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On the effects of derogatory group labels: The impact of homophobic epithets and sexist slurs on dehumanization, attitude and behavior toward homosexuals and women.

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A mia sorella Elena,

che ha trovato la sua strada

e mi sprona a trovare la mia

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Language can be used to harm or to express prejudice toward a social group. As bystanders or target likely all of us have had the experience of derogatory language: We can overhear verbal offenses on the street, on television or read them on magazines and newspapers. Indeed, in the last years episodes of verbal derogation have hit the headlines, at least in the Italian context. For instance, newspapers recently reported that a drunk man stripped naked in Rome was first insulted and labeled as *faggot* and then attacked by some locals (La Repubblica, March 30, 2011). Interestingly, even public authorities use derogatory language to point out homosexuals. For instance, in 2004 an Italian Minister, Mirko Tremaglia, declared "poor Europe, the fags are in the majority" (Corriere della Sera, October 12, 2004). However, gays are not the only group victim of derogatory language. For instance, recently in making reference to attractive women, the Italian Prime Minister stated that he would like to change the name of his political party in *Forza Gnocca* (Go Pussy in English; La Repubblica, October 07, 2011). In addition, we can cite the case of a French politician, Patrick Devedjian who called a female opponent a *salope* (The Telegraph, June 30, 2007). These examples emphasize that verbal attacks are frequent and mainly address minority and stigmatized groups. Empirical efforts also testified that people commonly overhear homophobic and sexist language in their everyday life. Indeed, Swim and colleagues (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001; Swim, Person, & Johnston, 2008) showed that the frequency of hassles

toward gays and women was about two times a week, and that the majority of these episodes were represented by verbal attacks comprising prejudiced remarks, slurs and sexist or homophobic jokes.

What are the effects of derogatory language on people who accidentally come across these derogatory group labels? How is the derogatory language affecting the cognitive and behavioral reactions of the audience who overhears these social slurs? What are the consequences of derogatory language on the target?

In this thesis I address these questions by analyzing the implications of the exposure to a specific type of derogatory language: the *derogatory group labels* (DGL). DGLs are defined as specific terms for a given group that convey a negative attitude toward the target (Simon & Greenberg, 1996). Specifically, I focus on two distinct stigmatized target groups, the homosexuals and the women, taking in consideration different perspectives. First, I review the literature concerning the different forms of homophobic and sexist language (remarks, jokes, derogatory labels) from the perspective of both, the target and the non-target group members (Chapter 2). Second, I examine the impact of specific DGLs, namely the *homophobic epithets* and the *sexist slurs*. On one hand, I consider the effect of homophobic epithets on the audience (i.e., heterosexuals, Chapter 3). On the other hand I examine the consequences of sexist slurs on the target (i.e., women, Chapter 4). Moreover, in the present thesis I mainly analyze the impact of homophobic and sexist epithets when they were presented isolated from social contexts. Indeed, the consequences of this kind of language may depend on the social context (e.g., the relationship between the target and the user of the slurs, the gender of the user). To investigate whether contextual factors affect the social acceptability of sexist slurs I focused on *Sexist derogatory labels* (e.g., whore) and *Sexist objectifying labels* (e.g., pussy).

1.1. Consequences of the derogatory language

Regardless of the perspective (i.e., target or audience) there is some consensus of the fact that derogatory language is offensive. Men and women equally consider the hostile sexist comments as offensive (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005). Similarly, both heterosexuals and homosexuals agree that labels like *faggot* and *queer* are the most offensive terms to portray gays (Carnaghi & Maass, 2008). Therefore, it seems that target and audience are both aware about the harmful tone of derogatory language. However, the perception of the offensiveness of derogatory language may also depend on contextual and interpersonal factors. Indeed, it has been shown that the use of offensive language (e.g., taboo terms) is perceived as more harmful and inappropriate in a public rather than in a private situation, or if stated by a higher status rather than by a lower status speaker (Jay, 1992; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). The level of personal prejudice also affects the perception of offensiveness. For instance, the high sexist individuals do not detect the prejudiced tone of benevolent sexist comments or of sexist jokes (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Ford, Wentzel, & Lorion, 2001). Furthermore, the levels of offensiveness as well as other contextual variables (e.g., the presence of in-group members) affect the way people react to the derogatory group labels. In *Chapter 2* I review in detail research on derogatory language referring to homosexuals and women[1]. Specifically, I consider the consequences of derogatory language on both the target (i.e., gays and women) and on the audience (i.e., heterosexuals and men, respectively). In doing so, I analyze the effect of most of the forms of derogatory language (i.e., comments, jokes and derogatory labels) and I discuss similarities and differences among different lines of research.

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[1] Chapter 2 is written in Italian as it has been submitted for publication to an Italian journal (i.e. Psicologia Sociale).

In the next paragraphs I summarize previous research on the effects of homophobic and sexist language and I introduce the aims of the present thesis.

1.1.1 Homophobic language

Research on the consequences of homophobic language has shown that it negatively affects the target well-being. In particular, the exposure to homophobic language elicits detrimental outcomes like negative emotions (Swim, et al., 2009), the internalization of sexual stigma (Carnaghi, Castelli, & Comisso, 2011) and the tendency to avoid self-disclosure and coming-out (Burn, Kadlec, & Rexer, 2005). In contrast, the overhearing of homophobic epithets by heterosexuals leads individuals to report stronger prejudice toward homosexuals. Indeed, previous studies have shown that heterosexuals reacted to homophobic slurs by weakening the automatic (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007) and the explicit positive attitude toward gays (Carnaghi, Maass, Castelli, & Puvia, 2011; Goodman, Scheel, Alexander, & Eidelman, 2008).

Based on this evidence, in the present thesis I extend the research on the consequences of homophobic language on heterosexuals. In *Chapter 3*, across two studies, I investigate the effects of homophobic epithets on the perception and the behavior towards gays. I first analyze the impact of homophobic epithets on dehumanization, hypothesizing that homophobic labels would lead to deny the humanness to homosexuals as a group. In addition, I test the consequences of homophobic epithets on the non-verbal behavior toward homosexuals, examining the physical distance. I predict that after the exposure to homophobic epithets heterosexuals would enhance their tendency to maintain a physical distance toward a gay man.

