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HOMOPHOBIC BULLYING IN THE ITALIAN SCHOOL CONTEXT: STUDENT AND SCHOOL PERSONNEL PERSPECTIVES

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Dedico questa tesi alla memoria di Giulio Regeni e ai suoi genitori

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

FACTORS UNDERLYING HOMOPHOBIC BULLYING, ROLES OF SCHOOL STAFF, POLICY AND PRACTICE: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the last decade, international research has highlighted that bias-based bullying towards sexual and gender minority students (i.e., homophobic bullying) is a prevalent problem in schools (Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, & Koenig, 2011; Rivers, 2011). Homophobic bullying is defined as the deliberate and recurring victimization of youth who are, or are perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (i.e., LGBT; Rivers, 2014). LGBT and heterosexual youth may experience different forms of victimization (Hong & Garbarino, 2012), such as verbal (e.g., homophobic epithets and slurs), physical (e.g., assault, threats), and relational aggressive behavior (e.g., social exclusion, rumor-spreading). The most frequent forms of homophobic victimization are name-calling, teasing, rumor-spreading, and being ridiculed in front of others (Rivers, 2001). Experiencing homophobic victimization is also associated with negative outcomes on mental health and school well-being, such as anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, a sense of school belonging, school absenteeism, and withdrawal (Collier, van Beusekom, Bos, & Sandfort, 2013; Poteat and Espelage, 2007; Rivers, 2004; Russel et al., 2011).

The vast majority of LGBT and gender non-conforming students experience homophobic victimization in the school context as many studies have documented in various countries, for instance in Belgium, Canada, England, Ireland, Japan, Netherlands, Spain, and USA (Collier, Bos, & Sandfort, 2013; DeSmet et al., 2018; Higgins et al., 2016; Kasai, 2017; Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018; Llorent, Ortega-Ruiz, & Zych, 2016; Rivers, 2011; Taylor et al., 2011). These studies and international review (UNESCO, 2012; 2016) documented homophobic bias-based bullying in the school setting as a global issue. In one of the most recent surveys, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (i.e., GLSEN) examined a US nationally representative sample of 23,001 LGBT students from grades 6 to 12 and found that 60.3% had heard homophobic remarks like "dyke" and "faggot" frequently or often. In addition, 70.1% of the sample had experienced verbal harassment and 28.9% had been physically harassed because of their sexual orientation, whereas 59.1% had experienced verbal harassment and 24.4% had been physically harassed because of their gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2018). As regards Europe, in 2014, the European Union Agency

for Fundamental Rights (FRA) published the region's largest survey of LGBT people, conducted among more than 93,000 LGBT people from 28 countries (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). Referring to the educational setting, a majority of the respondents (68%) reported that they had experienced negative comments or conduct at school based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression, when they attended school before the age of 18. Additionally, almost all the respondents (91%) had witnessed negative comments or conduct because a schoolmate was perceived to be LGBT. Recently, UNESCO provided a global review of homophobic and transphobic violence in the school setting (UNESCO, 2016). Among European countries, where national data have been collected, homophobic and transphobic violence was found to be a pervasive phenomenon. For instance, in Ireland 52% of individuals reported that they had experienced name-calling due to sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. In Finland, more than one third of students (36%) experienced homophobic and transphobic bullying. In Belgium, more than half of LGBT respondents (56%) reported that at least once they had experienced homophobic or transphobic violence or discrimination at school.

In Italy, the little data available points to homophobic bullying being a common problem in the school context. In a study conducted among 364 high school students in northern Italy (Prati, Pietrantoni, & D'Augelli, 2011), 53% of the sample reported always or often hearing homophobic remarks towards gay male and 17% towards lesbian students. Moreover, 17% of the sample reported always or often reading written homophobic insults towards gay male and 6% towards lesbian students. In addition, 12% of the sample reported always or often seeing verbal or physical assaults against gay male and 2% against lesbian students. In another study with 1,627 high school students in Central Italy, 48% of the sample claimed to have heard homophobic remarks made by schoolmates often or very often and 8% of the sample claimed to have experienced homophobic victimization at least once. In addition, 76% of students reported the presence of written homophobic insults on the restroom walls (Ioverno, Baiocco, Nardelli, Orfano, & Lingiardi, 2016).

Research documented that homophobic victimization is connected to negative mental health and risky behavior, as well as educational outcomes. As regards mental and risk behavior outcomes, experiencing homophobic bullying is associated with depressive symptoms (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008; Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Rivers, 2004; Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008), anxiety (Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Swearer et al., 2008), post-traumatic stress symptoms (Dragowski, Halkitis, Grossman, & D'Augelli, 2011; Rivers, 2004), self-harm (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Rivers, 2001), suicidality (Almeida et al., 2009; Espelage et al., 2008; Friedman, Koeske, Silvestre, Korr, & Sites, 2006; Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, & Koenig, 2011), lower self-esteem (Bos, Sandfort, De Bruyn, & Hakvoort, 2008), internalized homophobia (D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002), behaviors which are risky to sexual health (Bontempo, & d'Augelli, 2002; Rivers, 2004), and alcohol and drug use (D'Augelli et al., 2002; Espelage et al., 2008), As regards school-related outcomes, homophobic victimization is associated with a lower sense of school belonging (Pizmony-Levy, Kama, Shilo, & Lavee, 2008; Poteat et al., 2011; Poteat & Espelage, 2007), discipline problems (Murdock, & Bolch, 2005), truancy (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2008; Rivers, 2000), lower academic achievement (Aragon, Poteat, Espelage, & Koenig, 2014; Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010), and dropping out of school (Wyss, 2004).

On one hand, given the prevalence of homophobic bullying and the serious consequences of experiencing this specific form of aggression, previous research has pointed to the need for understanding the reasons, at the individual and contextual levels, that account for student engagement in homophobic bullying in the school context (Poteat, 2017), as well as ascertaining practice and policy aimed at preventing and dealing with this unique kind of aggressive behavior. On the other hand, considering that school staff play a critical role in dealing with homophobic bullying and promoting school safety for all students, and in particular for sexual and gender minority students (Eccles and Roeser, 2011; O'Shaughnessy, Russell, Heck, Calhoun, & Laub, 2004; Russell & McGuire, 2008), past research has investigated factors underlying school staff - especially teachers - responses to homophobic bullying and their relationship with school climate.

The present literature review aims to address three key issues. First, it provides a review of the studies that have investigated individual and school contextual factors promoting engagement in homophobic bullying behaviors. Second, it illustrates the studies that have addressed several individual and school contextual factors associated with the frequency and type of school staff responses to homophobic bullying. Third, it gives an account of studies that highlighted policies and strategies to improve school climate for sexual and gender minority youth.

Individual and Contextual Factors Underlying Homophobic Bullying

Past research focused on multiple factors that foster or inhibit student engagement in homophobic bulling in a school setting. In particular, scholars emphasized the importance of taking into account the interaction of both personal characteristics and social context that may predict homophobic bullying. Indeed, homophobic bullying may be considered a complex phenomenon in which intra- and inter-individual factors converge and interact (Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Poteat, 2017).

Individual factors. A range of individual factors (i.e., personal characteristics that might influence an individual's behavior, for instance gender, sexual prejudice, or empathy) have been considered to account for students' engagement in homophobic behaviors. With regard to gender, male compared to female adolescents tend to report higher levels of involvement in homophobic bullying (Poteat, 2015; Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010; Poteat & Espelage, 2005, 2007; Poteat & Rivers, 2010), and being male predicts a higher probability of engaging in homophobic bullying (Camodeca, Baiocco, & Posa, 2018). Also, gender predicts variability in how often students used sexual orientation bias-based language across high school grade levels, that is, male students used homophobic epithets with increased frequency, whereas female students reported a decreased frequency in use (Poteat, O'Dwyer, & Mereish, 2012).

The importance of an individual's sexual orientation identity represents another personal characteristic that may explain why adolescents engage in homophobic behaviors. Poteat and colleagues (2013) found that heterosexual adolescents who place a greater importance on their sexual

orientation identity are likely to report more frequent use of homophobic language. This finding may be explained referring to social identity theoretical framework (Tajfel, 1981), since adolescents would engage in this bias-based behavior to enforce their membership to the ingroup by expressing the difference between themselves and individuals perceived as non-conforming to the ingroup norms or belonging to a marginalized outgroup, that is, a sexual minority. Adolescents who consider their sexual orientation a core feature of their social identity adopt homophobic behavior as a means to assert their heterosexuality as well as avoid any miscategorization as a member of a sexual minority (Poteat, 2017).

If we consider individual attitudes and beliefs, sexual prejudice (i.e., negative attitudes towards sexual minority individuals; Herek & McLemore, 2013) plays a critical role in adolescents' homophobic attitudes and behavior in the school social context (Horn et al., 2008; Poteat et al., 2013). The extant research has indicated that sexual prejudice is higher among boys than girls (Hoover & Fishbein, 1999; Poteat 2007) and found that adolescents who reported higher rates of sexual prejudice were likely to use homophobic epithets, although sexual prejudice is associated with homophobic behavior more among boys than girls (Epstein, 2001; Poteat, 2015; Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010; Poteat et al., 2013).

Both femininity and masculinity gender norms (i.e., "social expectations for appropriate behaviors of men as compared to women"; Pulerwitz & Barker, 2008) are promoted and maintained in a school setting (Pascoe, 2007) as well, male and female students are likely to experience homophobic victimization when they do not conform or are assumed to be non-conformant with traditional gender norms (Aspenlieder, Buchanan, McDougall, & Sipplola, 2009). Nevertheless, the existing literature shows that only traditional masculine ideology beliefs represent an individual factor associated with engagement in homophobic bullying. Indeed, male adolescents who endorse these beliefs or belong to peer groups holding high masculinity attitudes are more likely to perpetrate homophobic behaviors (Birkett & Espelage, 2015; Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1994; Poteat, Kimmel, & Wilchins, 2011). Boys may engage in homophobic behavior to prove their conformity to gender

norms, reducing likelihood of being targeted as a sexual or gender minority. Indeed, being targeted as a member of these minorities enhances the likelihood of being put in a subordinate position (Pascoe, 2007).

As another individual factor, moral disengagement (i.e., psychosocial mechanism aimed at disengaging internal moral control from harmful conduct restructured into worthy conduct; Bandura, 2002) has been found related to levels of engagement in homophobic bullying (Camodeca et al., 2018). Students who were more inclined to justify and dismiss homophobic bullying reported a higher frequency of involvement in this behavior. Moral disengagement may be considered one way to foster a lack of responsibility related to individual aggressive behavior towards sexual minority youth and blaming the victim to escape inner moral sanctions.

Research had indicated the role of individual dominance behavior to understand why adolescents engage in homophobic bullying. Bullying may be considered a strategy to achieve dominance and high status among peers (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Poteat and DiGiovanni (2010) explored this relationship and found that students who reported more frequent involvement in dominance-promoting behaviors among peers were more likely to use homophobic epithets. These findings showed that homophobic bullying (i.e., the use of biased language) was associated with individual behaviors aimed at establishing and maintaining dominance over peers by referring to a sexual minority youth in a derogatory manner and adopting the common stigmatization of sexual minority at societal level (Herek and McLemore, 2013).

Contextual factors. To achieve a better understanding of homophobic bullying, research has taken into account several contextual factors that may explain why adolescents might perpetuate this bias-based behavior. Considering bullying as a group process allows us to better understand the interplay between individual characteristics and contextual factors, such as social school norms (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Salmivalli, 2010). Prior studies have documented that peers are present during bullying behavior (O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukianinen, 1996) and can play various roles with regard to this. (Olweus, 2001; Poteat

& Rivers, 2010). Referring to association between bullying and the use of homophobic language, Poteat and Rivers (2010) took into account three main roles involved in bullying behavior, namely the perpetrator role (i.e., the primary or traditional bully) and peripheral roles such as the reinforcers and the assistants who encourage and help the perpetrator, respectively (Salmivalli et al. 1996). Poteat and Rivers (2010) found that among boys, the role of primary bully and reinforcer were associated with more the frequent use of homophobic language, whereas among girls, all the three roles predicted the more frequent use of homophobic language. These findings suggest that use of homophobic epithets is a means to intensify the effect of bullying across distinct but concurrent roles and to stigmatize victims regardless of their actual sexual orientation. The presence of a group of individuals who play different roles while engaging in bullying underlines that bullying and homophobic bullying are often perpetrated by groups of peers rather than individuals (Rivers, 2017; Rivers, Duncan, & Besag, 2007).

Regarding homophobic bullying, it has been found that being a member of an aggressive and homophobic peer group is related to the more frequent use of homophobic language (Birkett & Espelage, 2014; Poteat, 2007; 2008). Moreover, in a study among Italian high school students, Prati (2012a) found that the observed frequency of homophobic bullying against lesbian and gay students was associated with participants' engagement in this aggressive behavior. These results emphasize the role that group norms play in shaping individual behavior. Behaviors perceived as frequent in a group may be considered normative in that group and influence individual behavior (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004).

A great deal of literature on bullying had demonstrated that victimized students are not only the targets of bullying aggression, but may engage in (counter)aggressive behavior themselves, and they can be considered a distinct group (i.e., bully-victims) from nonvictimized bullies (Hong & Espelage, 2012; Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999; Salmivalli, 2010; Salmivalli & Nieminen 2002; Withney & Smith, 1993). Furthermore, experiencing victimization is associated with reactively aggressive behaviors (Pellegrini et al., 1999; Schwartz et al., 1998). In line with these results, previous research

has found that male students who used homophobic epithets were more likely to also experience this form of homophobic victimization (Poteat & Espelage, 2005). Consistently, and in a longitudinal study, Birkett and Espelage (2015) demonstrated that students who were called homophobic epithets were more likely to call others homophobic epithets over time. Moreover, Poteat (2008) found that being the target of homophobic epithets may predict the more frequent use of this bias-based language within a higher homophobic peer group climate.

As authority figures in schools, teachers should be responsible for handling homophobic bullying and harassment and promoting school safety for all students. and in particular for sexual and gender minority students (Eccles and Roeser, 2011; O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004; Russell & McGuire, 2008). At the school level, the extant literature has underscored teachers' critical roles in modeling student behaviors and influencing the school environment (Hong & Espelage, 2012; Olweus, 1992). Teachers contribute to student perception of school climate and play a critical role in endorsing respect norms that promote safer schools. Indeed, Poteat and colleagues (2013) found that students' higher perceptions of teachers' fostering mutual respect in their classroom were associated with less student engagement in homophobic bullying.

School Staff Responses to Homophobic Bullying

School staff members are important in supporting and promoting a positive learning environment and student well-being. If we consider the marginalized condition of sexual and gender minority students in the broader school context, school staff members play a critical role in fostering a supportive environment for all, and in particular for LGBT and gender nonconforming students (Russell, Horn, Kosciw, & Saewyo, 2010). Furthermore, school staff, especially teachers, may face homophobic bullying episodes and their interventions are fundamental to create a school context in which sexual and gender minority students feel safer (Kosciw et al., 2018).

Given the prevalence of homophobic bullying at school, the presence of supportive school staff may be particularly important for LGBT students. Teachers can adopt several strategies to support LGBT youth. They can address the use of homophobic language and intervene in homophobic

bullying and harassment episodes (Palmer, Kosciw, Greytak, & Boesen, 2017). Another way school staff can show their support for LGBT students is by displaying stickers or posters that identify them as supportive educators (Kosciw et al., 2018). Teachers can also include positive representations of LGBT people, history, literature, and events into their curricula (Palmer et al., 2017), as well as providing information about sexual orientation and gender identity/expression (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004). Additionally, a student may reveal his/her sexual orientation or gender identity to a teacher (i.e., coming out). In this case, the teacher can support the student in a helpful and respectful way, since coming out is an emotional process for an LGBT adolescent. To promote these strategies, school staff members need training focused on ways to support sexual and gender minority youth and intervene in homophobic bullying episodes (Greytak & Kosciw, 2014; O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004; Toomey & Russell, 2016).

