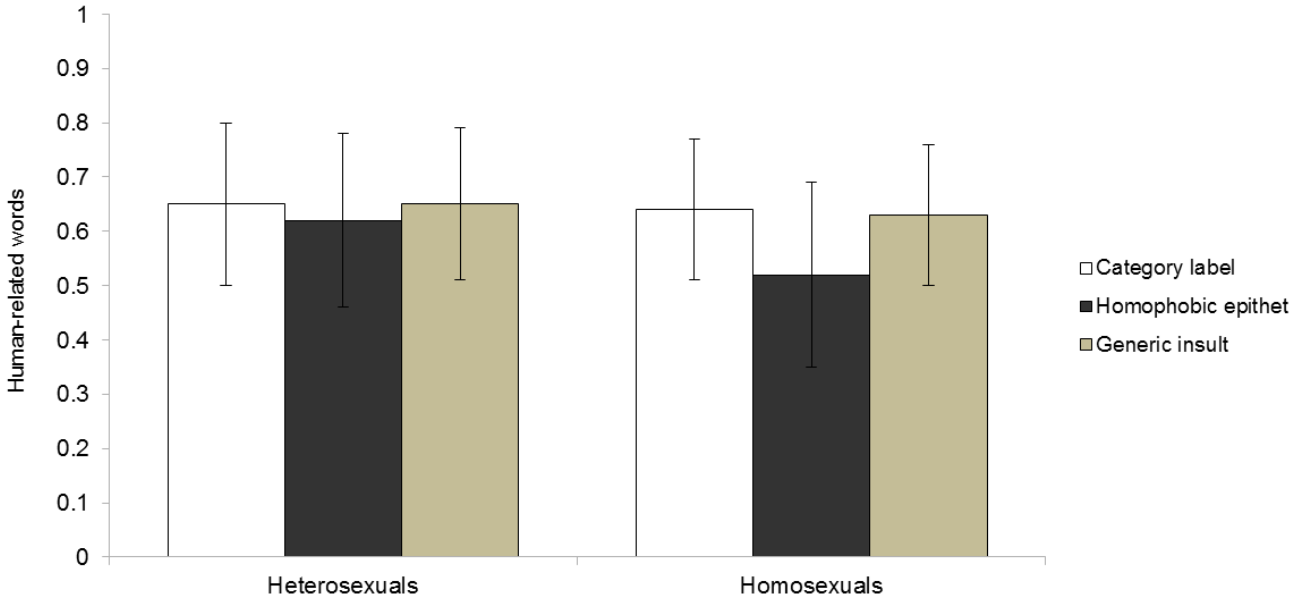
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$t(29) = 1.60$, $p = .12$, $d = .59$, and homosexuals, $t(29) = -.85$, $p = .40$, $d = .31$. The same was true for participants exposed to the label *faggot* and *fairy* (heterosexuals: $t(29) = -.74$, $p = .46$, $d = .27$, and homosexuals: $t(29) = -1.14$, $p = .26$, $d = .42$).

[5] As in Study 1, 20 Australian participants (17 females; $M_{age} = 25.35$, $SD = 7.65$) reported the extent to which the terms (*homosexual* vs. *gay* vs. *lesbian*) refer to each gender. Answers were reported on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all likely) to 6 (very likely). Pairwise *t*-test showed that *gay* ($M = 5.24$, SD = .83) and *homosexuals* ($M = 5.05$, SD = 1.39) are words more likely used for men than for women ($M = 2.81$, SD = 1.32; $t(20) = 5.90$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.63$, 95% CI [1.570, 3.287] for *gay* and $M = 2.28$, SD = .90; $t(20) = 8.02$, $p < .001$, $d = 3.59$, 95% CI [2.043, 3.480] for *homosexual*, respectively). On the contrary, *lesbian* is a term that refers more to women ($M = 5.81$, SD = .51) than men ($M = 1.05$, SD = .22), $t(20) = 34.92$, $p < .001$, $d = 15.62$, 95% CI [4.477, 5.046].

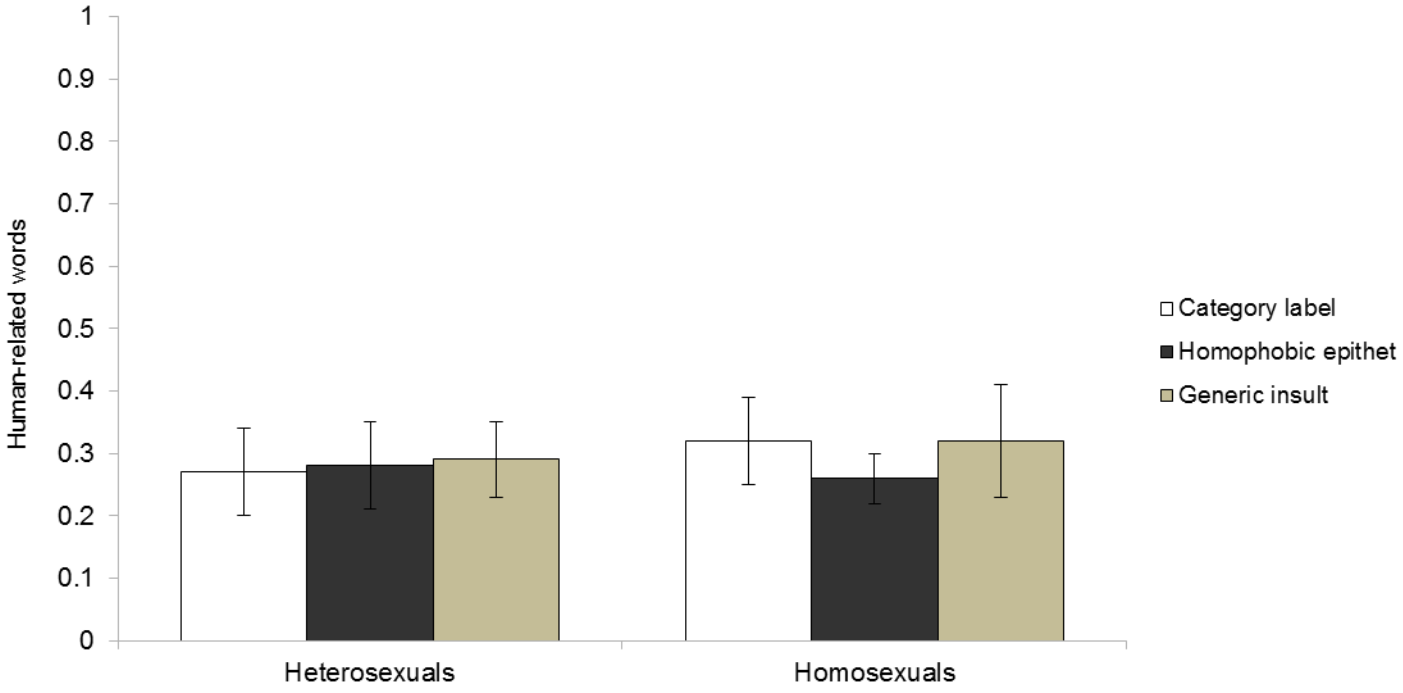
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Figure 1. Mean of human-related words attributed to heterosexuals and homosexuals across conditions (Study 1).



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Figure 2. Mean of human-related words attributed to heterosexuals and homosexuals across conditions (Study 2).



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