1.1.2. Sexist language

The consequences of being the target of sexist language have been well documented in the literature. It has been demonstrated that women are negatively

affected by sexist slurs as they report higher level of anger and fear, and less self-esteem when come across a sexist comment (Swim et al., 2001). Moreover, as women appraise sexist language as an expression of prejudice and inequality, they are motivated to react to this verbal form of discrimination by confronting the sexist commenter (Swim & Hyers, 1999). At the same time, also men recognize sexist language as offensive and inappropriate leading to condemn sexism. As a consequence men negatively evaluate individuals who express prejudice and positively rate the victim of sexist language (Biernat & Eidelman, 2007). However, when men are not able to detect the offensive tone of sexist language (e.g., sexist jokes, benevolent remarks), those with high level of hostile sexism tend to tolerate prejudice and to express negative attitudes toward women (Ford et al., 2001; Ford, Boxer, Armstrong, & Edel, 2008; Ryan & Kanjorski, 1998).

Previous studies on the effects of sexist language have rarely investigated the consequences of DGLs that portrayed women, namely *sexist labels.* In this thesis I examine how sexist slurs are perceived and what are their effects on the target group. Since previous research on sexist language has analyzed the offensiveness but not their social acceptability, in *Chapter 4* I investigate how both men (audience) and women (target) perceive different classes of sexist slurs in terms of social acceptability. In particular, I distinguish between *Sexist Derogatory Labels* (e.g., bitch, whore) and *Sexist Objectifying Labels* (e.g., hot-chick, pussy) and I investigate how their social acceptability changes depending on contextual factors such as the type of user-target relationship and the gender of the user.

Then, in *Chapter 5* I examine the impact of both the sexist derogatory and objectifying labels on the hostile and benevolent sexism among women. In this case I

test whether women react to these classes of derogatory labels increasing their hostility toward the in-group.

Finally, in *Chapter 6* I discuss the results and the implications of the effects of homophobic epithets and sexist slurs in perpetuating prejudice, as well as the differences and the similarities of the impact of these classes of verbal attack on the target and on the audience. Moreover, I discuss the contribution of this thesis to the research on derogatory group labels, dehumanization, sexism, and the role of homophobic and sexist slurs in perpetuating prejudice.

Chapter 2

Conseguenze del linguaggio sessista e omofobo sui destinatari e spettatori dell'offesa

Il linguaggio è uno dei principali canali attraverso il quale si manifesta il pregiudizio. L'espressione di un atteggiamento negativo nei confronti di una persona può avvenire, infatti, tramite l'utilizzo di espressioni verbali che offendono una persona in quanto membro di un dato gruppo. Ne sono un esempio parole come *troia* e *frocio*, utilizzate per riferirsi alle donne e agli omosessuali. Tuttavia, indipendentemente dall'intento di chi lo utilizza, è lecito chiedersi se e quali siano le conseguenze di questo linguaggio denigratorio. Da un lato, essere chiamato *frocio* potrebbe comportare emozioni di rabbia ed umiliazione nella vittima dell'offesa, come pure in altre persone omosessuali. Dall'altro lato, coloro che sono spettatori, anche involontari, dell'offesa potrebbero indignarsi e reagire o, al contrario, mostrare un incremento della loro omofobia. Diversi potrebbero essere quindi gli effetti dell'essere esposti ad un linguaggio denigratorio in base alla prospettiva assunta per cui in questa rassegna tratterò le conseguenze di tale tipologia di linguaggio distinguendo tra coloro che sono destinatari e coloro che sono spettatori dell'offesa.

In letteratura numerosi studi hanno analizzato le reazioni a diverse forme di linguaggio denigratorio, quali ad esempio affermazioni, barzellette, ed etichette denigratorie. Prima di procedere all'analisi dei loro effetti, descriverò brevemente queste diverse tipologie di linguaggio denigratorio. Alcune ricerche si sono focalizzate nello studio degli effetti di affermazioni il cui contenuto è ritenuto irrispettoso e

denigratorio nei confronti di uno specifico gruppo sociale. Ne sono un esempio i discorsi d'odio (Cowan & Mettrick, 2002; Craig & Waldo, 1996; Herek, 1992) oppure i commenti sessisti (Swim, Hyers, Cohen & Ferguson, 2001), razzisti (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003) e omofobi (Swim, Johnston & Pearson, 2009). Talvolta tali commenti vengono espressi in forma scherzosa o tramite barzellette. In questo caso si tratta di una forma particolare di espressione di pregiudizio in quanto le affermazioni scherzose possono veicolare un messaggio offensivo che, per la sua natura umoristica e di derisione, ha conseguenze diverse da un messaggio con lo stesso contenuto ma espresso in modo serio (Pexman & Olineck, 2002; Ford, Boxer, Amstrong & Edel, 2008). Vi sono infine le etichette denigratorie, le quali rappresentano termini che esprimono un atteggiamento di denigrazione nei confronti del gruppo o della persona a cui si riferiscono (Simon & Greenberg, 1996). La particolarità delle etichette denigratorie risiede nel fatto che non sono affermazioni ma singoli specifici termini offensivi indirizzati inequivocabilmente ad un particolare gruppo e non generalizzabili ad altri gruppi o persone. Questa caratteristica differenza le etichette denigratorie dalle "parolacce" e da altri tipi di insulti. Le etichette denigratorie, in genere, enfatizzano aspetti del gruppo quali caratteristiche somatiche (e.g., *muso giallo* per gli asiatici), il suo passato (e.g., *Nazi* per i Tedeschi), e abitudini come ad esempio quelle culinarie (e.g., *spaghetti* per gli Italiani).

Indipendentemente dalla loro forma espressiva, il linguaggio denigratorio risulta essere di uso molto frequente nella nostra società, soprattutto nei confronti di alcuni gruppi minoritari o stigmatizzati. La frequenza di episodi discriminatori verso donne e omosessuali è molto forte - circa 2 episodi la settimana - ed è spesso rappresentata da aggressioni di natura verbale (Swim, Hyers, Cohen & Ferguson, 2001; Swim, Person & Hohsnoton, 2008). Swim e collaboratori (Swim et al., 2008) hanno riscontrato, ad

esempio, che ben il 58% degli episodi di discriminazione verso gli omosessuali erano rappresentati da attacchi verbali piuttosto che da comportamenti.

