# Gay guys using gay discourse:

## Friendship, shared values and the intent-context-effect matrix

Mark McCormack

Liam Wignall

Max Morris

In this article, we use in-depth interviews with 35 openly gay male undergraduates from four universities in England to develop an understanding of the changing nature of language related to homosexuality. In addition to finding a diminution in the prevalence of homophobic language, we demonstrate that participants maintain complex and nuanced understandings of phrases that do not use homophobic pejoratives, such as 'that's so gay'. The majority of participants rejected the notion that these phrases are inherently homophobic, instead arguing that the intent with which they are said and the context in which they are used are vital in understanding their meaning and effect. We conceptualize an intent-context-effect matrix to understand the interdependency of these variables. Highlighting the situated nature of this matrix, we also demonstrate the importance of the existence of shared norms between those saying and hearing the phrase when interpreting such language.

**Introduction**

Prejudice and oppression have traditionally been defining features of sexual minorities' lives in Western cultures (Adam 1998). Lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) youth[1] have suffered homophobic bullying and social stigma if they disclosed their sexual identity (Ryan and Rivers 2003), and many opted to stay in the closet until adulthood because of this victimization (Epstein 1997). One of the key mechanisms by which this social regulation occurred was the use of homophobic language by heterosexuals (Burn 2000), which had deleterious effects on mental health (Poteat and Rivers 2010).

A sophisticated understanding of the social dynamics and uses of homophobic language has developed in the sociological literature (e.g. Burn 2000; Nayak and Kehily 1996). This has focused on the *gendered* nature of homophobic language, and argued that homophobic language primarily regulates gendered behaviours rather than sexual identities (Kiesling 2007). Given the centrality of homophobia to constructions of masculinity, the regulatory use of such language has been particularly prevalent among adolescent males (Mac an Ghaill 1994).

However, there has been a liberalization in attitudes toward homosexuality in the UK over the past thirty years (Clements and Field 2014; Weeks 2007), and this has had a profound effect on what McCormack (2011) calls homosexually themed language. Whereas phrases such as 'that's so gay' were traditionally classified as homophobic, a growing body of research contends that these phrases do not necessarily have negative effects (Lalor and Rendle-Short 2007; Rasmussen 2004), and can even result in bonding between gay and straight male peers (McCormack 2012). Even so, research on the changing nature of homosexually themed language has been limited to the experiences and opinions of heterosexual youth (Lalor and Rendle-Short 2007; Michael 2013), with the perspectives of sexual minorities underrepresented in the literature.

In this article, we use in-depth interviews with 35 openly gay male undergraduates from four universities in England to develop an understanding of the contemporary dynamics of homosexually themed language that is rooted in the attitudes and experiences of gay men. In addition to finding a diminution in the prevalence of homophobic language, we demonstrate that participants maintain complex and nuanced understandings of homosexually themed language. The majority of participants rejected the notion that 'that's so gay' and similar phrases were inherently homophobic, instead arguing that the intent with which they are said and the context in which they are used are vital in understanding their meaning and effect. The interdependency of intent and context with effect was so strong that we reject using them as distinct variables, instead conceptualizing an intent-context-effect matrix. Highlighting the situated nature of this matrix, participants emphasized the importance of the existence of shared norms between those saying and hearing the phrase when interpreting such language.

**Theorizing language, homophobia and masculinity**

The meanings and uses of language are vital to any understanding of sexuality because language is the currency through which social norms are reproduced (Kiesling 2007). Poststructural approaches have been prominent in understanding the effect of language on sexualities (e.g. Butler 1990). Here, language is conceptualized as part of broader discourses that serve to 'constitute what people take to be the reality of that particular phenomenon' (Cameron and Kulick 2003: 16). Butler (1990), for example, discusses a 'constitutive outside' in which all stigmatized gendered behaviours deemed socially unacceptable are located. For Butler, this necessarily includes same-sex desire and she contends that it is by violently and repeatedly repudiating same-sex desires that 'acceptable' gender and sexual identities are maintained.

Poststructural theorizing has been utilized to interrogate simplistic associations between speech, acts and the reproduction of homophobic norms (Harvey 2012; Mason 2002; Rasmussen 2004). Rather than seeking recourse through changes in law, for example, Butler (1997) calls for a transgressive politics centred on the use of language to resist homophobic behaviours. Through her concept of performativity, Butler contends that language can be reconstituted because words can 'become disjoined from their power to injure and recontextualised in more affirmative modes' (p. 15). In this way, Butler calls for the subversive re-interpretation of anti-gay language as an active form of resistance to pervasive societal homophobia (see Brontsema 2004). Central to such theorizing is the recognition that while the meaning of words can change, prior understandings will continue to inflect contemporary interpretations.