Research has shown that when students had supportive educators, they felt less unsafe due to their sexual orientation or gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2018), reported less fear-based truancy (Kosciw et. al., 2018; Seelman, Walls, Hazel, & Wisneski, 2011), lower levels of victimization (Murdoch & Bolch, 2005), less school troubles (Russell, Seif, & Truong 2001), and a greater sense of school belonging or connectedness (Diaz, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2010; Kosciw et al., 2018).

Moreover, school personnel responses to bullying due to sexual orientation, gender identity and expression have positive consequences on school climate. Research has found that when students witnessed teacher intervention in homophobic bullying incidents, they reported high levels of perceived safety (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004). Teacher interventions may also represent a positive model of behavior and influence student intervention by improving student intervention skills and the confidence to behave in a similar way (Hirschstein, Edstrom, Frey, Snell, & MacKenzie, 2007). Indeed, students witnessing their teacher counteract homophobic epithets are more likely to intervene when hearing this kind of bias-based language (Wernick, Kulick, & Inglehart, 2013). In addition, students in schools where teachers intervened in instances of homophobic bullying reported lower levels of victimization related to their sexual orientation and gender expression and achieved better

academic outcomes (Kosciw, Greytak, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). Moreover, students who witnessed their teachers intervening more against homophobic epithets, they were less likely to use and hear homophobic language at school (Slaatten, Hetland, & Anderssen, 2015).

Unfortunately, teachers do not always support sexual and gender minority students and they may sometimes fail to intervene in homophobic bullying incidents or may ignore or dismiss the seriousness of these episodes. For instance, in the GLSEN national survey, 47.2% of LGBT students reported that school staff members never intervened in instances of homophobic language use and 60.4% reported that staff members did nothing or told students to ignore the victimization (Kosciw et al., 2018). In another study, only 44% of students reported hearing teachers and other school staff members stop homophobic comments (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004). Moreover, school staff members may be involved in the use of bias-based language, indeed, in a GLSEN survey, 56.6% of students reported hearing negative remarks about sexual orientation from their teachers (Kosciw et al., 2018).

Individual factors. Research indicated the reasons that might foster different types of school personnel responses to homophobic bullying episodes. At the individual level, personal attitudes and beliefs play an important role in shaping school staff intervention and supporting the victim. In a study carried out in the Netherlands, teachers who reported higher negative attitudes towards homosexuality were less likely to intervene in homophobic bullying incidents (Collier, Bos, & Sandfort, 2015). Higher levels of sexual prejudice are also associated with less empathy towards the victim or the likelihood of supporting them (Nappa, Palladino, Menesini, & Baiocco, 2017), whereas sexual prejudice was associated with school staff legitimization of homophobic bullying episodes (Zotti, Carnaghi, Piccoli, & Bianchi, 2018). Teacher beliefs may influence their reactions in instances of homophobic bullying. Greytak and Kosciw (2014) found that teachers who reported both higher levels of awareness of the seriousness of the homophobic name-calling and bullying and higher levels of self-efficacy in intervening in homophobic incidents were more likely to intervene in the event of homophobic remarks. In a similar vein, more positive beliefs about the outcomes of the intervention in the case of homophobic bullying (Collier et al., 2015) and higher self-efficacy (Collier et al., 2015;

Poteat, Slaatten, & Breivik, 2019) were associated with a higher likelihood of intervening in homophobic bullying episodes.

Intergroup contact theory suggests that interaction between members belonging to different groups can reduce prejudice and intergroup conflict (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Interpersonal contact with LGBT individuals has been found to be associated with more positive attitudes and reduced sexual prejudice (Herek & Capitanio, 1996). Research on homophobic bullying analyzed the relationship between teacher contact with LGBT individuals and the form of their responses to homophobic bullying incidents. Greytak and Kosciw (2014) found out that knowing an LGBT person enhances the likelihood of teacher intervention in homophobic episodes, moreover, the study done by Zotti and colleagues (2018) found higher levels of contact with LG individuals was related to less frequent legitimization of homophobic bullying.

Contextual factors. To expand the understanding of school staff responses to bullying of sexual and gender minority youth, studies have taken into consideration the social context in which staff members are embedded. Collier and colleagues (2015) showed that descriptive (i.e., most other colleagues would intervene in homophobic bulling episodes) and injunctive norms (i.e., significant individuals would expect intervention in homophobic episodes) were correlated to teacher intentions to intervene in verbal and homophobic bullying scenarios. McCabe, Rubinson, Dragowski, and Elizalde-Utnick, (2013) found a similar pattern referring to the subjective norm of the school, in other words, teachers' intentions to intervene in instances of homophobic harassment were associated with the expected approval from important school referents. In line with these results, the higher observed frequency of colleagues' legitimization of homophobic bullying was associated with a higher frequency of a teacher behaving in the same manner (Zotti et al., 2018). Poteat et al. (2019) tested another contextual-based factor, that is, teacher beliefs that their colleagues would support them if they intervened against homophobic language. Findings showed that teachers who believed they would have the support of their colleagues were more likely to intervene against homophobic epithets.

Although very few studies addressed contextual factors correlating to school staff responses to homophobic bullying, these results suggest the relevance of an ecological perspective to encourage collaboration among school staff members in handling homophobic bullying in the school setting. The present thesis intends to indagate the role of unexplored contextual factors that may predict school staff responses to homophobic bullying.

Promoting an Inclusive and Safe Learning Environment: Policies and Strategies

School policies and strategies aim to promote a supportive school climate for sexual and gender minority youth, as well as to prevent and respond to homophobic bullying behaviors. The complex nature of homophobic bullying presents several difficult tasks for teachers, administrators, and policy advocates. The extant literature has examined several resources at the school level to improve the school experiences and academic outcomes of LGBT students, namely comprehensive antibullying policies, inclusive curriculum, and Gay-Straight Alliances.

Antibullying policies inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity/expression (i.e., enumerated policies) specify the protection of students based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity and expression (Russell, Kosciw, Horn, & Saewyc, 2010). Comprehensive policies contribute to the creation a safe school climate for sexual and gender minority students. For instance, students in schools with enumerated policies were less likely to hear homophobic language, experienced less homophobic victimization and were more likely to report victimization episodes to school staff than students in schools with generic policies (Kosciw et al., 2018). Moreover, students attending a school with an enumerated policy were more likely to judge teasing and excluding lesbian, gay and gender nonconforming peers as wrong and distressing than students attending a school without a policy (Horn & Szalacha, 2009). A study among over 2,400 students in California underscored the same association, that is, students attending a school with enumerated policies reported higher levels of safety than students in schools with generic policies (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004).

The presence of inclusive curriculum provides a further means to improve the learning experiences of sexual and gender minority students by including a positive representation of LGBT people and issues into class lessons. For instance, in a US national study, LGBTQ students who reported being taught LGBTQ issues at school were less likely to hear homophobic remarks and feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation and gender expression, experienced lower levels of victimization, and felt a greater sense of belonging to their school (Kosciw et al., 2018). In a similar vein, students who reported having access to information regarding sexual orientation and gender identity or being taught LGBTQ issues perceived the school climate to be safer for gender nonconforming male students (Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012). Overall, students who attended schools with an inclusive curriculum perceived the school climate to be safer (Russell, Kostroski, McGuire, Laub, & Manke, 2006; Szalacha, 2003). Indeed, sexual and gender minority youth may see themselves acknowledged by school staff in a respectful manner and perceive a greater sense of school belonging. This process may, in part, account for the current findings, that is sexual minority students attending schools with an inclusive curriculum perceive a safer and more welcoming school climate.

The presence of Gay-Straight Alliances (i.e., GSAs) improve school experiences and the quality of life of LGBT students. GSAs aim to support LGBT students by creating a positive and safe space, providing emotional and social support to members. GSAs are student-led clubs in US schools and promote several activities for LGBT students and for the school community, such as education on LGBT issues, interpersonal support and counseling, safety, social events (e.g. Youth Pride, parties). Students with GSAs in their school perceived more school safety and less homophobic bullying (Ioverno, Belser, Baiocco, Grossman, & Russell, 2016). Specifically, research has found that sexual minority students who have GSAs in their school report hearing less frequent use of homophobic language (Kosciw et al., 2018), lower levels of victimization (Goodnow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Kosciw et al., 2018), less frequent involvement in risky sexual behaviors and lower substance use (Poteat, Sinclair, DiGiovanni, Koenig, & Russell, 2013), as well as lower levels of truancy

(Goodenow et al., 2006; Kosciw et al., 2018; Poteat et al., 2013) compared to students without GSAs in their schools. Moreover, LGBT students who attend schools with GSAs are less likely to feel unsafe due to their sexual orientation and feel a greater connectedness to their school (Kosciw et al., 2018).

Overview of the Present Research

The dissertation aims at expanding the existing literature on homophobic bullying phenomenon in school setting by exploring individual and contextual factors that predict both student engagement in homophobic bullying behaviors and school staff responses to this kind of episodes. Chapter 1 aims at analyzing the unique contribution of the individual (i.e., gender, sexual prejudice, and contact with LG individuals) and contextual factors (i.e., homophobic bullying observed by students, being a victim, and perceived teacher responses to homophobic bullying) underlying student engagement in homophobic bullying taking into account the gender of the target. Chapter 2 aims at investigating the individual (i.e., sexual prejudice, contact with lesbian and gay people, and perceived seriousness of homophobic epithets) and contextual (i.e., homophobic bullying observed by school staff and perceived colleague reactions to homophobic bullying) factors that may predict school staff intervention against vs. legitimization of homophobic bullying. Based on an ecological framework, the current research considers both student and school personnel perspectives at individual and contextual level to achieve a deeper understanding of this complex phenomenon. Furthermore, both the studies may indicate suitable school policy strategies to improve school climate by preventing and handling homophobic bullying.

CHAPTER 2

THE ROLE OF GENDER IN HOMOPHOBIC BULLYING AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Introduction

Bullying is defined as a form of aggressive behaviors against a relatively powerless individual that is repeated over time (Olweus, 1993; Yang & Salmivalli, 2013). Bullying may take direct (e.g., hitting, pushing, assault, name-calling) or indirect forms (e.g., rumor-spreading, teasing, or social exclusion; Hong & Espelage, 2012). Many students experience victimization in the school context based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, a phenomenon referred to as homophobic bullying. The extant literature has documented that homophobic and transphobic bias-based bullying in the school setting is a widespread problem (Collier, Bos, & Sandfort, 2013; Higgins et al., 2016; Kasai, 2017; Kosciw et al., 2018; Llorent et al., 2016; Rivers, 2011; UNESCO, 2012; 2016). In Italy - where the current study was conducted - scholars documented that many students frequently witness homophobic bullying behaviors or experience homophobic victimization in a school setting (Ioverno et al., 2016; Prati, Pietrantoni, & D'Augelli, 2011). The quoted research further demonstrates that experiencing homophobic victimization and harassment at school is clearly associated with negative health and educational outcomes for sexual and gender minority youth individuals (e.g., depression, aggressive and suicidal behaviors, school truancy, and sense of school belonging; Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Collier, van Beusekom, Bos, & Sandfort, 2013; Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, & Koenig, 2011; Duong & Bradshaw, 2014; Russell & Fish, 2016). Given the prevalence of this phenomenon and the seriousness of its consequences, further investigation is needed to understand factors underlying homophobic bullying. The aim of the current study is to take the research on homophobic bullying a step further by addressing two distinct, albeit related issues. First, we aim to analyze the contribution of both the individual (i.e., gender, sexual prejudice, and contact with LG individuals) and contextual factors (i.e., homophobic bullying observed, being a victim, and perceived teacher responses to homophobic bullying) in predicting the frequency of students' engagement in homophobic bullying. Second, we intend to explore whether unique or similar patterns of association between individual and contextual factors and students'

engagement in homophobic bullying emerged as a function of the victim's gender, an issue that has thus far been overlooked.

Considering the Italian school context, homophobic bullying is a common and worrying problem (Ioverno et al., 2016), that has not yet been addressed by national prevention policies. Thus, further research should be carried out to enhance the little available data regarding this phenomenon (Camodeca et al., 2018; Ioverno et al., 2016; Prati et al., 2011), and inform policies and practices to deal with and prevent this phenomenon.

Correlates of Homophobic Bullying Engagement

Homophobic bullying behaviors among youth arise from multiple factors at individual and contextual levels (Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Poteat, 2017; Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, & Scheer, 2013). Individual factors refer to a set of personal characteristics that are associated with an individual's homophobic bullying behaviors (e.g., biological sex, age, and personal attitudes). Individuals' homophobic bullying behaviors are also influenced by contextual factors referring to social contexts to which they belong to (e.g., peer group, school and family setting).

With regard to the individual level, gender and sexual prejudice have been consistently identified as factors that underlie engagement in homophobic behavior (e.g., being male, rather than female, predicted higher engagement in homophobic bullying; higher levels of sexual prejudice were associated with a higher frequency of homophobic bullying; Camodeca et al., 2018; Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010; Poteat et al., 2013; Poteat & Espelage, 2005). Further, previous research (Collier et al., 2012; Heinz & Horn, 2009) has shown a direct effect of intergroup contact on attitudes towards sexual minority, however the only study (Poteat et al., 2013) that explored the relationship between contact with sexual minority and engagement in homophobic epithet use found only an indirect effect of contact on homophobic behavior (i.e., higher levels of sexual minority friendship predicted lower sexual prejudice, which in turn was significantly and positively associated with engagement in homophobic behavior).

Considering contextual factors, previous research found that the observed frequency of homophobic behaviors against lesbian and gay male students was positively associated with the frequency of engagement in homophobic bullying against lesbian and gay male targets, respectively (Prati, 2012a). Furthermore, research found that being the victim of homophobic bullying enhances the probability of engaging in homophobic bullying behaviors (Birkett & Espelage, 2015). In addition, the extant literature showed that perceived teacher responses to homophobic bullying is a factor associated with students' perception of a safer school environment (Ploderl, Faistauer, & Fartacek, 2010, Toomey et al., 2012) and students' intervention in anti-LGBT bullying (Wernick, Kulick, & Inglehart, 2013). Said otherwise, when students more frequently witnessed teacher intervention in homophobic episodes, they were more likely to perceive school as safer and then intervene themselves in the case of homophobic episodes. However, there has, as of yet, been no examination of the relationship between teacher reactions to homophobic bullying incidents, in terms of supportive intervention or legitimization of homophobic bullying (Zotti et al., 2018), and student engagement in this aggressive behavior.

The literature on students' involvement in aggressive and bias-based behavior emphasized the need to address this issue by examining the individual and contextual levels together (Birkett & Espelage, 2015; Hong & Espelage, 2012; Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Poteat, 2017). However, few studies have addressed the role of individual as well as of contextual factors in predicting students' involvement in homophobic bullying. For instance, Poteat and colleagues (2013) found that homophobic behavior was associated with both individual (i.e., sexual orientation identity importance, bullying engagement, sexual prejudice, empathy, and perspective-taking) and contextual factors (i.e., parents' sexual minority attitudes and classroom respect norms).

The present research aims to take the study of the role of both individual and contextual factors as potential underpinnings of homophobic bullying a step further. Indeed, and differently from previous research on this issue (Poteat et al., 2013), for the first time, we assessed the unique contribution of a different set of individual and contextual factors in predicting homophobic bullying.