In questa rassegna mi soffermerò in particolare sul linguaggio denigratorio nei confronti delle donne e degli omosessuali, illustrando inizialmente gli effetti di queste espressioni verbali sui destinatari per poi procedere ad analizzare le implicazioni sugli spettatori.

2.1. Conseguenze sui destinatari

I destinatari di espressioni verbali di pregiudizio non sono solo coloro che vengono insultati in prima persona, ma tutti i membri del gruppo bersaglio dell'offesa. Gli effetti del linguaggio denigratorio su coloro che sono destinatari dell'offesa, e che sono stati fino ad ora studiati, sono principalmente di tipo emotivo, cognitivo e comportamentale. In questo paragrafo considererò separatamente le conseguenze del linguaggio sessista sulle donne e di quello omofobo sugli omosessuali, discutendo poi possibili somiglianze e differenze.

2.1.1. Conseguenze del linguaggio sessista sulle donne

Il linguaggio sessista chiama in causa contenuti molto diversi (Swim et al., 2001), dalla pura denigrazione e misogenia (e.g., "Hey puttana, portami una birra!"), all'oggettivazione sessuale (e.g., "guarda il suo davanzale" per riferirsi al seno), agli stereotipi di genere (e.g., "siccome sei una donna, spetta a te fare il mio bucato") che, avendo a volte una connotazione positiva, meritano una trattazione a parte. Uno degli studi più interessanti sulle reazioni al linguaggio e, più generalmente, a episodi di sessismo è stato condotto da Swim e colleghi (Swim et al., 2001), i quali attraverso la metodologia del diario hanno analizzato le conseguenze di tali episodi sulle reazioni emotive e sul benessere psicologico di coloro che ne erano i destinatari. In un primo studio (Swim et al., 2001; Studio 1) alle partecipanti era chiesto di indicare per ciascun

episodio sessista che avevano subito o a cui avevano assistito durante la giornata, quanto era offensivo e quali erano le emozioni provate durante e a seguito dell'episodio. Nel 75% degli episodi analizzati le partecipanti sostenevano di aver provato soprattutto rabbia, ma anche un senso di sorpresa e disagio. Tali emozioni non perduravano però a seguito dell'episodio. In un ulteriore studio, gli autori (Swim et al., 2001; Studio 3) ampliarono l'analisi delle conseguenze emotive chiedendo ai partecipanti di indicare non solo il livello di rabbia, ansia, depressione ma anche quello di autostima personale. In questo caso a una maggiore frequenza di incidenti sessisti corrispondeva un maggior livello di rabbia ed ansia ma anche una minore autostima.

La rabbia, in qualità di reazione all'essere esposti a un linguaggio (riconosciuto) come sessista, è un dato che trova riscontro anche in studi condotti in laboratorio che hanno analizzato le reazioni a commenti sessisti ed eventi di discriminazione di genere vissuti in prima persona (Ellemers &Barreto, 2009; Matheson & Anisman, 2009) o come semplici testimoni (Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010). Altri studi hanno però sottolineato come l'essere esposti a un linguaggio sessista e più generalmente essere vittima di discriminazione sessuale sia un evento dal punto di vista emotivo piuttosto complesso. Infatti non solo la rabbia, ma anche altre emozioni come ad esempio la tristezza e il senso di umiliazione sembrano caratterizzare il vissuto emotivo di coloro che ne sono vittime. In un recente studio condotto in Italia (Paladino, Fasoli, Zaniboni, Vaes e Volpato, 2011) in cui sono state analizzate le reazioni emotive ad alcuni eventi pubblici di sessismo – nello specifico caso si trattava di alcune affermazioni del Premier Berlusconi – le donne che condannavano questo tipo di comportamenti riportavano una moderata ma eguale reazione sia di rabbia, che di umiliazione e tristezza davanti all'evento. In altre ricerche, invece, è la rabbia a risultare l'emozione predominante seguita, con minor intensità, dalla tristezza (Bosson, Pinel e Vandello, 2009) o dalla

vergogna e senso di umiliazione (Matheson & Anisman, 2009). Una variabile che è risultata essere determinante nell'influenzare il vissuto emotivo al sessismo per quel che riguarda la rabbia è il tipo di sessismo a cui la persona è esposta e con cui si trova a confrontarsi. Sono infatti soprattutto le istanze di sessismo tradizionale (Ellemers & Barreto, 2009; Barreto & Ellemers, 2009) e ostile (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Bosson et al., 2009) a suscitare rabbia nelle donne. Ellemers e Barreto (2009), ad esempio, mostrarono ai partecipanti i risultati di un sondaggio fittizio secondo il quale una larga maggioranza di cittadini sottoscriveva affermazioni di sessismo tradizionale (e.g., le donne sono meno intelligenti degli uomini) oppure di sessismo moderno e maggiormente benevolo (e.g., il fatto che poche donne occupano posizioni di alto status non è frutto della discriminazione), registrando poi le reazioni dei partecipanti. I risultati indicarono che le partecipanti donne riportavano maggiore rabbia in risposta al sessismo ostile piuttosto che a quello benevolo, in quanto quest'ultimo non era necessariamente percepito come un'espressione di pregiudizio nei confronti delle donne. Un recente studio di Bosson, Pinel e Vandello (2009) suggerisce, tuttavia, che le reazioni al sessismo benevolo sono diverse quando esperite in prima persona. In questo studio, in una condizione i partecipanti (sia donne che uomini) dovevano immaginare di essere una donna vittima di un comportamento od offesa verbale di tipo sessista, e dovevano riportare il grado in cui avrebbero provato emozioni di rabbia-disgusto (i.e., rabbia, disgusto, ostilità, risentimento e sorpresa), paura-depressione (i.e., depressione, paura, vergogna, senso di colpa, imbarazzo, tristezza e dubbi su sé stessi) e il tempo che reputavano necessario per recuperare lo stato di benessere psicologico precedente all'episodio sessista. Al contrario, in un' altra condizione le partecipanti donne dovevano descrivere un'occasione in cui erano state vittime di sessismo, indicando le emozioni provate e il tempo che avevano impiegato per il recupero del loro stato emotivo iniziale.