This theorizing exists alongside social constructionist research regarding the power of homophobic language in society (Plummer 1999). Highlighting the overarching similarities in approaches, work that draws on Butlerian theory (e.g. Pascoe 2007) adopts an 'interactionist approach to gender' (p. 14). While recognizing the value of poststructural scholarship in contesting clear linguistic distinctions about multiple meanings of words (Rasmussen 2004), we employ a social constructionist framework in this article because it aligns with our political aims of accessible and public sociology, and because research on the intersection of homophobic language with the construction of masculinities has tended to adopt this approach (e.g. Epstein 1997).

Research has demonstrated that homophobic language is central to the construction of heterosexual masculinities (Adams, Anderson and McCormack 2010); particularly in policing heterosexual men's gendered behaviours (Nayak and Kehily 1996; Plummer 1999). This is because the stigmatization of male homosexuality is not solely a result of heterosexual dominance in society (Rubin 1984), but also because it is conflated with femininity—which

is seen as oppositional to masculinity (Lorber 1994). Any association with femininity or homosexuality has thus resulted in men being socially marginalized or having to defend their own gendered identities (Richardson 2010).

Anderson (2008) contends that the most effective way to protect one's masculinity and heterosexuality is to deploy homophobic language against another person—as it is impossible to prove heterosexuality in a homophobic environment (Plummer 1999). However, homophobic language only regulates gendered behaviours in particular contexts—settings that are 'homohysteric' (Anderson 2009). Defined as the fear of being socially perceived as gay, homohysteria enables an understanding of when homophobia serves to regulate gendered behaviours and when it does not. Anderson (2009) cites Iran as an example of a culture in which high levels of homophobia do not result in men avoiding behaviours such as tactility that are feminized in the West.

A culture is homohysteric if it meets three conditions (McCormack and Anderson 2014). First, there must be widespread recognition that male homosexuality exists as an immutable sexual orientation within a significant proportion of the culture's population; secondly, that culture must be homophobic; and thirdly, there must be a cultural conflation of male femininity and homosexuality. When these conditions are met, men seek to avoid any perception of homosexuality because this will result in them being socially punished—most frequently by having homophobic epithets deployed against them (Plummer 1999). Homohysteria has been a powerful conceptual tool in understanding the changing gendered experiences of men (McCormack and Anderson 2014), as well as the changing nature of homophobic language (McCormack 2011).

**From homophobic to homosexually themed language**

Critical studies of men and masculinities from the 1980s and 1990s documented the prevalence of homophobic language alongside a presumption of heterosexuality (Epstein and Johnson 1994; Nayak and Kehily 1996). However, such attitudes and behaviours are not a necessary component of masculinities, but rather a result of men being situated within homohysteric cultures (Anderson 2009). Thus, McCormack (2011) developed a model of what he called homosexually themed language to capture the diverse meanings and effects of language in male peer group cultures with varying levels of homohysteria.

No generally accepted definition of homophobic language exists in the academic literature, and there is significant debate about what constitutes homophobic language. McCormack (2012:53) defined it as 'antigay language that is intended to wound another person', emphasizing that it does not have to be directed at sexual minorities. The key component of homophobic language is that its use is pernicious in both intent and effect (Thurlow 2001). However, in addition to negative intent and damaging effect, an assumption existed in academic research that homophobic language tended to be said within a homophobic environment (McCormack 2011). The linking of environment with effect and intent helped to historically contextualize sociological research on homophobic language that accurately captured the social dynamics of the 1980s and 1990s (Epstein 1997).

McCormack (2011) discussed how decreasing homohysteria in a culture led to different forms of homosexually themed language. Central to this was a focus on the varied uses of the word 'gay'. Lalor and Rendle-Short (2007) demonstrated that many young people are capable of hearing multiple meanings of the word – referring to sexuality in some contexts and being an expression of frustration in others. They highlight a generational divide in contemporary understandings of this use of language, with older people having markedly different views to younger people (Plummer 2010).

McCormack and Anderson (2010) called the use of 'gay' to express frustration or occasionally regulate behaviour 'gay discourse'. They sought to explain why people who had gay friends and espoused pro-gay attitudes would also use language that many interpreted as homophobic. Using in-depth interviews and observational data with young straight men, they demonstrated this use of language was not intended to marginalize or wound another person, and that it occurred in settings with little or no homophobia. While the history of these words means that these different interpretations may intersect (Butler 1997), cautioning against any simplistic understanding of gay discourse as necessarily having socially positive effects, the shift in young heterosexual men's use of language is nonetheless evidence of a broader change in how these words are used and understood (Cleland 2015; Lalor and Rendle-Short 2007).

Finally, McCormack (2011) has also presented ethnographic evidence where the use of phrases like 'that's so gay' bonded straight and gay men together—often through humour and ironic jokes about stereotypes of gay men (see also Potts 2014). Evidencing this shift, Slaatten, Anderssen and Hetland (2014) found that their straight male participants called friends gay-related names far more frequently than they did strangers, arguing that it helped bond friends together. McCormack (2011:672) found this happening between gay and straight male peers. He called this 'pro-gay language', defining it as 'the use of homosexually themed language that is used to bond people together in socio-positive ways or to demonstrate pro-gay attitudes'.