To attain this aim, in the current research we included those individual (i.e., participant gender, participants' level of sexual prejudice, and contact) and contextual (i.e., being victim and observed homophobic bullying towards actual and perceived gay male and lesbian students) factors that have been proved to predict students' engagement in homophobic bullying. Moreover, and for the first time, we explored the perceived teacher responses to homophobic bullying - which can be framed as additional contextual factor - and students' engagement in homophobic bullying. The rationale that backs the analysis of this contextual factor in predicting homophobic engagement relies on the fact that perceiving teacher responses to homophobic bullying might signal expected behaviors, as teacher responses represent the norms of a relevant referent group. The perceived teacher responses to homophobic bullying episodes might either legitimize (i.e., responses that contribute to foster homophobic bullying by dismissing the seriousness of and ignoring these aggressive behaviors) or discourage (i.e., responses that counteract homophobic bullying by teacher intervention in these episodes and supporting the victim) the emergence of such behaviors, thus playing a crucial role in enacting or inhibiting this form of bullying, respectively.

Nevertheless, previous research addressing either the individual or the contextual factors associated with homophobic behavior has not taken into account the gender of the victim of homophobic bullying. Two distinct patterns of results could be expected, one indicating that individual and contextual factors promoting homophobic bullying perpetration would be similar when the victims are gay males and lesbians (i.e., gender-*non*specific pattern), the other claiming that individual and contextual factors would be differently associated with homophobic bullying perpetration as a function of the gender of the victim (i.e., gender-specific pattern).

The current study further examined the individual (i.e., participant gender) and contextual factors (i.e., homophobic bullying observed by participants) that referred to both gender-nonspecific and -specific pattern. Considering participant gender, male students would engage in homophobic bullying behaviors more often than female students, as demonstrated by previous research (Birkett & Espelage, 2015; Poteat, 2015; Poteat, DiGiovanni & Scherr, 2013; Poteat & Espelage, 2005; Poteat

& Rivers, 2010), and this gender-nonspecific pattern should be found both when the victim is defined as a lesbian or as a gay male. By contrast, one might expect that participants displayed a higher frequency of engagement in homophobic bullying towards victims of the same gender. This hypothesis is backed by evidence from the analyses of bullying behavior as a 'black sheep' byproduct (Jones, Haslam, York & Ryan, 2008). Accordingly, students derogate members of the same rather than different gender to a greater extent when these ingroup members are perceived to display 'atypical' gender identity or sexual orientation related attitudes or behaviors. Hence, based on the gender-specific pattern, male students would engage more in homophobic bullying towards male than female victims, while female students engage more in homophobic bullying towards female than male victims.

Second, research on normative aggressive behavior among children and adolescents found that behaviors perceived as frequent within the peer group are evaluated as group normative (Boivin, Dodge, & Coie, 1995; Mercer, McMillen, & DeRosier, 2009). Consistently, being a member of an aggressive and homophobic peer group is related to a more frequent use of homophobic language (Birkett & Espelage, 2015; Poteat, 2007; 2008). It might be plausible that witnessing homophobic bullying perpetration could be associated with the probability of engaging in homophobic bullying behaviors, and this would be not limited to a specific target (Prati, 2012a) but spill over onto additional targets. Thus, witnessing homophobic bullying towards gay males or lesbians would be associated with the engagement in homophobic bullying behaviors towards both gay males and lesbians. Alternatively, witnessing homophobic bullying towards a gender-specific target would cue that peers expected bullying behavior towards that group exclusively. For example, having extensively witnessed bullying behaviors towards gay male targets would enhance the likelihood of engaging in such behaviors towards gay male targets, while extensively witnessing bullying behaviors towards lesbian targets would decrease the likelihood of engaging in homophobic bullying towards gay male targets.

Current Study and Hypotheses

This study investigates several specific factors that can be associated with student engagement in homophobic bullying against actual or perceived lesbian versus gay male peers. For the first time, the present research analyzes the unique contribution of each individual (i.e., gender, sexual prejudice, and contact with LG individuals) and contextual factor (i.e., homophobic bullying observed by students, being a victim, and perceived teacher responses to homophobic bullying) underlying homophobic bullying engagement specifically taking into account the gender of the students towards whom participants were directing their homophobic behavior.

As for individual factors, we hypothesized that male participants would report engaging in homophobic bullying behaviors more frequently than female students, regardless of the gender of the target, thus supporting the gender-*non*specific pattern (*Hypothesis 1a*). Alternatively, and in line with the gender-specific target pattern, we expected participants to report engaging in these behaviors more frequently towards the target of the same rather than the opposite gender (*Hypothesis 1b*). In addition, we hypothesized that participants who reported higher levels of sexual prejudice towards gay male (or lesbian) individuals would be more likely to engage in homophobic bullying against gay male (or lesbian) targets (*Hypothesis 2*). Also, we hypothesized that participants who reported higher levels of contact with LG individuals would be less likely to engage in homophobic bullying against both gay male and lesbian targets (*Hypothesis 3*).

As for the contextual factors, we hypothesized that participants witnessing homophobic bullying towards gay male or lesbian targets would be associated with engagement in homophobic bullying towards both gay male and lesbian targets based on the gender-*non*specific pattern (*Hypothesis 4a*). By contrast, referring to the gender-specific target pattern, we hypothesized that participants who reported higher levels of witnessing homophobic bullying towards gender-specific target would be more likely to engage in this behavior towards the same gender target, but less likely to engage in this behavior towards the opposite gender target (*Hypothesis 4b*). We hypothesized that

participants who reported being victimized more frequently would be more likely to engage in homophobic bullying towards both gay male and lesbian targets (*Hypothesis 5*). Finally, regarding perceived teacher responses, we hypothesized that participants who perceived higher levels of teacher legitimization of homophobic bullying episodes would report more engagement in homophobic bullying towards both gay male and lesbian targets (*Hypothesis 6a*). Whereas, participants who perceived higher levels of teacher intervention when faced with these episodes would report less engagement in homophobic bullying towards both gay male and lesbian targets (*Hypothesis 6b*). Since participant age may vary in how frequently participants engage in homophobic bullying, we statistically controlled for this variable in our models.

Method

Participants

Participants included $N = 2,138$ students ($n = 1,050$ female, $n = 1,053$ male, $n = 35$ did not indicate their gender) from 31 Italian secondary high schools located in the northern and eastern part of Italy (Friuli Venezia Giulia region). The total sample reflected the students' distribution across the four provinces of Friuli Venezia Giulia region, that is 46.9% Udine ($n = 1,002$), 17.7 % Trieste ($n = 379$), 15.9% Gorizia ($n = 339$), 19.5% Pordenone ($n = 418$). Students' ages ranged from 13 to 22 ($M = 16.57$, $SD = 1.57$).

Procedure

Two local public institutions (i.e., Regione Autonoma Friuli Venezia Giulia and Ufficio Scolastico Regionale per il Friuli Venezia Giulia) and three LGBT Italian non-profit organizations (i.e., Arcigay Arcobaleno Trieste Gorizia, Arcigay Friuli and Arcilesbica Udine) requested our research group conduct a study about individual and contextual factors associated with students' engagement in homophobic bullying at school. The study questionnaire was discussed and approved by the above-mentioned institutions and non-profit organizations. The research purpose and procedure were presented to the principals of all the secondary high schools of the region in which the study was carried out via two official letters and during two public meetings ($N = 75$ schools).

School staff was officially informed by the principals that the local university was conducting a study on homophobic bullying in collaboration with the above-mentioned institutions and non-profit organizations.

Principals sent an active consent letter to each parent of the students attending classes participating in the study. The active consent letter included information about the aim and the procedure of the study. Parents were asked to sign the consent letter indicating whether or not they wished to have their child participate in the study and return it to the school. Parents were also provided the contact information for the research team should they be interested in further information about the study.

Before the questionnaires were administered, students were informed about the study aim and given instructions by a trained research assistant on how to fill out the questionnaire. Consent to take part in the study was collected by the school administration. Students were assured that their participation in the study was entirely voluntary and anonymous, and that they could omit any question or stop filling in the survey at any time. The survey was given in the classrooms of students who had agree to participate in the study and took around 30 min to complete. When the surveys were completed the research assistant held a debriefing session with the class.

Measures

Students filled out the questionnaire in the following order about sexual prejudice, contact with LG individuals, homophobic bullying observed, homophobic bullying perpetration, homophobic victimization, and perceived teacher responses to homophobic bullying episodes.

This study was part of a larger research commissioned by Regione Autonoma Friuli Venezia Giulia to assess other aspects related to the adolescent condition, such as the perceived seriousness of homophobic language and body image concerns.

Sexual Prejudice. Sexual prejudice is a complex psychological construct which refers to negative attitudes towards homosexuality, homosexual behaviors and lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals, and is related to gender beliefs as a symbolic expression (Herek, 2004; Herek, 2009).

The current study considered a variety of assessments that might mirror the complexity of this construct (for a similar procedure, see Prati et al., 2011; Zotti et al., 2018). Based on Zotti et al.'s (2018) procedure to gain an overall measure of sexual prejudice, four dimensions pertaining to sexual prejudice were assessed. Specifically, three gendered target measures assessed negative attitudes towards lesbian and gay individuals separately, gender-inversion beliefs towards lesbian and gay individuals respectively, acceptability of same sex public display of affection (PDA) for lesbian and gay individuals separately, whereas a non-gendered target measure assessed sexual stigma.

First, participants completed the 3-item versions of the Attitudes Towards Gay Men (ATG) and the Attitudes Toward Lesbians (ATL) Scales (Herek, 1994; 2000; Herek & Capitanio, 1996), including sets of parallel statements (e.g., "I think gay men [lesbians] are disgusting"). Response options included "Strongly disagree", "Disagree somewhat", "Agree somewhat", and "Strongly agree" on a 4-point Likert scale. We averaged participants' ratings on the ATG and ATL to form two single indices. Higher scores on these indices indicated negative attitudes towards gay male and lesbian individuals. Means, standard deviations and Cronbach's alpha are reported in Table 1.

Second, students were asked to assess three statements related to sexual stigma (i.e., "Homosexuality is immoral"; "Homosexuality is an illness", "Homosexuality is a threat to family"; ISTAT, 2012; Zotti et al., 2018). Students reported the level of endorsement of each statement on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (= *strongly disagree*) to 4 (= *strongly agree*). In a similar manner, we averaged students' scores on sexual stigma to form a single index; higher values on this scale indicated a stronger stigmatizing view towards homosexuality (see Table 1).

Third, since negative beliefs about sexual minorities can contribute to sexual prejudice and the expression of particular beliefs (e.g., gender role non-conformity) promotes the expression of sexual prejudice (Herek, 2009), we assessed participants' beliefs about the gender role non-conformity of LG individuals (Zotti et al., 2018). Thus, students were asked the extent to which they endorsed four statements about gender role (i.e., "In general gay men [lesbians] are effeminate males [masculine females]"; "In general heterosexual men [heterosexual women] are effeminate males [masculine

females]"). Response options ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree* on a 4-point Likert scale. To calculate the level of students' belief about gender role non-conformity of LG individuals, students' scores of the heterosexual-referred statement were subtracted from their scores of the LG-referred statement, independently for females and males as targets. The different scores were then averaged thus forming two indices of beliefs about gender role non-conformity, separately for lesbian and gay individuals. Higher values indicated a stronger belief about LG individuals' gender role non-conformity, whereas values equal to zero indicated that lesbian individuals and heterosexual females were perceived to be similar, as well as gay individuals and heterosexual males, in terms of gender role conformity (see Table 1).

Fourth, to assess the affective component of sexual prejudice (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Prati et al. 2011), students were asked about the acceptability of same sex PDA by means of the affective scale already used in the Italian context (ISTAT, 2012; Zotti et al., 2018). Specifically, students read three brief depictions related to two individuals walking hand in hand on the street and kissing each other. The first depiction described a man and a woman; the second depiction described two men, whereas the third depiction described two women. Students were asked whether or not they considered the behavior described in each depiction acceptable (binary response, 0 = no acceptable, 1 = acceptable). We reversed this measure to make it consistent with the previous questions, thus higher scores indicated a lower level of acceptability of PDA between two men or two women (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Mean scores, Standard Deviations and Cronbach's alpha for measures used in the study*

Scale	Subscale	M	SD	α
Sexual Prejudice	ATG[a]	2.11	.84	.76
	ATL[a]	1.96	.76	.74
	Sexual stigma[a]	1.74	.76	.76
	Gender non-conformity of gay male individuals[b]	.96	1.04	
	Gender non-conformity of lesbian individuals[b]	.48	.94	
	Acceptability of PDA between two men[c]	1.24	.43	
	Acceptability of PDA between two women[c]	1.19	.39	
Homophobic Bullying Observed	HBO towards actual or perceived gay male students[d]	1.64	.53	.70
	HBO towards actual or perceived lesbian students[d]	1.19	.35	.71
Homophobic Bullying Engagement	HBE towards actual or perceived gay male students[d]	1.14	.27	.59
	HBE towards actual or perceived lesbian students[d]	1.05	.18	.72
Homophobic Victimization[d]		1.11	.23	.44*
Perceived Teacher Responses to Homophobic Bullying[e]	Perceived teacher legitimization of homophobic bullying	2.43	.70	.80
	Perceived teacher intervention to support to the victim	2.34	.67	.70

[a] From 1(= *strongly disagree*) to 4 (= *strongly agree*)

[b] From − 3 (= heterosexual individuals are more gender non-conforming than lesbian [gay] individuals) to + 3 (= lesbian [gay] individuals are more gender non-conforming than heterosexual individuals)

[c] 1 (= *acceptable*), 2 (= *no acceptable*)

[d] From 1 (= *never*) to 4 (= *always*)

[e] From 1 (= *never*) to 5 (= *always*)

* Recalculated with polychoric correlation (specifically entailed for ordinal data) α = .82

Contact with LG Individuals. One question assessed students' personally knowing at least one LG individual by means of a binary response option (no = 0 vs. yes = 1). Moreover, students were asked to indicate whether the LG individual/ s was/were a family member or a relative, somebody at school, a friend, a neighbor, or an acquaintance. Students were allowed to indicate multiple responses.

Homophobic Bullying Engagement. To assess the students' frequency in engaging in homophobic bullying (HBE), we utilized a modified version of Prati's *Homophobic aggressive behavior* scale (2012b). Students completed two parallel sets of four questions, one for homophobic bullying towards actual or perceived gay male students and the other for homophobic bullying towards actual or perceived lesbian students. As for the assessment of homophobic bullying towards actual or perceived gay male students, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which, in the last scholastic year, they had used homophobic biased language. targeting this specific group of individuals (i.e., finocchio [poof], frocio [faggot], checca, culattone [fairy]); they wrote the above-mentioned epithets on a wall, on a door, in a restroom, in an e-mail, in an SMS, and on a social network to address a male student because he appeared to be or was homosexual; they socially excluded or marginalized a male student because he appeared to be or was homosexual; they teased, verbally or physically harassed a male student because he appeared to be or was homosexual. As for the assessment of homophobic bullying towards actual or perceived lesbian students, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which, in the last scholastic year, they had used homophobic biased language targeting this specific group of individuals (i.e., lesbicona [dyke], pervertita [perverted]); they wrote the above-mentioned epithets on a wall, on a door, in a restroom, in an e-mail, in an SMS, and on a social network to address a female student because she appeared to be or was homosexual; they socially excluded or marginalized a female student because she appeared to be or was homosexual; they teased, verbally or physically harassed a female student because she

appeared to be or was homosexual. Each question was rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (= *never*) to 4 (= *always*), see Table 1.

Homophobic Bullying Observed by Students. To assess the frequency of homophobic bullying observed (HBO) in the school context, participants completed the same scale used to assess HBE referring to aggressive behavior perpetrated by other students and not by the participants. Accordingly, two parallel sets of four questions were used, one for HBO by participants towards actual or perceived gay male students and the other for HBO by participants towards actual or perceived lesbian students (see Table 1).

Homophobic Victimization. Consistently with the two previous scales described above, students' homophobic victimization by peers was assessed with a modified version of the *Homophobic victimization* scale developed by Prati (2012b). Students were asked how often in the last scholastic year they had experienced four different types of homophobic victimization at school (i.e., hearing homophobic biased remarks addressed to themselves such as above-mentioned; reading the above-mentioned remarks; being socially excluded or marginalized because they were perceived as homosexual; being teased, verbally or physically harassed because they were perceived as homosexual). Response options ranged from 1 (= *never*) to 4 (= *always*) on a 4-point Likert scale (see Table 1).