In aggiunta gli autori distinguevano tra episodi di sessismo ostile e benevolo. Nella condizione di assunzione di prospettiva la tipologia di evento sessista era manipolata sperimentalmente, mentre nella condizione di esperienza vissuta in prima persona le partecipanti classificavano gli episodi in ostile e benevolo dopo aver letto una definizione fornita dagli sperimentatori. I risultati mostrarono che le partecipanti donne che riportavano la loro reale esperienza indicavano di aver provato rabbia/disgusto e, in minore intensità, paura/depressione sia ad episodi di sessismo benevolo che ostile. In altri termini la loro reazione emotiva non si differenziava, cosa che invece veniva riscontrata nei partecipanti a cui era stato chiesto di immaginare come avrebbero reagito. In questo caso, in modo simile a quando evidenziato da Barreto e Ellemers (2005), i partecipanti sostenevano che avrebbero reagito con più rabbia/disgusto e anche paura/depressione ad un'istanza di sessismo ostile piuttosto che benevolo. Queste differenze tra coloro che dovevano immaginare le loro reazioni e coloro che invece dovevano riportare la loro esperienza era dovuta ad una tendenza a sovrastimare l'intensità di emozioni di rabbia nel caso di episodi di sessismo ostile e una sottostima di questa reazione nel caso del sessismo benevolente. Inoltre, coloro che immaginavano di essere vittima di sessismo sovrastimavano il tempo necessario a recuperare lo stato di benessere nel caso di sessismo ostile e lo sottostimavano in quello benevolente.

Il fatto che il linguaggio riconosciuto come sessista abbia un forte impatto emotivo sulle donne, ed induca ad esperire specifiche emozioni con diversa intensità, suggerisce che esso possa influenzare il comportamento in modi diversi. La rabbia, in particolare, è un'emozione che viene tipicamente riscontrata in quelle situazioni in cui le persone ritengono di aver subito un'ingiustizia e sono motivate a reagire ad essa (Matheson & Anisman, 2009). Infatti, diversamente dalla tristezza e dall'umiliazione, la rabbia è un'emozione a forte *arousal* che innesca reazioni comportamentali. Dal punto di

vista funzionale la rabbia, in modo simile alla paura, è una reazione a una minaccia al sé; diversamente da quest'ultima induce però le persone ad affrontarla piuttosto che ad evitarla (Hutcherson & Gross, 2011). Questo lascia supporre che la reazione di rabbia riportata dalle donne al linguaggio sessista possa motivarle ad affrontare coloro che si esprimono in questo modo. I risultati della ricerca di Ellemers e Barreto (2009) sono in linea con questa ipotesi. In uno studio le partecipanti credevano che sarebbero state valutate da un professore che aveva espresso delle opinioni esplicitamente sessiste oppure più sottilmente tali, come ad esempio il negare che le disparità di genere siano frutto di discriminazione (si veda la differenza tra sessismo tradizionale e sessismo moderno proposta da Swim, Aikin, Hall, e Hunter, 1995). Alle partecipanti veniva chiesto di indicare quanto secondo loro il professore era sessista, quanto erano arrabbiate ed infastidite dai suoi commenti e la loro intenzione a protestare scrivendo una lettera per chiedere che il professore fosse rimosso dal suo incarico. Come in altre ricerche (per una rassegna si veda Barreto, Ellemers Cihangir, & Stroebe, 2008), queste reazioni erano più pronunciate in reazione a commenti riconosciuti come tradizionalmente sessisti. L'aspetto interessante è che la decisione di protestare era mediata dalla rabbia provata nei confronti dell'uso di un linguaggio sessista: più intensa era la rabbia provata, maggiore era l'intenzione a protestare. Tuttavia, sebbene la rabbia sia l'emozione più frequentemente provata dalle donne in reazione a commenti riconosciuti come sessisti ed essa possa motivare a reagire, le reazioni di protesta ad eventi e linguaggio sessista non sono molto frequenti. Nello studio di Ellemers e Barreto (2009) circa il 61% delle partecipanti si diceva intenzionata a protestare per chiedere che il professore, che aveva espresso opinioni esplicitamente sessiste, venisse rimosso dal suo incarico. In questo studio però le studentesse non incontravano personalmente il professore ma leggevano solamente alcune sue affermazioni. Le partecipanti avevano così il tempo di indignarsi

ma anche di riflettere su come reagire prima di incontrare colui che aveva espresso opinioni sessiste. È però possibile che le cose vadano diversamente quando la reazione avviene in modo immediato in una situazione reale. A tale proposito, Swim e Hyers (1999, studio 1) studiarono sia le reazioni comportamentali (e.g., discussione con l'interlocutore) sia quelle emotive (e.g., pensieri ed emozioni scaturite dall'episodio) delle partecipanti che erano coinvolte personalmente in un evento sessista. L'esperimento era costruito in modo tale che le partecipanti prendevano parte ad una discussione in un gruppo composto da un maschio e due ragazze, oppure solo da confederati maschi oltre la partecipante. Veniva, quindi, manipolato il contesto in modo tale che la partecipante fosse l'unica esponente del gruppo offeso (i.e., le donne) oppure si trovasse in presenza di un'altra donna che, in quanto collaboratrice degli sperimentatori, aveva il compito di non reagire agli episodi sessisti. L'obbiettivo della discussione era quello di scegliere 12 persone da una lista di 30 candidati (15 maschi e 15 femmine) che avrebbero dovuto sopravvivere in un'ipotetica isola deserta. Durante la discussione uno dei maschi del gruppo, un complice dello sperimentatore, esprimeva tre commenti a contenuto sessista (e.g., "secondo me abbiamo bisogno di più donne sull'isola per poter soddisfare gli uomini") o non sessista (e.g., "secondo me abbiamo bisogno di più intrattenitori sull'isola affinché tutti siano felici"). La sessione era videoregistrata per poter analizzare le reazioni delle partecipanti. Al termine del compito era chiesto di completare un questionario relativo alle impressioni sugli interlocutori e alla volontà di interagire in futuro con ciascuno di loro. In aggiunta le partecipati visionavano il video e riportavano le emozioni e i pensieri che avevano provato durante la discussione. Dai risultati emergeva che nella condizione di commenti sessisti l'uomo che esprimeva tali affermazioni era giudicato meno responsabile e meno cooperativo, oltre ad essere scelto in grado minore per interazioni future. Per quanto