In his model, McCormack (2011) argued that homosexually themed words and phrases have no inherent meaning, and that the categorization of this language is dependent on the cultural context and the social dynamics of the speech (Rasmussen 2004). McCormack's model makes meaning contingent upon the level of homohysteria in the culture, and focussed on both US and UK cultures—including language such as 'fag' that is

rarely heard in the UK. We develop a modified model that focusses on language in the UK specifically (see Figure 1). This model is pertinent to this research given the changing attitudes toward homosexuality – and thus different levels of homohysteria – in British culture in recent decades.

*Insert figure 1 here*

## Changing social norms

Attitudes toward homosexuality in British culture have improved significantly over the past thirty years (Weeks 2007). In an extensive review of survey data, Clements and Field (2014) demonstrate that there have been improvements across a range of issues for LGB people related to general social attitudes, legal rights, employment and parenting. They argue that 'more liberal attitudes toward gay rights can…be seen as part of the progressive diversification, individualization and globalization of sexual behaviour' (p. 21). Data from the most recent *British Social Attitudes* survey shows a reduction of 17 percentage points since 2000 regarding the number of adults that think same-sex relationships are wrong, down to 29 per cent (Curtice and Ormston 2012); Weeks (2007: 3) described the improving attitudes toward homosexuality as part of an 'unfinished but profound revolution that has transformed the possibilities of living our sexual diversity and creating intimate lives'.

The trend of liberalizing attitudes toward homosexuality is supported by qualitative research. Coleman-Fountain (2014) shows lesbian and gay youth living without the persistent marginalization that was pervasive for previous generations, while Roberts (2013) finds a softening of masculinity and a rejection of homophobia among working-class heterosexual young men. Anderson (2014) contends that straight male youth's attitudes toward homosexuality have changed to the extent that they now kiss friends on the lips, cuddle in

bed, and proclaim 'bromances' with other men. These behaviours occur in the context of legal changes that mean that homophobic perspectives are no longer enshrined in British law.

It is important to recognize that decreasing homophobia is an uneven social process, influenced by a range of factors including class, ethnicity and location (Dean 2014; Roberts 2013). The visibility of LGB people is still restricted in particular institutions, hate crimes against sexual minorities persist (Harvey 2012), and homophobia remains rife in other parts of the world (Plummer 2014). Furthermore, some research argues that homophobia continues to be a pressing issue in schools: While the survey-based publications of Stonewall (e.g. Guasp 2012) are methodologically flawed, recent research highlights the multi-layered effects of homosexually themed language and that arguments about decreasing homophobia are contested even as it is recognized that overt homophobia has decreased (Warwick and Aggleton 2014; Woodford et al 2012). In essence, the level of homohysteria in a local context can differ from the broader culture, and broader social changes related to homosexuality impact differently on different groups (McCormack 2014a; Richardson 2010); not least related to the changing meanings of homosexually themed language.

An important component of decreasing homophobia is its effect on how sexual minority youth identify. Savin-Williams (2005: 1) argues that sexual minority youth have entered a 'postidentity' phase in which 'being labelled as gay or even being gay matters little'. Similarly, Dean (2014:5-6) conceptualizes a 'post-closet' culture that recognizes the 'cultural legitimation of "normalized" gay men and lesbians and their expanded latitude in negotiating desire, gender and identity'. Following Savin-Williams (2005), McCormack, Wignall and Anderson (2015) contend that same-sex desire is no longer a defining characteristic for many sexual minority youth. Given these changes in sexual identities among young people, and the diversification of types of homosexually themed language, we

examined how young gay men engage with and use homosexually themed language in contemporary British society.

**Methods**

*Participants*

Part of a broader project on young gay men's attitudes and experiences of university life, data comes from 35 interviews with openly gay male youth attending universities in England. We defined 'openly gay' as a participant having disclosed their sexuality to at least one person at university. Participants were recruited from four universities: two elite institutions and two post-1992 institutions. One university was located in the north of England, while three were found in different areas of the south, with an almost equal number of participants from each university. Participants were aged 18-21 at the time of interview, all of which took place in the spring of 2014. 31 participants identified as White British, two as Black British and two as Mixed-Race British.

15 participants identified as working-class and 20 identified as middle-class, and these categorizations were corroborated by questions about parental occupation and educational history. While this is a diverse class sample, we also frame our participants as being 'principally privileged' in terms of their gender, ethnicity and attendance at university. Drawing on Plummer's (2010) notion of generational sexualities, we highlight that how they interpret language is contingent upon their growing up in a context of decreased cultural homophobia and increased discussion of sexuality between friends (Clements and Field 2014; Evans and Riley 2014). It may be that the university setting is a distinct cultural site where levels of homohysteria are particularly low (Anderson 2009; Bogle 2008). In forthcoming research, Morris (under review) examines participants' friendship groups and highlights how

their gay identities remain important in their friendship networks even as they place less significance on their sexual identities in their lives.