Perceived Teacher Responses to Homophobic Bullying. To assess students' perception of teachers dealing with homophobic bullying in terms of legitimation of this behavior and support for the victim, we relied on an adjusted version scale used in the Italian school context (Zotti et al., 2018). Participants were presented with a brief depiction of an episode of homophobic verbal harassment (i.e., when someone is called names) and social exclusion or an episode of physical harassment (i.e., when someone is marginalized or attacked because he/she is or appears homosexual). For each kind of episode, students read four statements regarding teachers' response of legitimizing bullying (i.e., "They are not present [when this occurs]"; "They do not realize it", "They pretend not to see it"; "They justify the bully") and three statements regarding teachers' response of supporting the victim

(i.e., "They intervene to defend the victim, but the insults then increase"; "They intervene to defend the victim, but nothing changes"; "They intervene to defend the victim, and the insults [margination, attacks] then decrease and stop"). Students were asked to indicate the frequency of these different kinds of teachers' response on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (= *never*) to 5 (= *always*), see Table 1.

Demographic measures. Students completed demographic information about gender (male or female), age, school type and location (i.e., province), and grade.

Data Preparation

We first examined percentage of missing data. Except for perceived teacher response items, missing data ranged from a low of 0.1% to a high of 3.9%. Specifically, for items assessing perceived teacher responses to homophobic bullying (i.e., teacher legitimization of and intervention in homophobic bullying episodes), missing data ranged from a low of 15.4% to a high of 22.4%. Missing data were individuated as completely at random (MCAR), based on Little's (1988) MCAR test (*Chi-Square* = 7640.61, *df* = 8748, *p* = 1.000) and handled using the expectation maximization strategy (Schlomer, Bauman, & Card, 2010).

To gain specific measures of sexual prejudice, that is one for each target (i.e., lesbian and gay male individuals), two correlational analyses were carried out separately with participants' averaged score on gendered target scales (i.e., ATL, ATG, gender role non-conformity, acceptability of PDA) and non-gendered target scale (i.e., sexual stigma). Referring to the sexual prejudice towards gay male individuals measure, participants' averaged scores were significantly and positively correlated (see Table 2). Referring to sexual prejudice towards lesbian individuals measure, participants' averaged scores were significantly and positively correlated (see Table 3). Participants' averaged scores on these variables were z-transformed. Reliability analyses were then computed and provided an acceptable internal consistency for both lesbian (α = .66) and gay male target models (α = .77). Finally, to obtain two multidimensional measures of sexual prejudice towards both lesbian and gay male individuals and to avoid multicollinearity, students' scores on these variables were averaged,

thus creating two specific gender target measures of sexual prejudice. Higher average scores represented higher levels of sexual prejudice.

Table 2. Summary of Intercorrelations among ATG, sexual stigma, gender non-conformity of gay male individuals, and acceptability of PDA between two men

Measure	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. ATG				
2. Sexual stigma	.75*			
3. Gender non-conformity of gay males	.29*	.28*		
4. Acceptability of PDA between two men	.59*	.60*	.23*	

Note: *p < .01

Table 3. Summary of Intercorrelations among ATL, sexual stigma, gender non-conformity of lesbian individuals, and acceptability of PDA between two women

Measure	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. ATL				
2. Sexual stigma	.60*			
3. Gender non-conformity of lesbians	.14*	.10*		
4. Acceptability of PDA between two women	.54*	.50*	.08*	

Note: *p < .01

We created an index of contact with LG individuals by summing the selected options ranging from 0 to 5, that is, from no contact to higher levels of contact with LG individuals (Greytak & Kosciw, 2014; Zotti et al., 2018).

To obtain two specific measures of HBE referring to actual and perceived gay male and lesbian students, reliability analyses were computed separately and provided an acceptable internal consistency for a both gay male and lesbian target scale (see Table 1). Students' scores on the HBE

were averaged to form two single indices separated for gay male and lesbian targets. Higher scores indicated a higher level of students' frequency in homophobic bullying engagement (see Table 1).

To create two separated indices of HBO by participants, we carried out two distinct reliability analyses with participants' scores on HBO against actual and perceived gay male and lesbian students scale. Reliability analyses provided an acceptable internal consistency for both gay male and lesbian target scales (see Table 1). Participants' scores on the HBO were averaged to form two single indices separated for gay male and lesbian targets. Higher scores indicated a higher level of frequency of HBO on the part of participants (see Table 1).

As regarding the homophobic victimization index, reliability analysis showed an acceptable internal consistency (see Table 1). Students' scores on the homophobic victimization were averaged to form a single index. Higher scores indicated a higher frequency of homophobic victimization (see Table 1).

To gain specific measures of perceived teacher responses to homophobic bullying, that is, one referring to legitimization of this behavior and the other referring to support of the victim, two reliability analyses were carried out separately with participants' scores on different kinds of responses. Reliability analyses showed an acceptable internal consistency for both measures (see Table 1). Students' scores on statements referring to teachers' legitimization of homophobic bullying were averaged. Higher values indicated higher legitimization of homophobic bullying (see Table 1). In the same way we averaged students' scores on statements referring to teachers' support for the victim in an episode of homophobic bullying. Higher values indicated higher intervention intended to support the victim of homophobic bullying (see Table 1).

Analytic Strategy

Two independent regression analysis models were conducted to test if individual and contextual factors that predict homophobic bullying perpetration may differ based on the victimized student's gender. The first model focused on homophobic bullying towards actual or perceived gay male students as the outcome variable and the second model focused on homophobic bullying towards

actual or perceived lesbian students as the outcome variable (see Tables 4 and 5). With the exception of sexual prejudice, the predictors were the same for each model (i.e., gender, contact with LG individuals, HBO towards actual or perceived gay male and lesbian students, homophobic victimization, perceived teacher legitimization of homophobic bullying and intervention intended to support the victim). Referring to sexual prejudice, in the first model the predictor was sexual prejudice towards gay men, whereas in the second model the predictor was sexual prejudice towards lesbians. In the first model, homophobic bullying towards actual or perceived lesbian students was entered as a control variable. In the second model, homophobic bullying towards actual or perceived gay male students was entered as a control variable. Except for gender, all variables were z-standardized.

Results

Descriptive analyses

Referring to *Homophobic Bullying Engagement*, a paired sample t test revealed that participants were more likely to perpetrate homophobic bullying against actual or perceived gay male than lesbian students, $t(2137) = 19.97$, $p < .001$. In addition, a paired sample t test showed that students reported a higher frequency of homophobic bullying observed toward actual or perceived gay male than lesbian targets, $t(2137) = 44.71$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, with regard to students' perceptions of teacher handling of homophobic bullying, a paired sample t test indicated that participants perceived more teachers' responses compatible with legitimization of homophobic bullying than supporting the victim, $t(2137) = 4.45$, $p < .001$.

With regard to participants' personal contact with at least one LG individual, 33.2% of the sample reported that they did not personally know at least one LG individual. When participants affirmed that they personally knew at least one LG individual, 17.7% indicated that she/he/they was/were somebody at school, 25.9% indicated that she/he/they was/were a friend/s, 1.9% indicated that she/he/they was/were a neighbor, 4% indicated she/he/they was/were a family member or a relative, and 36.2% indicated that she/he/they was/were an acquaintance.

Table 4. Complete Model of the regression analyses on homophobic bullying towards actual or perceived gay male students

	B	SE	t	sr²
Intercept	-.11	.02	-4.85**	_
Sexual prejudice towards gay male individuals	.16	.02	9.50**	.15
Contact with LG individuals	.01	.02	.87	.01
HBO towards gay male students	.29	.02	15.19**	.24
HBO towards lesbian students	-.11	.02	-5.62**	-.09
Homophobic victimization	.12	.02	7.30**	.11
Teacher legitimization	.05	.02	2.87*	.05
Teacher intervention	-.02	.02	-1.37	-.02
Gender	.23	.03	6.73**	.11
Age	.02	.02	1.03	.01
HBE towards lesbian students	.49	.02	28.02**	.44

*Note: *p < .05, **p < .001*

Table 5. Complete Model of the regression analyses on homophobic bullying towards actual or perceived lesbian students

	B	SE	t	sr²
Intercept	.05	.02	1.93	_
Sexual prejudice towards lesbian individuals	.04	.02	2.10*	.04
Contact with LG individuals	.01	.02	.29	.01
HBO towards gay male students	-.17	.02	-8.28**	-.14
HBO towards lesbian students	.36	.02	18.15**	.30
Homophobic victimization	.01	.02	.32	.01
Teacher legitimization	-.01	.02	-.32	-.01
Teacher intervention	.00	.02	.09	.01
Gender	-.10	.04	-2.81*	-.05
Age	.02	.02	1.07	.02
HBE towards gay male students	.55	.02	28.16**	.46

*Note: *p < .05, **p < .001*

Regression Analyses

Model for homophobic bullying towards actual or perceived gay male students. The overall model was significant, *Adj. R²* = .50, *F*(10, 2083) = 205.76, *p* < .001. Participants' gender was significantly and positively related to HBE against actual or perceived gay male students, *B* = .23, *SE* = .03, *t* = 6.73, *p* < .001, *sr²* = .11, revealing that male, compared to female students, showed a higher tendency to engage in homophobic bullying against a gay male target (supporting *Hypothesis 1b*). Regression analysis showed a significant and positive relationship between the sexual prejudice towards gay men index and HBE towards actual or perceived gay male students, *B* = .16, *SE* = .02, *t* = 9.50, *p* < .001, *sr²* = .15, revealing that the higher the level of participants' sexual prejudice towards gay men, the higher the likelihood of perpetrating homophobic bullying against actual or perceived gay male students (supporting *Hypothesis 2*). The frequency of HBO by participants towards actual or perceived gay male students was significantly and positively related to HBE related to gay male student targets, *B* = .29, *SE* = .02, *t* = 15.19, *p* < .001, *sr²* = .24, indicating that the higher the frequency of HBO towards gay male students, the higher the tendency to engage in this behavior against the same target (supporting *Hypothesis 4b*). Whereas the frequency of HBO by participants towards actual or perceived lesbian students was significantly but negatively related to HBE against actual or perceived gay male students, *B* = -.11, *SE* = .02, *t* = -5.62, *p* < .001, *sr²* = -.09. This relationship indicated that the higher the frequency of HBO towards lesbian students, the lower the tendency to engage in homophobic bullying against gay male student targets (supporting *Hypothesis 4b*). Homophobic victimization experienced by participants significantly and positively predicted HBE against actual or perceived gay male students, *B* = .12, *SE* = .02, *t* = 7.30, *p* < .001, *sr²* = .11. This relationship showed that the higher the frequency of being the victim, the higher the likelihood to perpetrate homophobic bullying against actual or perceived gay male students (supporting *Hypothesis 5*). Perceived teacher legitimization of homophobic bullying was significantly and positively related to HBE against actual or perceived gay male students, *B* = .05, *SE* = .02, *t* = 2.87, *p* = .004, *sr²* = .05, indicating that a higher level of perceived frequency of teacher legitimization of homophobic bullying

predicted a greater tendency to be involved in this behavior (supporting *Hypothesis 6a*). Finally, the frequency of HBE against actual or perceived lesbian students (i.e., control variable) was significantly and positively related to the frequency of HBE against actual or perceived gay male students, $B = .49$, $SE = .02$, $t = 28.02$, $p < .001$, $sr^2 = .44$. This pattern showed that the higher the level of HBE against actual or perceived lesbian students, the higher the likelihood of engaging in this behavior against the opposite target.

Model for homophobic bullying towards actual or perceived lesbian students. With regard to HBE towards actual or perceived lesbian students, the overall model was significant, *Adj. R²* = .43, $F(10, 2083) = 159.20$, $p < .001$ (see Table 5). Participants' gender was significantly and negatively associated with HBE against actual or perceived lesbian students, $B = -.10$, $SE = .04$, $t = -2.81$, $p = .005$, $sr^2 = -.05$, indicating that female students were more likely than male students to engage in homophobic bullying against lesbian student target (supporting *Hypothesis 1b*). The index of sexual prejudice towards lesbians was related to HBE towards actual or perceived lesbian students, $B = .04$, $SE = .02$, $t = 2.10$, $p = .036$, $sr^2 = .04$, indicating the higher the level of participants' sexual prejudice towards lesbians, the higher the tendency to engage in homophobic bullying behavior against actual or perceived lesbian students (supporting *Hypothesis 2*). The extent to which participants observed homophobic bullying episodes against actual or perceived lesbian students was significantly and positively associated with the extent to which participants perpetrated homophobic bullying against the lesbian target, $B = .36$, $SE = .02$, $t = 18.15$, $p < .001$, $sr^2 = .30$ (supporting *Hypothesis 4b*). By contrast, the relationship between HBO towards actual or perceived gay male students was negatively related to HBE against the lesbian target, $B = -.17$, $SE = .02$, $t = -8.28$, $p < .001$, $sr^2 = -.14$. This relationship showed that the higher the frequency of HBO by participants towards gay male students, the lower the likelihood of perpetrating homophobic bullying against the lesbian target (supporting *Hypothesis 4b*). Finally, the extent to which participants reported engaging in homophobic bullying against actual or perceived gay male students (i.e., control variable) was significantly and positively related to the extent to which participants reported to engage in this behavior against actual or

perceived lesbian students, $B = .55$, $SE = .02$, $t = 28.16$, $p < .001$, $sr^2 = .46$. This pattern showed that the higher the level of HBE against actual or perceived gay male students, the higher the tendency to engage in this behavior against the lesbian target.

Discussion

Homophobic bullying and harassment remain a worldwide issue in the school context (Kosciw et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2012; 2016). Given the systemic nature of this phenomenon, we focused on the interplay between individual and contextual factors influencing students' engagement in homophobic behavior (Poteat, 2017). The majority of the published literature on this topic examined gender difference as a factor related to the perpetration of homophobic bias-based behavior (Camodeca et al., 2018; Poteat et al., 2013; Poteat & Espelage, 2005; Poteat & Rivers, 2010). For the first time in the Italian school context, the current study considered victimized students' gender (i.e., actual and perceived lesbian versus gay male target) to examine whether the contribution of individual (i.e., gender, sexual prejudice, and contact with LG individuals) and contextual factors (i.e., homophobic bullying observed, being victim, and perceived teacher responses to homophobic bullying) is based on a similar or gender-specific pattern in predicting students' engagement in homophobic bullying.

Participants reported that they were more likely to engage in and witnessed a higher frequency of homophobic bullying towards actual and perceived gay male than lesbian targets. These results can correspond to the prior findings showing that males reported a higher frequency of homophobic victimization than girls (Kosciw et al., 2009; Poteat et al., 2013; Poteat & Espelage, 2007).