riguarda la reazione comportamentale, solo il 45% delle partecipanti nella condizione sessista reagiva verbalmente almeno una volta, facendo soprattutto domande per comprendere l'intento del interlocutore (11,25%), contraddicendolo (9,20%), oppure in casi ancora più rari esprimendo il loro disappunto. Inoltre, se le partecipanti erano le uniche donne del gruppo reagivano più frequentemente rispetto a quando era presente un'altra donna, soprattutto al primo della serie dei commenti sessisti. Per quanto riguarda le reazioni emotive, le partecipanti riportavano numerose emozioni e pensieri negativi verso il collaboratore sessista (e.g., l'aver voluto abbandonare la discussione o pensare di picchiarlo), che però non rispecchiavano il tipo di risposta comportamentale messa in atto. Infatti, sebbene molte donne affermavano di aver voluto reagire pubblicamente ai commenti sessisti, le medesime non mettevano in atto tale comportamento e, qualora invece lo mettevano in atto, adottavano un comportamento dai modi gentili. I risultati di questo studio evidenziano che commenti sessisti inducono quasi sempre una reazione emotiva negativa nelle partecipanti mentre le reazioni comportamentali sono meno frequenti, soprattutto in presenza di altre donne che non reagiscono. In un secondo studio (Swim & Hyers, 1999; Studio 2) le partecipanti non erano più esposte in prima persona ad un episodio sessista ma leggevano uno scenario in cui una donna si trovava in un gruppo di discussione dove un uomo esprimeva tre commenti a carattere sessista o non sessista. Per ognuno dei commenti le partecipanti riportavano quanto lo ritenevano offensivo e con quale probabilità avrebbero reagito a tali commenti. Le reazioni proposte erano quelle rilevate nel primo esperimento (e.g., ignorare il commento, fare delle domande di chiarimento, utilizzare sarcasmo, picchiare ecc.). Inoltre, era chiesto di indicare quanto ciascuna reazione esprimeva disapprovazione, quanto era gentile e socialmente accettabile, e quanto comportava rischi di ripercussioni da parte dell'interlocutore sessista. I risultati mostrarono che la

probabilità di reagire almeno una volta era maggiore se il tipo di reazione era percepita come poco rischiosa e gentile (e.g., fare domande). Confrontarsi apertamente con il commentatore era, invece, un tipo di reazione giudicata come poco probabile poiché ritenuta rischiosa e poco accettata socialmente. Ciononostante, indipendentemente dal tipo di risposta messa in atto, le donne sembravano giudicare in modo positivo le reazioni a commenti sessisti. In modo simile, Dood e collaboratori (Dood, Giuliano, Boutell & Moran, 2002), infatti, hanno mostrato che le partecipanti donne, esposte ad uno scenario che descriveva una situazione in cui una donna ignorava o reagiva ad un commento sessista, rispettavano e giudicavano la protagonista come più piacevole quando reagiva al commento.

Il linguaggio tradizionalmente e apertamente sessista, in quanto riconosciuto come offensivo, suscita rabbia nelle donne e le motiva a reagire, anche se poi il fatto di intraprendere realmente reazioni di protesta è influenzato anche da altri fattori (i.e., presenza di altri membri del gruppo offeso, accettabilità sociale della reazione, tipologia e natura dell'offesa, ecc). Una questione che rimane da comprendere è se il linguaggio sessista che si presenta come positivo e benevolo verso le donne non solo abbia meno probabilità di essere riconosciuto come tale (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005) e quindi di suscitare atti di protesta, ma abbia addirittura un effetto opposto, ossia di portare ad un'interiorizzazione del sessismo. In una serie di studi Jost e Kay (2005), ad esempio, hanno esposto i partecipanti a una serie di affermazioni di sessismo benevolo e più in particolare indicative di una visione complementare degli stereotipi di genere (i.e., le donne sono accoglienti e gli uomini portati alla azione) riscontrando che queste avevano l'effetto di indurre le donne a valutare come più eque e giustificate le attuali relazioni di genere nella nostra società. Sempre su questa linea, Becker e Wright (2011) hanno dimostrato come il sessismo benevolo, a differenza di quello ostile, riduce le probabilità

di protesta e di intraprendere azioni a sostegno della parità di genere, indicando che questo effetto è dovuto alla percezione delle relazioni di genere come eque. Quali sono le motivazioni che porterebbero il sessismo benevolo ad avere questi effetti? Secondo questi autori il sessismo benevolo, ed in particolare la complementarietà negli stereotipi di genere, portano a razionalizzare l'esistente, offrendo alle donne la sensazione di godere di alcuni vantaggi rispetto agli uomini. Paradossalmente quindi l'esposizione al sessismo benevolo, a differenza di quello ostile o più tradizionalmente riconosciuto come tale, può contribuire al mantenimento dello status quo nelle relazioni di genere.

2.1.2. Conseguenze del linguaggio omofobo sugli omosessuali

L'omofobia può essere definita come un atteggiamento negativo ed ostile nei confronti degli omosessuali che può manifestarsi attraverso diversi comportamenti, come per esempio gli insulti verbali, gli attacchi fisici o a beni materiali posseduti dalla popolazione target. Herek (1989), attraverso un'indagine empirica su un campione di persone lesbiche e gay, evidenzia che il 92% dei partecipanti riportavano di essere stati vittime di attacchi verbali omofobi. Tali dati sono in linea con una ricerca successiva su episodi omofobi (D'augelli, 1992) in cui si evidenziava che tre quarti dei partecipanti omosessuali riferivano di essere stati vittime di insulti verbali, il 26% di minacce violente e il 17% di danneggiamenti a oggetti di proprietà.

Gli attacchi omofobi, compresi quelli verbali, possono avere effetti sia sul benessere psicologico di individui gay o lesbiche sia sul processo di costruzione dell'orientamento sessuale. Savin-Williams (1994), infatti, suggerisce un legame tra l'esposizione di giovani omosessuali ad attacchi verbali e fisici e lo sviluppo di problemi scolatici, abuso di sostanze e suicidio. In maniera sperimentale, Swim e collaboratori (Swim et al., 2009) confrontarono le conseguenze degli episodi omofobi e non omofobi, tra cui gli attacchi verbali, sulle reazioni emotive provate dai partecipanti omosessuali.