Given that research on sexual minorities has been critiqued for collecting data with a biased sample of people who have had particularly difficult experiences (Savin-Williams 2001), we eschewed traditional techniques that use counselling services and LGBT groups to recruit participants, using a combination of social media and snowball sampling instead. The third author made contact with potential participants on a number of social networking sites, inquiring if they were interested in participating in a project about sexual minority youth. Those that responded positively were provided with further details, and informed consent was attained. Interviews were conducted in-person by the third author.

It is important to recognize that these recruitment techniques may be biased toward people with better than average cultural and sexual capital given their use of social networking sites and attendance at university. This may have resulted in a privileging of particular narratives: recruiting from victim-support groups, for example, could have resulted in more differentiated accounts of homosexually themed language. Sexual minority youth who remain in the closet may have different experiences of homosexually themed language, even though some research suggests this is not the case (Anderson 2011). While these issues restrict claims of generalizability, this approach is in line with McCormack's (2014b) call for a greater diversity of recruitment strategies for research with LGB people.

*Procedures*

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to develop a rich understanding of participants' experiences of being openly gay in contemporary society. Interviews averaged 65 minutes and included questions about definitions and experiences of homophobic language and understandings and uses of the phrase 'that's so gay'. Participants were also

asked questions about their sexual identity, friendship networks, and experiences at school and university. Interviews occurred in private, were digitally recorded and transcribed. All participants signed consent sheets prior to interview, and the ethical procedures of the ESRC were followed. Ethical approval was gained from the first and third authors' university.

While guided by the literature on the changing nature of homosexually themed language, a modified grounded theory approach to analysing the data was employed (Charmaz 2014). This involved initial coding by the first and second author, using constant comparative methods. Emerging codes were discussed and developed into focused codes that we used to develop a 'theory of the phenomena that is grounded in the data' (Braun and Clarke 2006: 80-81). Coding was cross-checked by the third author, who coded 10% of the transcripts, and related the theoretical themes back to original transcripts to check internal coherence (Charmaz 2014).

We also examined the data for differences according to race and class but did not find these to be useful modes of analysis. Given the small number of ethnic minorities in our sample and the multiplicity of experiences within this group, arguments about race are not developed in this article. However, given the diversity of class backgrounds and range of universities participants attended, we include discussion of class where it is important to contextualize the findings.

It is through the process of coding, logical abstraction and inter-rater reliability that rigour is assured. Even so, we recognize the subjective nature of qualitative research, emphasizing that narratives are not the description of 'truths' or transparent reflections of internal states or individual intentions, but the process by which individuals mediate their identities in the social world (Coleman-Fountain 2014). While data is retrospective in nature, this has been shown to be valid for research on sexual minority experiences (Rivers 2001)

and there is no evidence to suggest that participants were misrepresenting their experiences and beliefs.


**Near-total absence of homophobic language**

Research has shown that homophobic language has traditionally been a daily part of young gay men's lives (Nayak and Kehily 1996). Its use among heterosexual male youth has been so prevalent that it was even described as a 'compulsive' component of their behaviours (Pascoe 2007: 84). However, our research provides a counter-narrative to this framing, as homophobic language was only a peripheral concern in participants' lives. Asked if they had encountered what they would consider to be homophobic language, seven of the 35 participants stated that they had *never* heard it. For example, Jamie answered, 'I can't think of a time when I've heard homophobic language or encountered any form of homophobia. I never have'. Similarly, Tyler said, 'I don't think I have heard it [homophobic language]. Not here or at school'. These responses came from both middle and working-class participants and were found from students at each of the four universities.

Of the remaining 28 participants, 26 had heard homophobic language very rarely. Joe said that, 'back home it was infrequent, never a big thing'. He added, 'I hear it much less than I used to. It's just not common here'. Oliver responded that he heard homophobic language 'one per cent of my life I suppose', explaining that this meant 'a little' at school, and never since then. Similarly, Steven said, 'I don't think I see that much of it in general. Nothing springs to mind'.

While Simon had been called queer 'once or twice' at school, his attitude was emblematic of how distant homophobic language was to participants. He said, 'In my everyday life, I don't expect homophobia. If someone was homophobic to me, I would be really shocked… People are not ok with it anymore, and it's not acceptable to say those kind

of things'. Supporting the notion that overt homophobia is socially unacceptable (McCormack 2012), Patrick said, 'I've heard nothing here. You'd be lynched if you said anything [homophobic]'. While Patrick was a middle-class student attending an elite university, these responses were found across the four universities and were independent of participants' social class. Thus, for the great majority of participants, homophobic language – as defined by them – was not pervasive and did not feature as a prominent component of their lives.