Considering individual factors taken into account in the present study, our findings have shown that participants' gender and sexual prejudice influenced engaging in homophobic bullying on a gender-based target. As for participants' gender, our results supported *Hypothesis 1b*. Indeed, female compared to male students are more likely to engage in homophobic behavior towards actual and perceived lesbian targets, whereas male compared to female students are more likely to adopt the same behavior towards actual and perceived gay male targets. These results allow us to extend the

understanding of relationship between gender and homophobic attitudes, bullying and victimization (Camodeca et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2009; Prati et al., 2011; Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010). Specifically, the association between perpetrator's and target's gender may contribute to understand the role of homophobic bullying as a means to stigmatize members belonging to the same gender when they are perceived as gender nonconforming (i.e., deviant related to traditional gender norms and heteronormativity) and as a threat to group identity, consistent with the phenomenon of the black sheep effect (Jones et al., 2008). Moreover, these findings suggest that homophobic bullying should be understood as an intergroup process based on norms and identity that stem from group membership. Future research could explore the difference between the effect of participants' gender on homophobic bullying engagement towards gay students and that towards lesbian ones. The association between participants' sexual prejudice and engaging in homophobic bullying towards a gendered victim corroborated our *Hypothesis 3*. Specifically, participants who reported a higher level of sexual prejudice towards a gender-specific target (i.e., lesbians versus gay men) were more likely to involve themselves in homophobic bias-based bullying against the same gender target (i.e., actual and perceived lesbian versus gay male victimized students). The current research extended the prior literature on the connection between sexual prejudice and homophobic behavior among adolescents. Indeed, previous findings had shown that higher levels of sexual prejudice were associated with a higher likelihood of engaging in homophobic bullying regardless of the target's gender (i.e., use of bias language; Camodeca et al., 2018; Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010; Poteat et al., 2013). Our findings highlighted that participant sexual prejudice towards a gender-specific target determined specifically towards whom participant would direct homophobic bullying. Given the emerging association between sexual prejudice towards and homophobic bullying against gender-specific target, our results contribute to literature underscoring that sexual prejudice towards a specific gender target, lesbians for instance, do not spill over to other sexual minorities, gay men for instance. Said otherwise, sexual prejudice is not an undifferentiated hostility towards sexual minorities in general, but its connection

with homophobic bullying engagement towards a specific target is driven by unique negative beliefs and feeling towards the target.

In line with our *Hypothesis 4b*, participants who reported a higher frequency of homophobic bullying observed against lesbian students were more likely to be involved in this behavior against the same target, on the contrary they were less likely to be involved in this behavior against the opposite target. Taking into account witnessing homophobic bullying against a gay male target, our results displayed the same pattern, that is a greater likelihood of engaging in this behavior against the same target but a reduced likelihood of engagement in this behavior against the opposite target. Our findings confirmed the extant literature on general aggression in a school setting (Mercer et al., 2009; Thomas et al., 2006) and homophobic bias-based behavior (Birkett & Espelage, 2014; Poteat, 2007; 2008) relating to an aggressive peer group context as a factor in promoting aggressive behavior among members. The current study contributed to this issue by highlighting the specific contribution of the observed frequency of homophobic bullying towards gender-specific targets to account for engaging in this behavior based on a victimized student's gender. Our results confirmed the findings of a previous study (Prati, 2012a) carried out in the Italian school context indicating that participants' witnessing homophobic bullying towards a gender-specific victim promoted this behavior against a target of the same gender. The current study extended these findings, by showing that observing homophobic bullying towards a gender-specific target inhibited this behavior against a target of the opposite gender. This result may further support the role of descriptive norms that not only foster engaging in homophobic bullying behaviors against a specific target (for instance, gay male targets), when these behaviors are perceived as frequent, but also restrain behaviors not aimed at that specific target.

Concerning being a victim, our findings revealed that homophobic victimization predicted engagement only in homophobic bullying against a target of one gender (i.e., gay male), supporting *Hypothesis 5*. This result is in line with the extant literature on victimization, (Hong & Espelage, 2012; Pellegrini et al., 1999; Salmivalli, 2010; Salmivalli & Nieminen 2002; Withney & Smith,

1993), as well as on homophobic victimization (Birkett & Espelage, 2015; Poteat & Espelage, 2005), highlighting that victimized students may, in turn, perpetrate aggressive behavior against other students (i.e., bully-victim subgroup; Salmivalli & Nieminen 2002). In addition, the findings from this study extend our understanding of the role of homophobic victimization as being victimized as a unique factor underlying engaging in bullying against a gender-specific target (i.e., gay male) at the intersection of the victim's actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender. We surmise that perpetrating homophobic bullying by victimized students toward actual and perceived gay male targets might be a way to reinforce gender norms and acceptable masculinity and to prove their heterosexuality (Pascoe, 2007; Phoenix et al., 2003; Poteat & Russel, 2013).

Findings related to our *Hypothesis 6a and 6b* were mixed since perceived teacher responses to homophobic bullying in terms of legitimization were found to be a significant predictor of participants' engaging in homophobic bullying against actual and perceived gay male targets only, whereas perceived teacher intervention was found to be a significant predictor of engaging in homophobic bullying against neither lesbian nor gay male targets. Prior findings indicated that students who observed a teacher intervening to address homophobic bias-based bullying were more likely to intervene themselves (Wernick et al., 2013). From the opposite point of view, findings from our study appear to show that teacher legitimization of homophobic bullying has operated as a unique contextual factor promoting participants' involvement in this aggressive behavior against gay male targets.

Lastly, and contrary to *Hypothesis 2*, our study did not find an association between knowing LG individuals and engaging in homophobic bullying against both lesbian and gay male students. The extant literature indicated that contact with LG individuals can reduce homophobic attitudes among adolescents (Collier et al., 2012; Heinze & Horn, 2009) and friendship with a sexual minority has an indirect effect on homophobic bullying behavior mediated through sexual prejudice (Poteat et al., 2013). The findings from this study indicated only a significant and negative correlation between contact with LG individuals and sexual prejudice toward lesbians as well as gay men. Future research

should assess the construct under consideration in a deeper fashion (e.g., intimate versus distant contact).

The results of the current study point out suitable implications for practice and policies in a school setting. As previous research has shown (Palmer, Kosciw, Greytak, & Boesen, 2017; Pascoe, 2007; Phoenix et al., 2003; Renold, 2002; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, & Russell, 2010), students' engaging in homophobic behavior provides a means to maintain hegemonic gender and sexuality norms and derogate gender and sexual minority youth perceived as a threat to group identity. Our results suggest that intervention efforts to prevent student homophobic bullying in a school setting should consider the victim's gender. Schools should aim to counteract gender- and heteronormativity and promote a learning environment fostering lesbian and gay students and issues, as well as disrupting the gender norm mechanism which informs school climate (Palmer et al., 2017). Moreover, schools need to deconstruct adolescents' sexual prejudice towards lesbian and gay male targets which intersect gender beliefs, for instance including positive representation of LG individuals and events in the curriculum, redefining the traditional use of gendered school spaces and activities, and fostering intergroup relations (Kosciw et al., 2018).

With regard to a homophobic school climate, intervention is needed to deconstruct the perceived normativity of homophobic bullying behaviors, introducing at the national and local levels enumerated anti-bullying policies including bias-based bullying related to the intersection of a target's sexual orientation and gender. Referring to victimized students, schools need to adopt extensive strategies to support the victim and minimize the adverse effects of victimization in order to prevent reactive aggression (Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002). Also, based on our findings, schools should prevent the stigmatization of sexual minority youth that fosters aggressive behavior towards individuals perceived as gender and sexual orientation nonconforming. As teacher legitimization of homophobic bullying promotes student engagement in this aggressive behavior against actual and perceived gay males, interventions should be aimed at enhancing pre- and in-service teacher training program promoting practices and skills to counteract homophobic episodes and to deepen the

knowledge of the connection between homophobic behavior and gender norms. Anti-bullying and nondiscrimination strategies, as well as inclusive curriculum, and training for teachers should be shaped by taking into account gender differences related to predictors that foster engaging in homophobic behaviors. Additionally, the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) and school local institutions should provide extensive guidelines for preventing and handling homophobic incidents with regard to a victim's gender (Russell et al., 2010).

CHAPTER 3

INDIVIDUAL AND CONTEXTUAL FACTORS PREDICTING SCHOOL STAFF RESPONSES TO HOMOPHOBIC BULLYING

Zotti, D., Carnaghi, A., Piccoli, V., & Bianchi, M. (2018). Individual and Contextual Factors Associated with School Staff Responses to Homophobic Bullying. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy, 16*(4), 543-558.

Abstract

This cross-sectional research investigates the individual (i.e., sexual prejudice, contact with lesbian and gay [LG] people, and perceived seriousness of homophobic epithets) and contextual (i.e., homophobic bullying observed by school staff and perceived colleague reactions to homophobic bullying) factors as predictors of school staff intervention against vs. legitimization of homophobic bullying. Data were collected in secondary schools in the North of Italy via a paper-and-pencil survey. Participants were school staff members (N = 273) from 24 Italian secondary schools. The results have indicated that the higher the sexual prejudice and the lower the contact with LG individuals, the higher the legitimization of homophobic bullying. Also, perceiving colleagues as legitimizing or intervening in cases of homophobic bullying predicted similar reactions on the part of school staff participants. The findings are discussed with respect to the current literature regarding homophobic bullying, and applied interventions for school staff training programs to tackle homophobic bullying at school are put forward.

Keywords School climate. School staff. Bullying. Homophobia. Contact hypothesis. Secondary school

Students who identify as or who are considered to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (i.e., LGBT) are more frequently the target of discrimination in general, and in particular of bullying within the school context, compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers (Greytak, Kosciw, Villenas, & Giga, 2016; Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001; Robinson, Espelage, & Rivers, 2013; UNESCO, 2012, 2016; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005). Studies carried out in numerous countries have shown that homophobic bullying, as well as harassment and name-calling, is a widespread phenomenon in school settings, for instance in Great Britain (Guasp, 2012), Ireland (Higgins et al., 2016), Italy (Ioverno, Baiocco, Nardelli, Orfano, & Lingiardi, 2016), European Union (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014), the USA (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016), Canada (Taylor et al., 2011), and Australia (Hillier et al., 2010).

Surveys conducted in Canada (Smith, 2000; Taylor et al., 2011), Great Britain (Guasp, 2012), Israel (Pizmony-Levy, Kama, Shilo, & Lavee, 2008), and the USA (Kosciw et al., 2016) have revealed that LGBT students frequently declare that school staff tend not to intervene in cases of homophobic verbal or physical assault. Inaction on the part of school staff can be understood as implicit approval of the bullying acts (Mishna, Newman, Daley, & Solomon, 2008). Additionally, at least in certain cases, school staff justifies the students perpetrating the bullying behavior, thus blatantly legitimizing the bullying, which is part of a general response of disengagement (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Camodeca et al., 2018). For instance, in Italy, which is the context of the current research, 25.8% of secondary school students reported teachers having justified the students perpetrating the bullying behavior in the case of homophobic episodes (Prati, Coppola, & Saccà, 2010).

In a recent study (Kosciw et al., 2016) among US LGBT students, more than half who have been the victim of homophobic bullying never reported these incidents to school staff, as they cast doubts on the effectiveness of school staff intervention, expressed concerns about staff members' reactions, and fear that reporting these homophobic episodes would have made the situation worse. Furthermore, Kosciw et al. (2016) found that students in schools where staff intervene less often in

cases of homophobic remarks felt less safe in their school because of their sexual orientation and gender expression.

Conversely, school staff can also improve the climate at school when they actively address homophobic bullying and support the victims. Indeed, school staff intervention in cases of homophobic bullying enhances the feelings of acceptance on the part of LGBT students (Ploderl, Faistauer, & Fartacek, 2010) and creates a supportive and safe school environment (Bochenek & Brown, 2001; Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012). Moreover, LGBT students with supportive school staff, compared to those whose school staff is less supportive, are less likely to miss school because they feel embedded in a safer and more comfortable environment (Kosciw et al., 2016).

In sum, evidence suggests that school staff reactions can vary significantly, including, but not limited to, underestimation of the seriousness of bullying, engaging in homophobic jokes and name-calling, a lack of awareness regarding homophobic bullying episodes, direct intervention to address the bullying, and collective actions to counteract the phenomenon in question. Despite the extensive variety of school staff reactions, however, many responses can fall into two categories of interest here, namely those reactions that covertly and overtly tend to legitimize homophobic bullying episodes, hereafter referred to as legitimizing reactions, and supportive interventions in cases of these episodes. Legitimizing reactions refer to different responses to homophobic bullying, spanning from subtler (e.g., ignoring, not intervening) to more blatant (e.g., discounting the offensiveness of homophobic acts and the student perpetrating the bullying behavior) reactions, which likely contribute to legitimizing the bullying episodes. Supportive interventions in cases of homophobic bullying refer to all the individual attempts to purposively support the victim and counteract the bullying episodes. Significantly, these distinct types of reactions shape different outcomes at school, the former reactions being associated with unsafe feeling and absenteeism among students and high levels of victimization, and the latter reactions associated with supportive school climate and a reduced rate of drop-outs (Anagnostopoulos, Buchanan, Pereira, & Lichty, 2009; Goodenow,

Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Kosciw et al., 2016). The aim of this work is to analyze the distinct individual and contextual correlates associated with these two different types of school staff reactions.

A recent review (Vega, Crawford, & Van Pelt, 2012) suggests that the manner in which school staff manage sexual orientation-based discriminations is due to both individual factors, such as school staff's personal attitudes and beliefs, and to contextual factors, such as their perception of colleagues' beliefs and reactions towards these forms of discrimination. Several qualitative studies have examined school staff reactions to bullying or harassment based on sexual orientation or gender expression (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009; Ferfolja & Robinson, 2004; Gerouki, 2010; McGarry, 2008; McIntyre, 2009; Meyer, 2008; O'Higgins-Norman, 2009; Sykes, 2004). Only a few recent quantitative studies have explicitly examined either individual factors (Greytak & Kosciw, 2014; Nappa, Palladino, Menesini, & Baiocco, 2017) or the interplay of individual and contextual factors (Collier, Bos, & Sandfort, 2015; McCabe, Rubinson, Dragowski, & Elizalde-Utnick, 2013), as predictors of school staff reactions to homophobic bullying or incidents of harassment. The aim of this study is to complement these empirical works by analyzing within the same research design the different or overlapping contributions of individual and contextual factors in predicting two distinct school staff reactions to homophobic bullying, namely their legitimization of the homophobic bullying episodes or their supportive intervention in case of these episodes.

As for the individual variables, we corroborate previous findings that attest to a relationship between sexual prejudice on the part of school staff and their reactions to homophobic bullying (Collier et al., 2015; Nappa et al., 2017) and extend this investigation to factors that have received little attention, such as school staff contact with LG individuals (Greytak & Kosciw, 2014) and the perceived offensiveness of homophobic verbal assaults. As for the contextual variable, the frequency of homophobic bullying observed by school staff and their perception of colleagues' reactions to homophobic bullying comprise the contextual variables, as it has been shown that they play a significant role in shaping the manner in which school staff manage homophobic bullying (Collier et al., 2015; McCabe et al., 2013; Novick & Isaacs, 2010). Pursuing this goal would allow us to clarify

the specific contribution of the individual and contextual factors as unique predictors of staff reactions to homophobic bullying in terms of legitimization of or intervention to counteract homophobic bullying episodes.

It is worth noting that the only two studies that have addressed the interplay between the individual together with contextual factors and school staff reactions to homophobic bullying were carried out in the Netherlands and the USA (Collier et al., 2015; McCabe et al., 2013), while no research on this issue has yet been carried out in the Italian context. A recent Eurobarometer survey in the European Union has shown that the Italian context is characterized by high levels of negative attitudes towards LG individuals (European Commission, 2015; see also, Baiocco, Nardelli, Pezzuti, & Lingiardi, 2013; Lingiardi, Falanga, & D'Augelli, 2005), and a national survey has shown the widespread use of homophobic epithets, even in the adult population (ISTAT, 2012). Moreover, only 58% of those interviewed claimed to personally know LG individuals (ISTAT, 2012). The prevalence of a negative and stigmatizing view of LG individuals, the high usage of homophobic epithets, and the low level of contact with LG individuals make the Italian cultural context a useful setting in which to test whether school staff's homophobia, contact with LG individuals, and the perceived seriousness of homophobic epithets (i.e., individual factors) might contribute to shape staff reactions towards homophobic bullying. Also, no policy that prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation exists in Italian schools (Nappa et al., 2017; Prati, Pietrantoni, & D'Augelli, 2011). Differently from other European countries (e.g., Ireland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, the UK, France), Italian schools are neither provided with a national guideline nor supported by specific training to deal with homophobic bullying (Dankmeijer, 2017). Moreover, in-school support groups (e.g., Gay-Straight Alliance) are not present in the Italian school context. The lack of any institutional condemnation of discrimination based on sexual orientation, as well as any institutional support to address homophobic bullying, makes the analyses of school contextual factors especially important in understanding staff reactions towards homophobic bullying, particularly in the Italian context.