In particolare gli autori considerarono sia emozioni negative (i.e., rabbia, ansia e depressione) che positive (i.e., felicità, entusiasmo e rilassamento). I risultati mostrarono che gli episodi omofobi, e solo questi, provocavano una forte rabbia e ansia. Gli attacchi verbali non-omofobi determinavano invece soprattutto un incremento dello stato depressivo, un minore entusiasmo e una minore tranquillità. Inoltre, questo studio considerava una variabile importante nello studio delle conseguenze di comportamenti e linguaggio omofobo, ossia l'identificazione e l'importanza attribuita all'essere omosessuale. I risultati evidenziavano che una forte identificazione con il proprio orientamento sessuale (omosessuale, bisessuale o lesbica) incrementava gli effetti negativi sul benessere psicologico. In altri termini il linguaggio omofobo produceva reazioni di rabbia e ansia più intense in coloro che ritenevano l'essere gay una parte importante della propria identità. È, quindi, probabile che le reazioni di rabbia riflettano un sentimento di ingiustizia suscitato dall'essere vittima di omofobia. Come affermato nel precedente paragrafo la rabbia è, infatti, un'emozione che fomenta reazioni di protesta a quello che viene visto come un trattamento ingiusto ed immeritato (Leach, 2008; Van Zomeren, Spears, Fisher, & Leach, 2004). A mia conoscenza non ci sono tuttavia in letteratura studi che hanno esaminato le reazioni comportamentali di persone omosessuali a commenti omofobi. È però possibile ipotizzare che, come avviene per le donne esposte a commenti sessisti, anche per gli omosessuali, la rabbia, a differenza di altre emozioni negative, si accompagni alla necessità di rispondere all'omofobia e che tuttavia queste reazioni a loro volta dipendano anche da altri fattori (e.g., la presenza di altre persone, etc.).

Quello che di certo emerge dalle ricerche è che le conseguenze del linguaggio omofobo per gli omosessuali possono essere subdole e preoccupanti. Carnaghi, Castelli e Comisso (2011) hanno voluto verificare se le etichette omofobe, rispetto alle etichette

categoriali, possono incrementare negli omosessuali i livelli di omofobia interiorizzata. Tale costrutto fa riferimento all'interiorizzazione, da parte degli omosessuali, di quell'insieme di credenze secondo cui gli omosessuali sono un gruppo inferiore e svalutato (Herek, 2007). Il concetto di omofobia interiorizzata fa esplicito riferimento alla omosessualità ego-distonica evidenziata nel DSM-IVR, secondo cui la consapevolezza di esser omosessuale si accompagna ad un sentimento negativo, ad una bassa autostima gruppale e al desiderio di abbandonare la propria appartenenza di gruppo (Herek, 1998). Il processo di interiorizzazione delle credenze negative riguardo agli omosessuali avviene in età precoce, molto prima che gli individui abbiano chiaro quale sia il proprio orientamento (Gonsiorek, 1985). Secondo Jellison, McConnell e Gabriel (2004), è altamente probabile che gli atteggiamenti negativi nei confronti dell'omosessualità negli eterosessuali e negli omosessuali siano simili, almeno nei primi momenti dello sviluppo dell'identità sessuale. In questa ricerca (Carnaghi, Castelli, & Comisso, 2011), i partecipanti omosessuali, in un primo momento erano esposti subliminalmente ad etichette categoriali (i.e., *gay* e *omosessuale*) oppure denigratorie (i.e., *frocio* e *culattone*). La finalità di questa manipolazione risiedeva nell'intento di richiamare nella memoria dei partecipanti, ossia di rendere accessibili, sistemi distinti di conoscenze riguardo all'omosessualità, più negative nella condizione denigratoria che in quella categoriale. Successivamente i partecipanti completavano una scala relativa all'omofobia interiorizzata (e.g., vergognarsi, desiderio di essere eterosessuali, ecc). Infine, i partecipanti riportavano il loro livello di coming-out, ossia se avevano dichiarato il loro orientamento sessuale ad amici, famiglia e comunità. I risultati evidenziarono che il livello di omofobia interiorizzata era maggiore quando i partecipanti riportavano un minore livello di coming out. Inoltre, e in maniera indipendente dal livello di coming out, i partecipanti che erano stati esposti ad un etichetta denigratoria a carattere omofobo

riportavano una maggiore omofobia interiorizzata rispetto ai partecipanti nella condizione di etichetta categoriale. Questi risultati mostrano che il linguaggio omofobo, espresso attraverso un'etichetta denigratoria, può determinare un processo spontaneo di attivazione delle credenze negative apprese durante i processi di formazione dell' orientamento sessuale ed agire, in maniera situazionale, sul vissuto emotivo e valutativo della propria omosessualità. Se il linguaggio offensivo aumenta la percezione di stigmatizzazione di coloro che ne sono vittima (Carnaghi, Castelli, & Comisso, 2011), questo potrebbe indurre le persone ad evitare di esporsi e reagire a commenti omofobi rendendo pubblico il proprio orientamento sessuale. A tale proposito Burn, Kadlec e Rexer (2005) presentarono ad un campione di studenti omosessuali 13 scenari in cui un eterosessuale esprimeva delle affermazioni nei confronti degli omosessuali. In particolare, attraverso uno studio pilota condotto su un campione proveniente dalla stessa popolazione sperimentale, gli autori avevano selezionato i 13 scenari sulla base delle affermazioni che la popolazione omosessuale dichiarava di aver ricevuto più frequentemente (e.g., un eterosessuale chiama un ragazzo poco atletico *frocio*). I partecipanti dovevano poi indicare il grado di offesa di ciascuno scenario, il livello di pregiudizio omofobo dell'individuo che aveva emesso tali affermazioni e la probabilità con cui avrebbero voluto rendere pubblico il loro orientamento sessuale. I risultati dimostrarono che i 13 scenari erano considerati molto offensivi e che l'eterosessuale, portatore di tali affermazioni, era percepito come altamente omofobo. Inoltre, la percezione di offesa degli scenari era negativamente correlata con l'intenzione di render pubblico il proprio orientamento: più alta era la percezione di offesa, più bassa era la probabilità di coming-out.