In addition to the lack of homophobic language experienced by the majority of participants, the two participants that said they had heard homophobic language frequently at some point in their lives did not speak of being hurt by hearing it (c.f. Thurlow 2001). While Bradley, who was working-class, said he was called 'poof' by some students at high school, he added that it 'didn't bother' him. Ed, who was middle-class, said, 'Some things can be seen as very homophobic, but they don't say it abusively or mean it in that way, so it doesn't really matter'. While we return to the question of intent later, experiences of victimization or harassment were almost entirely absent from participants' narratives (c.f. Poteat and Rivers 2010).

These findings are complicated by the diverse range of opinions as to whether 'that's so gay' was homophobic. When asked directly, 28 of the participants said that they did not think it was. Even so, participants often broadened the scope of their answer about hearing homophobic language to include that and similar phrases. For some, this was in recognition that other people felt the phrase was homophobic. Of the 33 participants who discussed total absence or infrequent use of homophobic language, 15 were including 'that's so gay' in their response. Thus, apart from Bradley, Ed and Simon, the participants that reported ever hearing homophobic language were referring to 'that's so gay' or other similar phrases—not homophobic pejoratives (Thurlow 2001). Significantly, and in contrast to some high-profile

surveys (Guasp 2012) and academic research (Woodford et al. 2012), participants' understanding of these phrases were complex and nuanced.

**Hearing and interpreting 'that's so gay'**

Contrary to the dominant cultural narrative that the phrase 'that's so gay' is a central feature of young gay people's lives (e.g. Guasp 2012), 16 of the 35 participants reported that they had never heard the phrase regularly in their lives. While the remaining 19 participants reported hearing it relatively frequently at some point, 14 of them said that they heard it more at school than at university. For example, Charlie said, 'I do not hear that stuff as much now, because I'm not in the playground anymore'. Finn's comment mirrored several of the participants' views when he said, 'I heard it more at school because people were trying to fit in there. At university, you don't have to do that'. None of the participants considered the phrase to be evidence of homophobic bullying (c.f. Woodford et al 2012).

In addition to rejecting a bullying framework, the notion that the phrase was homophobic was also rejected by the majority of participants (Warwick and Aggleton 2014). 28 of the participants did not consider it, or other similar uses of the word gay, to be inherently homophobic. Tyler said, 'I don't find it derogatory in any way. It's just one of those words, isn't it?' Similarly, Zachary said, 'No, I don't think it's homophobic …If a kid says "that's so gay", they don't mean it in an offensive way'. This was found across class backgrounds and was independent of the university participants attended.

Five of the participants rejected the notion that the phrase was homophobic because they used it themselves. Rory said:

> I use it all the time. In fact it was probably one of my favourite things to say as a kid… I've grown out of it a bit now, but I think 99% of people who use it are not saying 'that's so gay' because they think, 'that's what gay people do, and I don't like

gay people and that's a gay thing'. They're saying, 'oh I'm pissed off that my laptop is broken'.

Similarly, Harvey said, 'I think it's just a light-hearted comment or a joke…I say it a lot… I think everyone I know uses the word as an adjective. Like, "that's so gay" or "this programme is so gay" or whatever'. These participants were happy to use the phrase because for them, the use of the word gay in this context had become dissociated from homosexuality (Lalor and Rendle-Short 2007).

Seven participants argued that the phrase is inherently homophobic. Even so, they still sought to distinguish it from other forms of homophobia. For example, Owen said, 'It's passively homophobic…It's the implications of the phrase, as opposed to the intentions of the person using it'. Similarly, Lewis said, 'I don't think it's intentionally homophobic… but I don't think it's at all positive'. Alex also sought to differentiate language by intensity, saying:

It's homophobic, but it's not what I would call active homophobia. It's not the same as shouting someone down or beating them up or anything. It's definitely a passive implied thing by using it as an offensive term.

Three of these participants also linked it to heterosexist norms (Plummer 1999). Felix said, 'It shows that society still thinks being straight is better, if gay means rubbish'. Lewis argued that phrases including 'that's so gay' are 'representative of homophobic attitudes in society'. He added, 'I don't think it's at all positive and it should stop'.

However, even these participants who adopted the most critical stance relating to the phrase discussed the importance of context, arguing that the way such phrases are deployed is important in understanding their effect. Interestingly, these seven participants all had middle-class backgrounds. It is possible that their critical perspectives were in part a result of a symbolic identification with what they perceive to be liberal middle-class values of non-discrimination and anti-homophobia (see Kehily and Pattman 2006).