Individual Factors Related to School Personal Reaction in Homophobic Bullying Incidents

Sexual prejudice. Experimental research in social psychology has demonstrated that sexual prejudice is a strong determinant in preventing social observers from intervening in cases of homophobic discrimination. In a relevant study, Kreus, Turner, Goodnight, Brennan, and Swartout (2016) assessed, among other constructs, participants' sexual prejudice and then exposed participants to current verbal harassment and physical intimidation perpetuated by an aggressor confederate towards an ostensibly gay male target. The time participants took to intervene in the staged scenario was assessed. Results revealed that the higher the sexual prejudice, the longer the time participants took to intervene. The fact that sexual prejudice likely interferes with intervention in cases of homophobic discrimination has also been demonstrated outside the laboratory, and specifically in the case of homophobic bullying at school. Precursory evidence has shown the co-occurrence of homophobic attitudes among teachers and their tendency to refrain from addressing LGBT issues in school (Bailey & Phariss, 1996; Ollis, 2010; Sears, 1992). The relationship between teachers' sexual prejudice and the manner in which they manage homophobic bullying episodes has also been analyzed by Collier et al. (2015). In this research, which was conducted with secondary school teachers in the Netherlands (Collier et al., 2015), the authors assessed participants' attitudes towards homosexuality, presented them with homophobic bullying scenarios and measured participants' behavioral intention to intervene in the described incidents. Bivariate correlations indicated that higher levels of negative attitudes towards homosexuality were associated with lower intentions to intervene. Recently, and in the Italian school context, Nappa et al. (2017) found that higher levels of teachers' homophobia (i.e., attitudes towards lesbians and gay men related to three dimensions such as deviance, personal discomfort, and institutional homophobia; Lingiardi et al., 2015) were associated with higher feeling of powerlessness and a lower feeling of positive activation, such as understanding the needs and thoughts of the victim.

On the basis of this empirical evidence, assessing school staff's sexual prejudice could be highly informative regarding the manner in which they deal with homophobic bullying in the school context. Specifically, the above-mentioned evidence demonstrates that sexual prejudice may reduce the likelihood of teacher intervention in situations of homophobic discrimination in general, and also in hypothetical homophobic bullying scenarios, as well as distancing school staff from understanding the needs and thoughts of the victim. Hence, we hypothesized that higher levels of sexual prejudice on the part of school staff could be associated with higher levels of homophobic bullying legitimization. (*Hypothesis 1*).

Contact with LG people. Inter-group contact is a crucial variable in improving inter-group relations, such as weakening prejudice, enhancing cooperation, and pro-social behaviors (Abbott & Cameron, 2014; Poteat & Vecho, 2016; Sakalli & Ugurlu, 2003; Shamloo, Carnaghi, & Fantoni, 2018a; Shamloo, Carnaghi, Piccoli, Grassi, & Bianchi, 2018b; Smith, Axelton, & Saucier, 2009). Notwithstanding the importance of contact as a key factor in shaping bystander intervention in bullying episodes, to our knowledge, there is only one qualitative study (McGarry, 2008) and one quantitative research (Greytak & Kosciw, 2014) that have analyzed the association between teachers' contact with LGBT individuals and the way in which they deal with homophobic bullying episodes. In the qualitative study carried out on a sample of secondary teachers in an American school, McGarry (2008) reported that higher levels of contact with LGBT individuals was an important factor in promoting teacher intervention in cases of homophobic bullying. Similarly, in a quantitative study based on an American national sample of secondary school teachers, Greytak and Kosciw (2014) showed that the lower the contact with both an LGBT student and an LGBT person other than a student or a coworker, the lower the teachers' intervention in anti-LGBT bullying and harassment.

Building on this premise, and given the few empirical studies on this issue, we intend to gather additional quantitative evidence on the association between staff levels of contact with LG individuals and the manner in which they deal with homophobic bullying. In line with results from Greytak and Kosciw (2014), we hypothesized that lower levels of contact with LG individuals among school staff

would be a significant predictor of higher levels of homophobic bullying legitimization (*Hypothesis 2*).

Perceived seriousness of homophobic epithets. As far as the manner in which school staff deals with the use of homophobic language in the school environment is concerned, a survey conducted in the UK (Guasp, 2014) revealed that secondary school teachers considered homophobic epithets harmless banter and too common to intervene in every situation. These findings suggest that the seriousness and the extent of the usage of homophobic epithets are often denied or minimized (Gerouki, 2010; Zack, Mannheim, & Alfano, 2010). More importantly for our purpose, the perceived seriousness of homophobic bullying events has been found to influence the way school staff manages these events. Indeed, research has suggested that forms of bullying that are processed as not serious, including cyber and homophobic bullying, end up being considered less worthy of attention and consequently of intervention (Craig, Bell, & Leschied, 2011; see also, Greytak & Kosciw, 2014; Perez, Schanding Jr, & Dao, 2013; Yoon, 2004).

The present study intends to explore the potential relationship between the perceived seriousness of homophobic epithets by school staff and the manner in which homophobic bullying episodes are dealt with. Based on the reported research which indicates that dismissing the seriousness of homophobic bullying is associated with decreased levels of intervention (Craig et al., 2011; see also Greytak & Kosciw, 2014), we hypothesized that the lower the perceived seriousness and offensiveness of homophobic epithets, the higher the probability that the school staff would legitimize homophobic bullying episodes (*Hypothesis 3*).

Contextual Factors Related to School Personnel Reactions to Homophobic Bullying Episodes

Homophobic bullying observed by school staff. Research addressing the role of homophobic bullying observed by school staff in influencing the manner in which this bullying is managed has produced mixed findings. In a qualitative study conducted in the Irish secondary school context, O'Higgins-Norman (2009) found that when teachers stated that name-calling occurred with great frequency, they also claimed that they could not address bullying all the time. In a similar vein, results

coming from a survey in the UK (Guasp, 2014) showed that teachers who admitted to refraining from intervening in cases of homophobic remarks justified their behavior by claiming that homophobic slurs were too common to intervene in every situation. This pattern of results suggests a potential negative relation between the homophobic bullying observed by school staff and their intention to actively intervene in homophobic bullying episodes. In a quantitative research regarding bullying in general (i.e., not specific to homophobic bullying), Novick and Isaacs (2010) assessed how frequently teachers observed or were informed about bullying episodes and their intervention in bullying incidents (i.e., coaching students on how to dealing with bullying episodes and support for bullying prevention and social skills). Otherwise, results indicated that the higher the levels of observed bullying episodes, the higher the teachers' interventions.

Given the few studies addressing the relationship between the homophobic bullying observed by staff and the manner in which they manage homophobic bullying, additional evidence is needed to evaluate this relationship. In the current study, we intend to contribute to the debate on this issue by testing whether the levels of observed homophobic bullying may or may not be associated with either staff intervention in case of homophobic bullying or legitimization of bullying episodes (*Hypothesis 4*).

Perceived colleagues' reactions to homophobic bullying. Social norms strongly orient individuals' behaviors. The manner in which one observes others responding to a given event may contribute to shape an individual's response to that event (Carnaghi & Yzerbyt, 2006; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Turner & Oakes, 1986). Descriptive norms refer to norms pointing to the perception of what most people do in a given situation (Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991). The study by Collier et al. (2015) is, to our knowledge, the first to address (among other variables) the impact of descriptive norms on teachers' intentions to intervene in homophobic bullying scenarios. Specifically, Collier et al. (2015) assessed teachers' intentions to intervene, their perceptions of what colleagues would do in a similar situation, and their perception of whether salient referents (e.g., the school principal) expect them to intervene (i.e., injunctive norm). Bivariate

correlations showed a significant association between both norms and intentions to intervene. In other words, the more favorable the descriptive and injunctive norms were with regard to intervening, the stronger the reported intention to intervene.

The current study tests whether school staff perception of colleagues' responses to homophobic bullying, namely the descriptive norm, would be associated with similar responses to such events by participants. We reasoned that especially within the school context without institutional norms regarding how to deal with homophobic bullying episodes, such as in the Italian context, perceived colleague reactions to homophobic bullying might be a source of information regarding how one is expected to respond to such events (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). Hence, and in line with results from Collier et al. (2015), we hypothesized that perceived legitimization of homophobic bullying by other school staff members would be positively correlated with self-assessed legitimization of homophobic bullying. In a similar vein, we hypothesized that perceived intervention by other school staff members would be positively correlated with self-assessed intervention in homophobic bullying (*Hypothesis 5*).

Overview of the Study

The current study aims to analyze the unique predictors of school staff reactions to homophobic bullying in terms of supporting the LG students victimized by peers or legitimizing homophobic bullying. For the first time, this research analyzes the specific contribution of both individual factors (i.e., sexual prejudice, contact with LG individuals, the perceived seriousness of homophobic epithets) and contextual factors (i.e., the homophobic bullying observed by school staff and the perceived responses of colleagues to homophobic bullying) in predicting staff reactions to homophobic bullying in the Italian context (see Fig. 1).
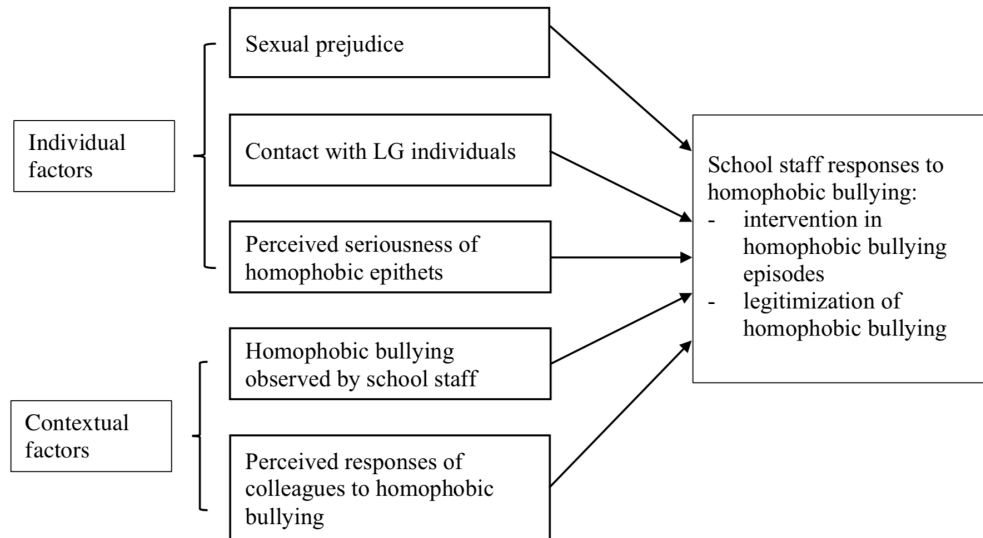
Figure 1. Theoretical relationships analyzed in the present study.

Method

Participants

Two hundred seventy-three school staff members ($n = 179$ women, $n = 84$ men, $n = 10$ participants did not indicate their gender) from 24 secondary schools in north Italy voluntarily took part in the research. Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 63 ($M = 49.25$, $SD = 8.44$). The research was presented to all the secondary schools of the region in which the study was carried out ($N = 75$ schools). School participation in the research was contingent upon the agreement of the school principal as well as the faculty. Twenty-four schools (i.e., 36.9% of the region schools) agreed to take part in the research, and 16.1% of the school staff voluntarily agreed to fill in the questionnaire. At the regional level, school staff was comprised of 62.4% women. Our sample reflected the gender make-up of the population, 65.6% of the research sample being women. Also, at the regional level, the mean age was 52.5 years old, which is close to the mean age of the research sample. As the number of school staff is not officially listed per institution, we are not able to ascertain whether participation proportionally varied from school to school. Moreover, 77.3% of participants were teachers, 6.6% of participants were janitors, 5.5% of participants belonged to the office staff, 1.5% of participants were technicians, and $n = 1$ participant reported being a psychologist. Finally, 8.8% of respondents did not report their position.

Procedure

School staff was officially informed by the school board that the local university was conducting a study on homophobic bullying in collaboration with the local regional government. In accordance with ethical standards, the aim of the research, the research procedures, and information about participating in the research were provided by the school board to the school staff. The current questionnaire was reviewed and discussed by our lab and the school boards and approved by the school boards. Participants were invited to take part in the study and fill out a questionnaire left in the staff room. Participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire individually and then put it in a box provided by the researcher. Participants were requested to fill out the questionnaire only one time and, to enhance participants' compliance, the reason behind this request was explained by stating that the reliability of the research output strongly depended on that. Participants were informed that their responses were anonymous, and they could withdraw from the study at any time. To ensure anonymity and encourage completion of the questionnaire, sexual orientation of the participants was not requested in their background information. Participants were informed that they could contact the researcher for any question or clarification. No incentive was provided to participants to complete the survey. Data collection lasted for 2 months.

Measures

Measures were presented in the following order: sexual prejudice, contact with LG individuals, homophobic bullying observed by school staff, perceived colleague reactions to homophobic bullying, personal reactions to homophobic bullying, perceived seriousness of homophobic epithets, demographic measures.

Sexual prejudice. Sexual prejudice is a multidimensional phenomenon that maps onto different aspects of the representation of sexual orientation (Herek, 2004; Herek & McLemore, 2013). Due to this complexity, the current operationalization of this construct relies on multiple assessments (for a similar procedure, see Prati et al., 2011). Specifically, the complexity of sexual prejudice was addressed by multiple assessments including a robust measure of attitudes towards LG individuals,

sexual stigma assessment, gender-inversion beliefs towards LG individuals assessment, and acceptability of same-sex sexual behaviors in public contexts. Indeed, participants were presented with the short form of the Attitude towards Gays and Lesbians (i.e., ATGL, Herek, 2000; see Herek & Capitanio, 1996; e.g., "Sex between two men [women] is just plain wrong"). Participants rated their answers on a four-point scale, ranging from 1(= *strongly disagree*) to 4 (= *strongly agree*). We averaged participants' ratings on the ATGL to form a single index. Higher values on this index indicated negative attitudes towards LG individuals. Means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alpha are reported in Table 1.

Also, participants rated three items pertaining to assess sexual stigma (i.e., "Homosexuality is immoral"; "Homosexuality is an illness", "Homosexuality is a threat to family"). Participants reported the level of endorsement of each item by means of a four-point scale, ranging from 1 (= *strongly disagree*) to 4 (= *strongly agree*). Similarly, we averaged participants' ratings on sexual stigma; higher values on this scale indicate the higher endorsement of a stigmatizing view towards homosexuality (see Table 1).

Third, acceptability of same-sex sexual behaviors was measured by means of the affective scale already used in the Italian national survey on this issue (ISTAT, 2012). Specifically, participants read three short descriptions concerning two individuals kissing each other. In the first description, the two individuals were a man and a woman; in the second description, they were two men, while in the third description, they were two women. For each description, participants indicated whether that behavior was acceptable or not (binary response, 0 = no, 1 = yes). We summed participants' responses on items related to the acceptability of same-sex sexual behaviors thus creating an index ranging from 0 to 2. To make the entire sets of measures coherent, we reversed this index so that higher values indicated a lower acceptance of these behaviors (see Table 1).