Questi risultati dimostrano che gli epiteti omofobi, assieme ad altre forme di discriminazione verbale, esercitano degli effetti negativi sul benessere degli omosessuali

e, in particolare, su due aspetti di fondamentale importanza nel processo di formazione e di consolidamento dell'orientamento sessuale. Infatti, gli insulti verbali concorrono a richiamare alla memoria dei partecipanti esperienze negative legate al proprio orientamento, assieme ad emozioni di ansia e di rabbia. Inoltre, contesti omofobi, come quelli creati dai commenti o epiteti denigratori, riducono la possibilità di coming out, aumentando altresì l'omofobia interiorizzata. Questo ultimo risultato è estremamente importante per due ragioni. Da una parte, alti livelli di coming-out sono associati a più frequenti e positivi processi di socializzazione secondaria con membri dell'in-group. Durante queste esperienze gli stessi omosessuali, possono riscrivere gli atteggiamenti negativi interiorizzati, un processo quest'ultimo che può aver luogo sia attraverso esperienze positive con i membri dell'in-group sia confrontando e confutando tali credenze (Maylon, 1982, Minton & McDonald, 1984). Dall'altro, Bagley e Tremblay (1997) hanno dimostrato che contesti in cui è difficoltoso il coming-out, a causa di un clima particolarmente omofobo, è più alto il rischio di suicidi. Infatti, gli autori confrontarono due campioni di studenti, omosessuali ed eterosessuali, ed evidenziarono che il rischio di suicidio era del 13.9% più alto nel campione omosessuale e che tale percentuale era legata a difficoltà nei processi di coming-out.

2.1.3. Discussione

Le ricerche presentate in questa prima sessione hanno evidenziato le numerose conseguenze del linguaggio denigratorio su coloro che ne sono destinatari, in particolare le donne e gli omosessuali. Qui di seguito discuterò alcune analogie e differenze degli effetti del linguaggio sessista e di quello omofobo sulle donne e gli omosessuali.

Ciò che accomuna gli effetti del linguaggio sessista ed omofobo sono le reazioni emotive provate dai destinatari. Gli studi illustrati hanno messo in evidenza che i destinatari, a seguito di un linguaggio denigratorio a loro rivolto, provano soprattutto

emozioni negative (Swim et al, 2001; Swim et al., 2008). Ciononostante, gli studi documentano che il linguaggio sessista e quello omofobo differiscono relativamente alle conseguenze di tipo comportamentale. Il linguaggio sessista sembra indurre ad una reazione di protesta qualora sia percepito come grave (Swim & Hyers, 1999; Ellemers e Barreto, 2009). Al contrario, è stato mostrato che l'esposizione ad un linguaggio omofobo aumenta l'interiorizzazione dello stigma da parte degli omosessuali e la loro propensione a nascondere il loro orientamento sessuale, soprattutto quando percepito come offensivo (Carnaghi, Castelli, & Comisso, 2011; Burn et al., 2005).

Alla base di queste diverse reazioni ci possono esserci varie spiegazioni. Da un lato è possibile che sia la rabbia per essere state discriminate a prevalere nell'esperienza emotiva delle donne nei confronti del linguaggio denigratorio a loro rivolto, mentre per gli omosessuali sia l'ansia legata alla paura di poter essere stigmatizzati e discriminati. Infatti, come è stato sottolineato precedentemente, la rabbia è un emozione che induce all'azione e ad affrontare la minaccia della discriminazione e denigrazione. L'ansia è, invece, un'emozione simile alla paura che porta ad evitare e nascondersi, spiegando così perché gli omosessuali non reagiscono ma, anzi, tendono ad interiorizzare il senso di inferiorità che il linguaggio denigratorio veicola nei loro confronti.

Un'altra possibile spiegazione chiama in causa le strategie di coping al sessismo ed omofobia (Cody & Welch, 1997; Kaiser & Miller, 2004). Sebbene donne e omosessuali valutino come offensivo e lesivo il linguaggio denigratorio a loro rivolto, differiscano nelle strategie utilizzate per far fronte a queste forme di discriminazione. Gli omosessuali tendono a nascondere il loro orientamento e ad adattarsi a norme eterosessite della società dissociandosi dal gruppo degli omosessuali, sperando così di non essere vittime del pregiudizio omofobo. In altri termini per fare fronte alla stigmatizzazione gli omosessuali sembrano privilegiare strategie di coping che

chiamano in causa la “mobilità sociale”, mentre le donne quelle di cambiamento sociale (Tajfel, 1981). Del resto le donne, a differenza degli omosessuali non possono celare il loro “stigma”.

Riassumendo, le ricerche illustrate mostrano che il linguaggio denigratorio ha un forte impatto negativo sui destinatari dell’offesa. Inoltre, le conseguenze emotive, assieme alle strategie di coping al sessismo e all’omofobia, contribuiscono alla messa in atto di differenti reazioni comportamentali che hanno lo scopo di difendere dal pregiudizio e dalla discriminazione.

2.2. Conseguenze sugli spettatori

Dopo aver illustrato le conseguenze su coloro che sono oggetto delle molestie verbali di carattere sessista ed omofobo, mi soffermerò nell’analisi degli effetti sugli spettatori. Con il temine “spettatori” intendo quelle persone che sono involontariamente esposte ad un linguaggio offensivo sessista o omofobo che non è diretto né a loro in prima persona né tantomeno al gruppo a cui appartengono. Questa differenza ricalca spesso la distinzione tra in-group e out-group per cui, ad esempio, nel caso di commenti sessisti gli spettatori sono gli uomini e nel caso del linguaggio omofobo sono gli eterosessuali.

2.2.1. Conseguenze del linguaggio sessista sugli uomini

Le conseguenze dell’essere esposti ad un linguaggio sessista riguardano sia la valutazione della vittima dell’offesa che delle donne in generale. Uno studio di Biernat e Eidelman (2007) ha analizzato le conseguenze del linguaggio sessista sulla valutazione di un/a candidato/a ad un corso universitario. All’inizio dello studio veniva fornita la descrizione del professore che aveva scritto una lettera di referenza per il/la candidato/a. In particolare era riportata una sua frase, la quale esprimeva un pensiero di

tipo sessista (e.g., “è provato in natura che le donne hanno una capacità di pensiero inferiore agli uomini”), egualitario (e.g., “che le donne, quando hanno l’opportunità, hanno successo nel campo delle scienze è un fatto dimostrato nella storia”) o neutro (nessun commento riferito al genere sessuale). Successivamente, i partecipanti dovevano giudicare sia il/la candidato/a sia il professore. Relativamente all’impressione del professore, egli era giudicato generalmente come meno piacevole quando la lettera conteneva affermazioni sessiste. Inoltre, ad un giudizio più negativo del professore corrispondeva una valutazione più positiva della candidata femmina. In questo caso i partecipanti reagivano correggendo il giudizio sulla candidata alla luce del fatto che il professore era sessista. Questo studio sembra quindi suggerire che l’essere esposti a un linguaggio sessista non influenzi in negativo il giudizio e le opinioni degli uomini sulle donne. In realtà, il tipo di reazione potrebbe dipendere dal tono in cui viene espresso il sessismo e dal condividere o meno delle credenze sessiste.