While all but these seven students rejected the framing that the phrase was inherently homophobic, 23 participants displayed some ambivalence about the phrase and argued that homophobia would depend on circumstance. For example, Simon said, 'It's not necessarily homophobic… I don't think people mean it in a homophobic way'. Rob commented, 'It's not homophobic, not really. Especially because of the context in which most people say it'. David had a similar perspective, saying, 'If it's said maliciously then it can be homophobic, but if it's in a general kind of "oh we have an essay in tomorrow, that's gay", it doesn't really matter'. He added, 'it's just a way of talking, so everyone can agree and express that "tell me about it" expression'. Thus, while these gay youth did not support use of the phrase, neither did they argue it was homophobic (Anderson 2011). As McCormack (2011) found in his study of straight male youth, the majority of gay men in this study eschewed simplistic understandings of the phrase for one that was dependent on the social context in which it was said.

**Intent-context-effect**

Cameron and Kulick (2003: 123) called for scholars to move 'beyond intention' in order to understand how language constructs sexuality in society. McCormack (2011) responded to this call by arguing that one can only determine if language is homophobic by considering intent, effect and social context together. This argument was supported by our participants' responses to an open question about when language was classified as homophobic. For the majority of participants, the most important factor was the intent of the speaker. Graham said, 'It's all about the intention I guess. If it's intentionally hurting somebody else, then it's bad and it shouldn't happen'. The importance of intent was also highlighted in Matt's explanation of why 'that's so gay' is not homophobic. He said, 'I don't think it is. There is no intent

behind it'. Similarly, Oliver said, 'It's the intention behind language that creates a word to be homophobic'.

Participants also emphasized the importance of social context in determining whether language was homophobic. Highlighting this, Rob said, 'For me anything could be…It just really depends on the context and the connotations'. The importance of context was also evident when participants discussed particular styles of masculine 'banter' (Hein and O'Donohoe 2014) from their hometowns. For example, David discussed bantering with his friends from his hometown, saying, 'Back home, I'm one of their only gay friends and so everything I do is, "oh my god, that's so gay"'. He added, 'That's not homophobic because we're having a laugh, and it's with that group, in that context'. Joe explained that the importance of context was that the phrase 'has taken on a second meaning'. For Joe context was about 'understanding what way the word is meant'.

Despite scholars highlighting its importance (e.g. Poteat and Rivers 2010), very few participants mentioned the effects of language in determining homophobia. In discussing whether 'that's so gay' was homophobic, Alfie said, 'The way I've heard it, no. But if people are cringing away and hiding in the corner, which I haven't seen, then I guess it would be'. Similarly, Charlie defined homophobic language as 'language that does pain to someone with same-sex attractions'. These were the only two participants to mention negative effects as important in their determination of homophobia. This may be attributable to the fact that few of the participants have experienced the damage homophobic language can have on general well-being.

Some participants explicitly talked about both intent and context in their answers. For example, Michael said, 'I don't think the words matter that much. It's more about how you approach it, and the kind of situation it's in'. Similarly, Evan said, 'I would define

homophobic language via the tone of voice generally and the situation…It's the tone and the context'. Most participants referred to both components at some point in interview.

What became clear in analysis of participants' answers is that while some participants referred to intent, and others discussed context or effect, they were all referring to the same set of broader issues: that the intent of the speaker is important; that this intent will be understood through the manner in which they say it; that this manner is determined by the social context; and that the effect is determined by these factors combined. Highlighting this imbrication of intent, context and effect, when Alfie discussed homophobia through effects, arguing that homophobia is demonstrated if people are 'cringing away and hiding in the corner', he added, 'It depends on how it's used, what is intended by it'. This notion is exemplified by Finn when he uses the terms interchangeably. He said:

> …if you mean it to be nasty, then it becomes an insult, but if you're using it as a throw away comment or a term of endearment that's fine. It won't hurt. It all depends on the situation and the context.

Their comments highlight that intent, context and effect are better considered as intersecting concepts that cannot be compartmentalized into discrete categories. It is not about privileging intent, context or effect (Cameron and Kulick 2003), but recognizing their interdependency. In order to move away from the notion of discrete variables that have their own unique influences, we call this inter-relationship the intent-context-effect matrix.

**Friendship and the importance of shared values**

When participants spoke in interview about the importance of intent, the intent of the speaker often seemed clear and obvious to them. While this could be seen as a simplistic understanding of language, it was evident that intent was judged differently according to how well they knew the person using the words. For example, David said, 'If it's a complete

stranger coming up to me and going "that's so gay" about me, I would feel more inclined to put up a shield'. John shared this view, saying, 'If someone on the street, a friend, was like "Oi, gay," that's fine, fantastic. If some random guy across the street shouted it, I might go over and start something with them'.

Indeed, friendship was highlighted as important in how 'that's so gay' was interpreted by many participants, several of whom enjoyed using it with their straight friends. For example, Evan said that such language can 'break down barriers between the straight and gay community'. Similarly, David said, 'My [straight] friends laugh at it because they know I'm gay so it's funnier when I say it. If they say it, I'll laugh and they know it's ok'. This is a social bonding process that McCormack (2011: 672) called 'pro-gay language'.