Fourth, since sexual prejudice is an overarching construct that includes, among others, evaluative, emotional responses and beliefs, and given that the above-mentioned items are more related to the evaluative, emotional-based component of attitudes towards LG individuals, we decided

to enter a gender role non-conformity measure to tap the beliefs about LG individuals. Although gender ideology is a distinct construct from sexual prejudice (Herek, 2004), other authors (e.g., Kimmel, 1997) have argued that contemporary sexual prejudice is entrenched with beliefs that, for instance, gay men are insufficiently masculine. Also, empirical works show that endorsing beliefs about the gender inversion of gay and lesbian individuals is a strong correlate of sexual prejudice (Barron, Struckman-Johnson, Quevillon, & Banka, 2008; Baunach, Burgess, & Muse, 2010; Keiller, 2010; Kilianski, 2003; Meaney & Rye, 2010; Parrott, Adams, & Zeichner, 2002). Given the significance of the beliefs about gender role non-conformity, we assessed beliefs about the gender-role non-conformity of LG individuals by asking participants the extent to which they agreed with the following statements: "In general gay men [lesbians] are effeminate males [masculine females]"; "In general heterosexual men [heterosexual women] are effeminate males [masculine females]." Participants reported their level of endorsement with the above-mentioned beliefs by means of a four-point scale, ranging from 1 (= *strongly disagree*) to 4 (= *strongly agree*). To compute the extent to which participants believed that LG individuals were gender non-conforming, participants' ratings of the heterosexual-referred items were subtracted from their ratings of the homosexual-referred items, separately for men and women as targets. The different scores were then averaged thus forming an index of beliefs in the gender non-conformity of LG individuals. Higher values indicated a stronger belief about LG individuals' gender non-conformity, while values equal to zero indicated that homosexuals and heterosexuals were thought to be similar in terms of gender conformity (see Table 1).

Participants' averaged scores on the ATGL, the sexual stigma, gender non-conformity, and acceptability were significantly and positively correlated (see Table 2). Participants' averaged scores on these variables were *z*-transformed. Reliability analyses were then computed and demonstrated a good level of internal consistency (α = .80). To fulfill our requirement of gaining a complex measure of sexual prejudice and to avoid multicollinearity, participants' scores on these variables were averaged, thus forming a single measure of sexual prejudice (for a similar procedure, see Saroglou,

Lamkaddem, Van Pachterbeke, & Buxant, 2009). Higher values on this measure indicated higher

levels of sexual prejudice.

Table 1. Mean scores, Standard Deviations and Cronbach's alpha for measures used in the study

Scale	Subscale	M	SD	α
Sexual Prejudice	ATGL[1]	1.61	.68	.86
	Sexual stigma[1]	1.38	.62	.76
	Gender non-conformity of LG individuals[2]	.40	.74	
	Acceptability of same-sex sexual behaviors[3]	1.21	.60	
Perceived offensiveness of homophobic epithets[4]	Offensiveness of homophobic labels addressing LG	3.66[a]	.62	.91
	Offensiveness of category labels referring to LG	2.01[b]	1.21	.97
Perceived offensiveness of slurs[4]	Offensiveness of hard slurs	3.67[a]	.58	
	Offensiveness of light slurs	2.83[c]	.80	
Homophobic bullying observed by school staff[5]		1.22	.33	.84
Personal reactions to homophobic bullying[6]	Personal intervention in the case of homophobic bullying	2.72[a]	.80	.78
	Personal legitimization of homophobic bullying	1.79[b]	.78	.82
Perceived colleague reactions to homophobic bullying[7]	Perceived colleague intervention in the case of homophobic bullying	2.73[a]	.75	.74
	Perceived colleague legitimization of homophobic bullying	2.15[b]	.75	.90

Note Means with different letters in the same scale differ significantly at $p < .001$.

Range

[1] From 1(= *strongly disagree*) to 4 (= *strongly agree*).

[2] From -3 (= *homosexuals are more gender conforming than heterosexuals*) to +3 (= *heterosexuals are more gender conforming than homosexuals*).

[3] From 0 to 2, higher values indicate a lower acceptance of these behaviors.

[4] From 1 (= *not all*) to 4 (= *very much*).

[5] From 1 (= *never*) to 4 (= *always*).

[6,7] From 1 (= *never*) to 5 (= *always*)

Contact with LG individuals. In line with the procedures outlined by Greytak and Kosciw (2014), participants were asked to indicate whether they personally knew at least one LG individual by means of a binary response format (no = 0 vs. yes = 1). They further indicated whether the LG individual/ s was/were a family member, somebody at school, somebody at work, a friend, a neighbor, or an acquaintance. The measure allowed for multiple responses. An index of contact with LG individuals was calculated by summing the selected options. This index ranges from 0 to 6, namely from a lack of contact with LG individuals to a high level of contact with LG individuals.

Perceived seriousness of homophobic epithets. We included a measure of the offensiveness of homophobic insults (see Carnaghi & Maass, 2006, 2008; Hunt et al., 2016), thus analyzing whether the extent to which homophobic labels addressing gay males and lesbians might contribute to shaping staff's own reactions. Specifically, participants were presented with homophobic labels addressing gay males (i.e., *finocchio* [poof], *frocio* [faggot], *checca*, *culattone* [fairy]) and lesbians (i.e., *lesbicona* [dyke], *pervertita* [perverted]), category labels referring to gay males and lesbians (i.e., *gay*, *omosessuale* [homosexual], *lesbica*, [lesbian]), two light slurs unrelated to sexual orientation (i.e., *scemo* [silly], *stupido* [stupid]), and two hard slurs not associated with sexual orientation (i.e., *coglione* [asshole], *stronzo* [bastard]). Participants rated the extent to which they perceived each term as insulting by means of a four-point scale, ranging from 1 (= *not all*) to 4 (= *very much*). Since homophobic labels addressing gay males and lesbians were significantly and positively correlated, $r(266) = .84, p < .001$, participants' ratings on these two measures were averaged together. Moreover, since category labels referring to gay males and lesbians were significantly and positively correlated, $r(264) = .95, p < .001$, participants' ratings on these two measures were also averaged together. Higher values indicated that terms were perceived as insulting (see Table 1).

Homophobic bullying observed by the school staff. As for the homophobic bullying observed (i.e., HBO) by the school staff, participants rated a modified version of the observation of homophobic aggressive behavior scale (Prati, 2012). This scale was comprised of eight items, four related to gay male-directed homophobic bullying and four related to lesbian-directed homophobic

bullying (i.e., to hear offensive labels such as *finocchio* [poof], *frocio* [faggot], *checca*, *culattone* [fairy], *lesbicona* [dyke], *pervertita* [perverted]; to read offensive labels such as the above-mentioned on a wall, in a restroom, on a door, in an e-mail, in an SMS, and on a social network; to notice a student who was socially excluded or marginalized because he/she appeared to be or was homosexual; to notice a student who was teased, insulted, or the target of aggression because he/she appeared to be or was homosexual). Participants reported the extent to which they witnessed these events in the last school year on a four-point scale, ranging from 1 (= *never*) to 4 (= *always*). Participants' ratings on the HBO were averaged to form a single index. Higher scores indicated a stronger observed prevalence of homophobic bullying (see Table 1).

Personal reactions to homophobic bullying. We relied on Prati et al.'s (2010) scale, which was derived from the work of Bacchini, Amodeo, Vitelli, Abbruzzese, and Ciardi (1999) and has already been used in the Italian context. Participants were presented with a description of a case of verbal homophobic bullying (i.e., when someone is called by offensive labels such as the above-mentioned) and then with a case of behavioral homophobic bullying (i.e., when someone is excluded and/or attacked). Participants were asked to report how they had managed such cases. To attain this aim, they read five items assessing personal *legitimization of homophobic bullying* (i.e., "I do nothing as it [the bullying episode] is a boyish prank"; "I pretend not to see it"; "I justify the bully"; "I'm not present [when this occurs]"; "I do not realize it"). Also, they read three items assessing *supportive personal intervention* (i.e., "I intervene to defend the victim, but the insults then increase^; ^I intervene to defend the victim, but nothing changes"; "I intervene to defend the victim, and the insults then decrease and stop"). It is worth noticing that personal *legitimization of homophobic bullying* items point to behaviors that either blatantly support homophobic bullying or collude with it so as to legitimize the occurrence of homophobic bullying, while the *supportive personal intervention* items allowed us to assess the frequency of personal intervention regardless of their effectiveness, thus controlling for the different outcomes of these interventions.

Participants rated these items on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (= *never*) to 5 (= *always*). Participants' ratings on items assessing *personal legitimization of homophobic bullying* were averaged. Higher values indicated higher legitimization of homophobic bullying (see Table 1). The same computation was applied to participants' ratings on items assessing *personal intervention in the case of homophobic bullying*. Higher values indicated higher intervention in the case of homophobic bullying (see Table 1).

Perceived colleague reactions to homophobic bullying. Participants were presented with both the verbal and behavioral bullying episodes as above. Participants had to report how their colleagues usually manage such cases. To do so, participants were provided with the same items already used to assess personal reactions to homophobic bullying but this time framed so as to refer to their colleagues' reactions. Participants rated their colleagues' reactions on the items on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (= *never*) to 5 (= *always*).

Participants' ratings on items assessing *perceived colleague legitimization of homophobic bullying* were averaged. Higher values indicated higher legitimization of homophobic bullying by school staff (see Table 1). The same computation was applied to participants' ratings on items assessing *perceived colleague intervention in the case of homophobic bullying*. Higher values indicated higher intervention in the case of homophobic bullying by school staff.

Demographic measures. Participants reported their gender, age, their role within school staff, the type of secondary school in which they were employed, the geographic location of the school (province), and the class they taught.

Statistical Analyses

A regression analysis was conducted with the sexual prejudice index, contact with LG individuals, homophobic bullying observed by school staff, colleague intervention in the case of homophobic bullying, colleague legitimization of homophobic bullying, and the perceived seriousness of homophobic epithets as predictor variables and personal intervention in the case of

homophobic bullying and personal legitimization of homophobic bullying as criterion variables. Demographic variables (i.e., age, gender) were also included in the regression analyses as predictors.

Given that the personal *legitimization of homophobic bullying* and personal *intervention in the case of homophobic bullying* capture two distinct, and not necessarily complimentary personal reactions to homophobic bullying, and since the two personal reactions to homophobic bullying were not significantly correlated (see Table 2), the above-mentioned regression model was carried out separately on these two types of personal reactions to homophobic bullying.

Table 2. Summary of Intercorrelations among ATGL, sexual stigma, gender non-conformity, acceptability of same-sex behaviors, HBO, category labels, homophobic labels, hard slurs, soft slurs, colleague intervention in case of and colleague legitimization of homophobic bullying, personal intervention in case of and personal legitimization of homophobic bullying.

Measure	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.
1. ATGL													
2. Sexual Stigma	0.73**												
3. Gender non-conformity	0.15*	0.16*											
4. Acceptability of same-sex behaviors	0.51**	0.58**	0.22**										
5. HBO	−0.01	0.09	0.01	0.02									
6. Category labels	0.21**	0.26**	0.05	0.22**	0.13*								
7. Homophobic labels	−0.18**	−0.21**	−0.06	−0.10	−0.16**	0.11							
8. Hard slurs	−0.05	−0.07	0.02	0.01	−0.09	−0.03	0.43**						
9. Soft slurs	0.01	−0.01	−0.01	0.02	−0.11	0.08	0.34**	0.35**					
10. Colleague intervention	−0.07	0.11	−0.01	0.05	0.17*	0.19**	0.06	0.05	0.10				
11. Colleague legitimization	−0.02	−0.02	−0.04	−0.04	0.23**	0.07	−0.09	−0.06	−0.06	0.11			
12. Personal intervention	−0.17*	−0.02	−0.03	−0.02	0.05	0.10	0.15*	0.18**	0.21**	0.74**	0.07		
13. Personal legitimization	0.07	0.11	−0.02	0.08	0.14*	0.06	−0.21**	−0.14*	−0.10	0.18*	0.52**	0.06	

$*p < .05; **p < .01$

Continuous variables were *z*-standardized, and participant gender was coded as binary variable (0 = woman, 1 = man). These models allowed us to verify the unique predictors of each type of school staff reactions (i.e., personal legitimization of homophobic bullying and personal intervention in the case of homophobic bullying) as criterion variables, thus also controlling for age and gender.

As shown by the correlation analyses (see Table 2) and the tolerance analyses (see Tables 3 and 4), no multicollinearity was detected among predictors. Below, we discuss significant predicted effects, while the full models are shown in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Complete Model of the regression analyses on personal legitimization of homophobic bullying

	B	SE	t	sr^2	VIF
Intercept	-.12	.05	-2.32*	—	
Participants' gender	.006	.09	.06	.004	1.12
Participants' age	.04	.04	.86	.05	1.20
Colleague intervention in case of homophobic bullying	.06	.05	1.36	.08	1.13
Colleague legitimization of homophobic bullying	.33	.05	7.18**	.44	1.14
Sexual prejudice index	.11	.05	2.30*	.14	1.23
HBO	.02	.05	.48	.03	1.15
Category labels	.02	.04	.53	.03	1.22
Homophobic labels	-.07	.05	-1.50	-.09	1.36
Contact with LG individuals	-.09	.04	-2.27*	-.14	1.12
Hard slurs	-.05	.05	-1.04	-.06	1.37
Soft slurs	-.05	.05	-1.08	-.07	1.31

Note: *p < .05, **p < .001

Table 4. Complete Model of the regression analyses on personal intervention in the case of homophobic bullying

	B	SE	t	sr²	VIF
Intercept	-.030	.06	-.49		
Participants' gender	.007	.11	.06	.003	1.11
Participants' age	.004	.05	.08	.004	1.22
Colleague intervention in case of homophobic bullying	.66	.06	11.91**	.64	1.13
Colleague legitimization of homophobic bullying	.03	.05	.55	.03	1.15
Sexual prejudice index	-.08	.05	-1.50	-.08	1.22
HBO	.01	.05	.23	.01	1.15
Category labels	.03	.05	.60	.03	1.22
Homophobic labels	-.003	.06	-.06	-.003	1.36
Contact with LG individuals	-.08	.05	-1.62	-.08	1.12
Hard slurs	.09	.05	1.68	.09	1.40
Soft slurs	.08	.06	1.38	.07	1.37

*Note: *p < .05, **p < .001*

Results

Descriptive Analyses

As regards the *Contact with LG individuals* measure, 12% of the sample affirmed that they did not personally know at least one LG individual. Among those who personally knew at least one LG individual, 7% of the sample reported that the LG individual(s) in question was/were a family

member, 16.5% of the sample affirmed that the LG individual(s) was/were somebody at school, 19.8% of participants declared that they personally knew at least one LG individual at work. Of our sample, 43.2% reported that the LG individual(s) was/were a friend/s, 5.9% reported that he/she was/were a neighbor, and 51.3% affirmed that the LG individual(s) was/were an acquaintance.

Participants' ratings on *Perceived seriousness of homophobic epithets* were analyzed by means of a four (labels: homophobic vs. category vs. hard slurs vs. light slurs) repeated measure ANOVA. The omnibus effect was significant $F(1, 262) = 87.16$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .25$. Pairwise comparisons (Bonferroni's correction) showed that participants perceived homophobic labels and hard slurs as similarly offensive ($p = 1$), and more offensive than both category labels and light slurs ($p < .001$). Also, light slurs were perceived as being more offensive than category labels ($p < .001$). However, category labels were not perceived as neutral labels, as revealed by a one-sample t test on a test value equal to 1, which stands for not at all offensive, $t(264) = 13.51$, $p < .001$.

With regard to *Personal reactions to homophobic bullying*, a paired sample t test showed that participants reported more intervention in the case of homophobic bullying than legitimization of homophobic bullying, $t(202) = 13.02$, $p < .001$. Moreover, a paired sample t test showed that participants reported more intervention on the part of their colleagues in the case of homophobic bullying than legitimization of homophobic bullying, $t(193) = 8.09$, $p < .001$.