Joe, a working-class student from an elite institution who regularly played football with his friends from home, also argued that homosexually themed banter would bond him with his teammates. He said:

> We'll be playing, and someone will pull your shorts down as a joke. People would say 'oh you like a bit of that don't you Joe'. I'd reply with 'Phwoar! Yeah!' We'd laugh. …It helped us bond. Maybe initially for someone not out it might bother them, but when they come to realise it's just meant jokingly and friendly, you realise it's actually really good.

When asked if his laughter was an attempt to conform to group norms, he replied, 'No man. These are old friends, good mates. It's just funny'. Joe described himself as 'a lad', and it is possible that Joe's interpretation of this banter is contingent upon his understanding of his own masculinity (Hein and O'Donohoe 2014). Furthermore, by highlighting the difference between those in the closet and those open about their sexuality, Joe drew attention to the importance of shared norms within the group when using the phrase—shared norms that can be implicitly assumed between friends, but not between strangers.

This notion of interpreting meaning according to friendship was developed by Leo. While he was concerned about the phrase 'that's so gay' because 'it can stigmatize gay people by equating them with weakness and stuff', friendship was key in his understanding. He said,

> I don't mind it from [name's friend]. It's a joke, he doesn't mean anything, and I say it to him all the time as well. But from people I don't know, saying it to me, I don't like it…but coming from people I know, who I know don't mean it negatively, I don't care.

Not all participants had such ease in using the phrase with their friends. Some had friends who would apologise if they said it in front of them. For example, Zachary said, 'My friends say it and it doesn't bother me. They'll be like, "sorry", and I'll be like, "I couldn't give a fuck"'. Finn played with this ambiguity and his straight male peers' concerns of being thought homophobic (Anderson 2014), saying, 'A couple of times when people have said it, I've jokingly gone, "ooh you shouldn't have said that". I'll pretend to be offended and once they're going, "sorry sorry", I'll say, "fuck it, I don't give a shit"'.

However, some participants were angered when friends apologised. For example, Patrick said, 'I don't like it when people apologise for it. That shows that it's a bad thing that they shouldn't have said'. For Patrick, his friends' apologies troubled the security of these norms, highlighting that the implicit norms he thought existed might not be shared across the group. Importantly, participants' narratives focussed on the use of the phrase among friendship groups because they argued that this was overwhelmingly the context in which the phrase was used (see Slaatten, Anderssen and Hetland 2014). Thus, in understanding the operation of the intent-context-effect matrix, it is vital to know the extent to which both shared norms are present in the setting and the intention of the speaker can be presumed.

**Discussion**

In this article, we have drawn on 35 in-depth interviews with openly gay male youth to develop understanding of the operations of homosexually themed language in contemporary society. Whereas this language was almost always homophobic in homohysteric cultures, it is complex and contested in settings where homophobia has declined. While scholars have started to investigate the changing nature of these phrases, empirical research has focussed on heterosexual men's understandings of this language (e.g. McCormack 2011).

The empirical findings in this article are significant. First, contrary to the dominant narrative about homophobic language (e.g. Guasp 2012; Pascoe 2007), 33 of the 35 participants had heard homophobic language very rarely or not at all. 'That's so gay' was regularly heard by less than half of participants, and the majority of this group said this mainly occurred at school. Participants had nuanced understandings of the phrase, and most felt that it was only homophobic in particular contexts—none counted it as evidence of homophobic bullying. Those that had heard it regularly at some point in their lives did not, in general, consider it homophobic. Thus, our research highlights a complex understanding of homosexually themed language among these openly gay male youth.

These empirical findings have led to important conceptual developments. Building on the recognition that the meaning of language is socially determined (Cameron and Kulick 2003), we developed the intent-context-effect matrix to understand the process by which participants interpreted homosexually themed language. Frameworks that seek to privilege intent, context or effect fail to recognize the interdependency of these terms, and do not understand the skill with which these openly gay youth interpret such language use.

This research also demonstrates the importance of shared norms between speaker and listener. McCormack's (2011) model of homosexually themed language demonstrated that the level of homohysteria in a setting influenced how such language is espoused and

interpreted. It is through shared cultural norms that our participants were able to determine the homohysteria of a setting. Participants emphasized the difference between hearing friends and strangers using such phrases, and highlighted that they predominantly heard it spoken within friendship groups (Slaatten, Anderssen and Hetland 2014).

However, it is important to recognize that the intent-context-effect matrix does not include the perspective of the speaker. Thus, the matrix needs to be situated within the context of understanding how young gay men interpret language used in their presence, rather than providing a 'true' reflection of what the phrase means. Even so, given participants' presumption that shared norms existed between themselves and the speaker when in friendship groups, and given the similarities between their interpretations of the phrase and the explanations of young heterosexual men in other studies (e.g. Lalor and Rendle-Short 2007; McCormack and Anderson 2010; Michael 2013), future research into the applicability of the matrix to young straight men may be a fruitful endeavour.

While these similarities with heterosexual male youth's explanations are important, many of our openly gay participants were aware of the association with homosexuality and worried that it would reproduce heterosexism. This is likely attributable to their own positionality as openly gay men living within a heterosexist culture, and their ability to critique these cultural norms. Significantly, many participants still used the phrase despite having these concerns. The seeming conundrum of gay youth using gay discourse can be explained through considering the evolution of language. Lalor and Rendle-Short (2007) empirically demonstrated that the word gay has become polysemous – and that people aged 18-30 are able to distinguish between when 'gay' refers to homosexuality or to something 'being rubbish'. Supporting the importance of shared norms, Lalor and Rendle-Short (2007:164) write that the latter use of gay 'functions as an in-group marker, when talking to peers or when "having fun". While the historical context of language means that these

distinctions will always occur in the context of a history of homophobic meanings, the fears about reproducing heterosexism are reduced because the meanings of homosexually themed language have evolved in line with changing attitudes toward homosexuality.

Lalor and Rendle-Short (2007) highlight a generational divide in understanding of this use of gay discourse, with older people having markedly different views to younger people. This divide is partly explained by the generational nature of sexualities (Plummer 2010), in that peoples' mediation of sexual cultures is determined by the historical context in which they were socialized. The marked shift in use of homosexually themed language by our openly gay participants is thus the result not just of the improvement in attitudes toward homosexuality (Clements and Field 2014), but also by the shift in sexual minority youths' attachment to sexual identities (Ghaziani 2014; Savin-Williams 2005). There is considerable explanatory power in linking the polysemy of the word gay to a reduction in the fixity of sexual identity labels. That is, if gay youth have less attachment to sexual identity labels, it follows that they will be more open to a diversity of meanings to the word 'gay' as well.

The notion that the nature of homosexually themed language has evolved alongside a liberalization of attitudes toward homosexuality in British culture (Clements and Field 2014) has important implications for social theorizing of language. Whereas Butler (1997) argued that there was a need for an active subversion of homophobic language to effect change, the shift in meaning of 'that's so gay' in this research speaks to the evolution of language that is not part of queer political action but rather an artefact of generational understandings of sexualities. In other words, the prior meanings of the phrase 'that's so gay' have less effect than theorized because the prior meanings associated with the phrase are less well-known among the younger generation.

This supports Harvey's (2012) contention that change will occur not by 'a simple resignification of language', but rather through 'a sustained engagement with people and the

issues' (p. 203). This is not to argue against the profound importance of language in shaping understanding of sexuality nor its political power in effecting change (Cameron and Kulick 2003), but to highlight the limits of the queer politics of language espoused by Butler (1997) and others (e.g. Brontsema 2004). Instead, it provides empirical support for the contention that scholars need to listen to multiple perspectives about the use of language (McCormack 2012).

The presence of a generational effect and the importance of shared norms raise important questions about use of homosexually themed language in public spaces. One arena in where there is considerable debate pertains to use of the phrase 'that's so gay' in schools. It cannot be assumed that different friendship groups will have the same implicit understanding, and these norms are less likely to be shared between students and teachers. This research suggests that a simplistic labelling of such language use as homophobic will not be an effective way of dealing with broader issues of heterosexism and homophobia in schools, and that a more sophisticated understanding of the complexity of language as explicated in this article will help deal with the different opinions of such language use (Warwick and Aggleton 2014).

There are of course limitations to this research. The narratives of closeted youth and other sexual minority groups could be different, and by recruiting from university settings we are focusing on men with a certain level of educational ability and social privilege. Given the limits of our sample, we were not able to provide an analysis of race either. However, given that class is central to the way in which whiteness is racialized in British culture (Garner 2012), particularly in relation to class, further investigation into how class and whiteness intersect in the construction of British identities with this language could also be a worthy endeavour. Furthermore, the age cohort of these men is also likely to be significant given the generational nature of sexualities and the evolution of language. Given the importance of

shared implicit norms in determining the intent-context-effect matrix, it is likely that different social groups will have different experiences of this language. Thus, further research is needed to explore these issues.

Even so, this research advances sociological understanding of the nature and effects of homosexually themed language in contemporary British culture. Rooted in the narratives of 35 openly gay male youth, it recognizes the complex and nuanced position of participants' experiences of homosexually themed language. It extends McCormack's (2011) model by developing conceptual apparatus to understand the ways in which gay male youth process such language. By proposing an intent-context-effect matrix, and situating this within a set of shared norms, it shows that simplistic understandings of language as either homophobic or not need to be rejected. Instead, it is vital to recognize the complex and subtle ways in which gay male youth use and understand such language.

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**Notes**

1. We do not include an analysis of trans youth in this article given the uniqueness of their experiences.