Regression analyses

Incomplete questionnaires were not entered into the main analyses. Regarding personal legitimization of homophobic bullying, the overall model was significant, *Adj. R²* = .33, $F(11, 166) = 8.94$, $p < .001$. The sexual prejudice index was positively associated with personal legitimization of homophobic bullying, $B = .11$, *SE* = .05, $t = 2.30$, $p = .02$, $sr^2 = .14$, indicating that the higher the level of participants' sexual prejudice the higher the tendency to legitimize homophobic bullying (supporting *Hypothesis 1*). Contact with LG individuals significantly and negatively predicted the legitimization of homophobic bullying, $B = -.09$, *SE* = .04, $t = 2.27$, $p = .03$, $sr^2 = -.14$. This pattern of results indicated that the lower the contact with LG individuals, the higher the tendency to

legitimize homophobic bullying (supporting *Hypothesis 2*). Finally, the extent to which participants perceived colleagues legitimizing homophobic bullying was positively associated with the extent to which participants legitimize homophobic bullying, $B = .33$, $SE = .05$, $t = 7.18$, $p < .001$, $sr^2 = .44$ (supporting *Hypothesis 5*).

As for personal intervention in the case of homophobic bullying, the overall model was significant, *Adj. R²* $= .49$, $F(11, 164) = 16.16$, $p < .001$. The only statistically significant result concerned the association between colleagues' intervention and participants' own intervention. Specifically, colleague intervention in the case of homophobic bullying was positively associated with personal intervention regarding the same behavior, $B = .66$, $SE = .06$, $t = 11.91$, $p < .001$, $sr^2 = .64$, showing that the higher the extent to which participants perceived their colleagues would intervene in the case of homophobic bullying, the higher their personal intervention (supporting *Hypothesis 5*).

Since the perceived seriousness of homophobic epithets and the observed homophobic bullying were significantly associated neither with staff legitimization of nor with intervention in bullying episodes, *Hypotheses 3* and *4* were not supported.

Discussion

The majority of research related to intervention by school staff in bullying incidents has explored student perceptions, leaving staff attitudes towards and reactions to these episodes partially unexplored (Bauman, Rigby, & Hoppa, 2008; Craig, Henderson, & Murphy, 2000; Craig et al., 2011; Espelage, Polanin, & Low, 2014; Sairanen & Pfeffer, 2011). Significantly, the underrepresentation of studies addressing the way school staff appraise and react to bullying is even more pronounced when homophobic bullying is taken into account (e.g., Collier et al., 2015; Greytak & Kosciw, 2014; Guasp, 2014; McCabe et al., 2013; Nappa et al., 2017; Norman, 2004; Russell, Day, Ioverno, & Toomey, 2016). This work helps fulfill this lacuna by analyzing the specific contribution of individual factors (i.e. sexual prejudice, contact with LG individuals, perceived seriousness of homophobic epithets), and of contextual factors (i.e., homophobic bullying observed by staff, perceived colleague

reactions to homophobic bullying), in motivating staff members to intervene in the case of homophobic bullying or legitimizing this bullying.

School staff reported that they were more likely to intervene rather than legitimize bullying episodes. Importantly, regression analyses showed that distinct individual and contextual factors predicted whether participants intervene when facing homophobic bullying episodes or legitimize these episodes. As far as individual factors are concerned, our results indicated that they play a crucial role in shaping participants' personal legitimization of homophobic bullying only but not participants' intervention in cases of homophobic bullying. Specifically, and in line with our hypotheses 1 and 2, participants' personal legitimization of homophobic bullying was predicted by sexual prejudice and contact with LG individuals. The results of the associations between sexual prejudice and the legitimization of homophobic bullying episodes confirmed previous findings showing the correlation between these two constructs (Collier et al., 2015; Nappa et al., 2017) and further boosted the experimental findings on this issue by showing the crucial role of sexual prejudice in refraining from intervening in situations of sexual discrimination (Kreus et al., 2016). As for findings concerning contact with LG individuals, our results corroborate the only finding reported in the literature thus far regarding the relation between contact with LG individuals and the way school staff manages bullying episodes (Greytak & Kosciw, 2014). As previous research on this issue has been conducted in the US context, our data provide the first evidence on the importance of establishing contact with LG individuals as a way in which to weaken staff legitimization of homophobic bullying in the Italian context as well. Moreover, our study contributes to the literature on the contact hypothesis (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) by demonstrating that low contact plays a key role in preventing bystanders from intervening when processing group discrimination. In summary, endorsing sexual prejudice and having low contact with LG individuals independently promoted the personal legitimization of homophobic bullying.

As for the contextual variables, perceived colleague reactions to homophobic bullying were the only contextual factors that accounted for personal reactions to homophobic bullying. Indeed, both

perceiving others as legitimizing homophobic bullying episodes and perceiving colleague intervention in the case of homophobic bullying predicted similar reactions on the part of participants (*Hypothesis 5*). These findings are in line with previous evidence (Collier et al., 2015; McCabe et al., 2013) showing the impact of descriptive norms on personal reactions when dealing with homophobic episodes.

Contrary to *Hypothesis 3*, the perceived seriousness of homophobic epithets was unrelated to the likelihood that school staff would legitimize homophobic bullying episodes as well as intervening in such episodes. Although null results are difficult to interpret, it might be plausible that as these epithets are processed as hard slurs, their homophobic content might be disregarded, thus losing their connection with homophobic bullying (for a similar explanation, see Hunt et al., 2016). Future studies can address this issue by more directly assessing the perceived bullying nature of homophobic labels and hard slurs, thus clarifying the relative contribution of the perceived offensiveness and bullying characteristics of these insults in predicting school staff reactions to homophobic bullying.

Finally, the homophobic bullying observed by school staff was not a significant predictor of either school staff legitimization of homophobic bullying or intervention in such episodes (*Hypothesis 4*). We speculated that at least two factors could have contributed to the lack of association between the variables in question. First, and differently from the study carried out by Novick and Isaacs (2010), we only assessed the frequency of observed bullying episodes by school staff, while we failed to consider the extent to which school staff were informed about bullying episodes. Second, and in contrast to Novick and Isaacs' (2010) research, we limited our investigation on school staff reactions to a restricted number of participants' types of intervention in cases of homophobic bullying, while Novick and Isaacs' (2010) detailed distinct and different types of interventions in bullying incidents, such as coaching students on the manner in which they could deal with bullying episodes. Hence, limitations regarding the nature of measures both in the predictor and the outcome variable could have overshadowed the association between the homophobic bullying observed by school staff and their reactions when dealing with homophobic bullying episodes.

The findings of the current research have relevant applied implications. First, training programs for school staff should aim to reduce sexual prejudice thus likely decreasing the legitimization of homophobic bullying episodes (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003; Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013; Szalacha, 2004). For instance, training programs should promote the opportunities for preservice and in-service teachers to deconstruct prejudicial attitudes and biased beliefs regarding LG individuals. Also, national and local school administration should promote training programs that support LG youth and adult visibility to enhance school staff familiarity and contact with LG people in the school community (i.e., students, school staff members, parents).

The interventions mentioned above are especially needed in those contexts in which sexual prejudice is strongly entrenched and the contact with LG individuals is still elusive, such as in the Italian school context.

Second, an enumerated antibullying policy should be promoted in the national and school setting. If Italian state law were to provide policies to protect listed categories of students, including but not limited to LG individuals, this would likely promote school staff intervention in cases of LGBT youth victimization (Russell, Kosciw, Horn, & Saewyc, 2010). Indeed, the presence at the school level of antibullying enumerated policy is positively associated with school staff engagement in supportive actions towards LGBT students (e.g., immediately addressing homophobic language; Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). Complimentarily, LGBTQ students in schools with inclusive policies report higher rates of school staff interventions in homophobic remarks than students in schools with no policy or only a generic one (Kosciw et al., 2016). These policies are specifically needed in Italy where the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) has not provided national policies to prevent and counteract bullying based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression specifically (Nappa et al., 2017).

Third, to counteract school staff legitimization of homophobic bullying and enhance the probability of counteracting homophobic bullying episodes, guidelines for school staff members in handling homophobic bullying and harassment episodes would be relevant to deconstruct the school

staff's perceived normativity of legitimizing homophobic bullying as well as informing school staff regarding the best practices of intervention against homophobic bullying and harassment.

Together, these tools are urgently needed given the detrimental consequences that homophobic bullying and harassment have on the victim's well-being (e.g., depression, psychological distress, and low self-esteem; Bianchi, Piccoli, Zotti, Fasoli, & Carnaghi, 2017; Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Collier, van Beusekom, Bos, & Sandfort, 2013; Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008; Wyss, 2004), and scholastic success (e.g., school absenteeism, discipline problems, and a low level of school belonging; Kosciw et al., 2016; Rivers, 2000; Poteat & Espelage, 2007).

Some methodological limitations should be acknowledged. First, the outcome measure concerning school staff intervention presented less variability in terms of types of interventions than the outcome measure concerning the legitimization of homophobic bullying. Future studies could rely on intervention-related measures that assessed different active strategies to counteract homophobic bullying. Second, given that the primary interest of the current study was to address an arbitrary classification of school staff reactions to homophobic bullying (i.e., school staff intervention vs. legitimization of homophobic bullying), we forced participants' responses in a simplified format. Hence, broader classifications of school staff reactions to such a phenomenon is encouraged for subsequent studies thus mapping staff reactions in a more ecological fashion. Third, we relied on self-reported measures, which are extremely sensitive to social desirability and self-presentational concerns. Future research should complement this measurement procedure with observations and reports from additional sources (e.g., students). Fourth, this study adopted a passive survey collection method, which could have interfered with a more appropriate random sampling. Fifth, although our sample at least in part matched the demographic characteristics of the target population, we warn against generalizing our findings to the school staff of the region under examination, given a self-selection bias likely occurred in our sample.

Although this empirical effort is, to our knowledge, among the few studies which addresses the psychological predictors of the manner in which school staff manage homophobic bullying in the

Italian context specifically (Nappa et al., 2017), additional work should be carried out in other countries to corroborate and enhance the external validity of our findings. Moreover, given the importance of contact with LG individuals in shaping staff reactions towards homophobic bullying, future studies should assess this variable by taking into account not only the quantity of contact, as in the current research, but also the quality of contact (Viki, Culmer, Eller, & Abrams, 2006), which has been found to be predictive of behavioral intention in the inter-group context. Also, and parallel to the quality of contact measure, it would be significant to assess the level of distant/close contact with LG individuals, by relying on an appropriate scale (Tausch, Hewstone, Schmid, Hughes, & Cairns, 2011), as it has been demonstrated that intimate contact is associated with more positive attitudes towards LG individuals (Heinze & Horn, 2009) and likely influence school staff appraisal of homophobic bullying episodes.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

The aim of these two studies has been to gain a deeper understanding of the complex nature of homophobic bullying by considering both student and school personnel perspectives. The first study was concerned with the student perspective to address the reasons behind student bias-based bullying against sexual and gender minority youth at school. The second study took into consideration the school staff perspective to understand why teachers and other staff members legitimize or intervene in instances of homophobic bullying.

The extant literature has indicated a range of factors underlying bullying perpetration on the part of students, highlighting the importance of analyzing the interplay of these factors at the individual and contextual level. The first study investigated both the individual and contextual factors related to students' engagement in homophobic bullying towards actual or perceived lesbian versus gay male students, namely taking into account the gender of the victim, to explore whether the contribution of these factors is based on a gender-specific or -*non*specific pattern in predicting students' engagement in homophobic bullying. Specifically, this research considered individual (i.e., participant gender, level of sexual prejudice, and contact with lesbian and gay individuals) and contextual (i.e., being a victim and observed homophobic bullying towards actual and perceived gay male and lesbian students) factors indicated by the extant literature as promoting more frequent students' engagement in homophobic bullying behaviors. For the first time, as a contextual factor, this study also explored the role of perceived teacher responses to homophobic bullying (i.e., in terms of the legitimization of homophobic bullying and intervention intended to put a stop to this behavior and support the victim) in predicting students' engagement in this aggressive behavior. Moreover, the association between both individual and contextual factors and homophobic bullying perpetration has been examined, taking into consideration the gender of the victim to understand whether factors predicting homophobic bullying are similar, regardless of a target's gender, or different as regards to a target's gender. Referring to individual factors, the results have shown that participants' gender and levels of sexual prejudice predicted student engagement in homophobic bullying on a gender-based target. Referring to contextual factors, the results have indicated that homophobic bullying witnessed

by students and being a victim have been found to be factors associated with student engagement in this aggressive behavior as a function of a target's gender. Regarding teacher responses, only the perceived legitimization of homophobic bullying was associated with student perpetration of homophobic bullying against a gender specific target.

The second study focused on school staff reactions towards homophobic bullying, analyzing factors that may be related to their legitimization of bias-based bullying episodes or their intervention to counteract these episodes and support the victim. As with the first study, the second study pointed to understanding the interaction of factors at individual and contextual levels in predicting school staff responses to homophobic bullying, since very few studies have previously addressed this interaction. The second study took into consideration the participants' level of sexual prejudice as an individual factor influencing school staff reactions, as previous findings had demonstrated. Furthermore, in this study we have taken into account school staff contact with lesbian and gay individuals and the perceived offensiveness of homophobic epithets that are underrepresented by previous studies as individual factors predicting school staff reactions to homophobic bullying. Based on previous literature, the second study also included the frequency of homophobic bullying witnessed by school staff and their perception of colleagues' reactions to homophobic bullying as contextual factors that may predict school staff responses to homophobic bullying. Our findings showed both individual and contextual factors were associated with school staff responses when bias-based bullying incidents occurred at school. As for the individual factors, participants' levels of sexual prejudice and knowing lesbian and gay individuals were associated to the frequency of school staff responses that legitimized homophobic bullying. As for contextual factors, the second study demonstrated that the two types of perceived colleague responses (i.e., legitimization of and intervention in homophobic bullying incidents) predicted the same types of responses on the part of the participants.

In line with literature on homophobic bullying (Birkett & Espelage, 2015; Hong & Garbarino, Poteat, 2017; Poteat et al., 2013), the results of both studies underscore the importance of an

ecological approach that considers both individual characteristics and the role of a broader school social context to account for factors underlying student engaging in sexual orientation bias-based bullying, as well as for factors that influence the ways in which school personnel handle instances of homophobic bullying in the school setting. Our studies contribute to further knowledge of the motives that explain both the phenomenon of homophobic bullying and school staff's reactions when this phenomenon takes place. Our results corroborate previous findings mentioned by literature regarding both factors associated with homophobic bullying behaviors and with responses displayed by school staff facing homophobic bullying episodes. Moreover, our studies implemented previous findings by improving the knowledge of factors related to engagement in homophobic bullying on a gender-based victim and school staff reactions during instances of homophobic bullying.

The results of these studies might indicate suitable actions focused on hindering and preventing homophobic bullying in the school setting. Given the interplay between individual and contextual factors, policies and practices need to take into account different levels of intervention. The discriminatory nature of homophobic bullying underscores the importance of deconstructing sexual prejudice and traditional gender beliefs that influence student and school staff behaviors and foster the stigmatization of sexual and gender minorities. In addition, the school climate mirrors the perceived normative behaviors of student and school staff members when they deal with homophobic bullying. Therefore, strategies aimed at counteracting homophobic bullying should improve behaviors that support sexual and gender minority youth at school and should deter students and school staff from engaging in detrimental behaviors towards sexual and gender minority. To achieve these aims, the extant literature has highlighted a wider range of strategies to improve school climate and support LGBT students such as promoting the presence of inclusive antibullying policies (i.e., that specifically enumerate sexual and gender minority youth), inclusive curriculum, GSAs in schools, and providing training for pre- and in-service school staff focused on LGBT school issues. For the first time in the Italian context, the current research addressed the serious concern of homophobic bullying from a twofold perspective. Understanding the interplay among individual and

contextual factors predicting both student and school staff behaviors represents one effort to ensure safe and affirming school climate for sexual and gender minority youth that are still targets of homophobic victimization.

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