Una letteratura consistente, infatti, ha mostrato che il linguaggio sessista espresso in modo ironico (e.g., barzellette) è percepito in modo diverso da quando il medesimo linguaggio è espresso in tono serio, poiché nel primo caso viene minimizzato il contenuto negativo del messaggio (Dews, Kaplan, & Winner, 1995; Pexman & Olinek, 2002). Inoltre, l’esposizione a commenti sessisti di tipo umoristico ha degli effetti sia sulla propensione ad utilizzare questo tipo di linguaggio che sulla tolleranza ad episodi sessisti. Thomas ed Esses (2004) hanno studiato la probabilità di utilizzare barzellette sessiste in funzione di differenze individuali, quali il livello di sessismo ambivalente (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996) e l’orientamento alla dominanza sociale (SDO; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). I partecipanti dovevano leggere e indicare la piacevolezza e l’offesa di alcune barzellette e successivamente riportare l’intenzione di raccontarne altre riferite alle donne o agli uomini. Dai risultati emerse che i partecipanti con un più alto livello di

sessismo ostile reputavano le barzellette riferite alle donne più divertenti e meno offensive (per risultati simili si veda Greenwoold & Isbell, 2002), oltre ad indicare una maggiore probabilità di raccontarle in futuro. Allo stesso tempo, anche un forte sessismo benevolente e SDO era in relazione positiva con un giudizio delle barzellette come meno offensive, ma non influenzavano i giudizi di divertimento e la propensione a raccontarle. Tutti questi effetti erano però evidenti solo per gli scherzi riferiti alle donne e non per quelli riferiti agli uomini.

Percepire delle barzellette sessiste come poco offensive ha, a sua volta, un effetto sulla tolleranza ad episodi sessisti. Ryan e Kanjorski. (1998) trovarono, infatti, che i partecipanti maschi che giudicavano molto divertenti le affermazioni scherzose mostravano una maggiore tolleranza di fenomeni di molestia e stupro, come anche una maggiore probabilità di scusare l'aggressore e di agire in modo a lui simile (vedi anche Viki, Thomae, & Hamid, 2006; Viki, Thomae, Cullen, & Fernandez, 2007). Altri studi si sono invece focalizzati sugli effetti dell'umorismo sessista in relazione alle differenze di sessismo personale. Ford e colleghi (Ford, 2000; Ford, Wentzel & Lorion, 2001) mostrarono, infatti, che le persone ad alto sessismo ostile, qualora esposte a barzellette o affermazioni sessiste dal tono scherzoso, tolleravano maggiormente episodi sessisti come, ad esempio, una situazione in cui sul luogo di lavoro una donna era trattata con aria di superiorità da un uomo che era il suo capo. Quando però tali affermazioni erano riportate in modo serio l'effetto di tolleranza spariva, soprattutto se non si conosceva il genere di chi narrava la barzelletta o se il narratore era una donna. I partecipanti a basso sessismo, invece, non mostravano alcun tipo di differenza a seguito dell'essere stati esposti a commenti sessisti umoristici o seri, evidenziando che il tono del linguaggio sessista non esercita su di loro un'influenza. Sulla base di queste evidenze Ford e Ferguson (2004) propongono la Teoria della Norma Pregiudiziale secondo la quale

l'ironia e l'umorismo modificano la norma di accettabilità del sessismo nelle persone che hanno credenze sessiste ostili, portandoli a tollerare maggiormente la discriminazione nei confronti delle donne. Come dimostrato in alcuni studi (Ford, 2000; Ford et al., 2001) questo fenomeno ha molteplici implicazioni sociali come, ad esempio, la propensione a donare soldi ad organizzazioni femminili (Ford, Boxer, Armstrong & Edel, 2008). Questi risultati evidenziano che per i partecipanti ad alto sessismo ostile l'essere esposti all'umorismo sessista comportava un cambiamento nel giudizio di offesa e tolleranza del sessismo in genere, ma ha anche conseguenze comportamentali più negative in coloro che mostrano un forte sessismo ostile. A tale proposito, Ford e collaboratori (Ford et al., 2008) mostrano che le barzellette sessiste hanno un effetto negativo su comportamenti di aiuto e sostegno alle organizzazioni femminili sia limitando la propensione a contribuire alla causa donando soldi sia evocando tagli ai finanziamenti per tali attività.

Nel paragrafo precedente, relativo agli effetti del linguaggio sessista sulle donne, è stato mostrato come esse reagiscano in modo esplicito ad affermazioni dal tono ostile e denigratorio (i.e. sessismo ostile e sessismo tradizionale, Barreto e Ellemers, 2005; Becker & Wright, 2011; Ellemers e Barreto, 2010). Al contrario, i toni paternalistici e bonari del sessismo benevolo suscitano invece un reazione opposta di minimizzazione delle diseguaglianze di genere e minori reazioni di protesta. Quali sono invece le reazioni degli uomini? Sebbene gli uomini percepiscano il sessismo ostile come più pregiudiziale del sessismo benevolo, in modo simile alla donne, il sessismo ostile non suscita in loro rabbia o indignazione (Barreto e Ellemers, 2005). Il sessismo benevolo ed in particolare gli stereotipi di genere complementari sortiscono, invece, gli stessi effetti rilevati nelle donne anche negli uomini, ovvero una tendenza a valutare come più eque e giustificate le attuali relazioni di genere nella nostra società (Jost & Kay, 2005).

Infine, una diversa prospettiva d'analisi del linguaggio sessista ha analizzato le reazioni che l'osservatore sociale mette in atto quando si trova dinnanzi ad una donna che reagisce ad un commento sessista, anche in relazione al tono e contenuto del commento stesso. In generale, gli uomini sembrano percepire una donna che protesta ad un commento sessista come meno piacevole rispetto ad una che non reagisce (Dood, Giuliano, Boutell & Moran, 2002). Tale giudizio può però cambiare a seconda della tipologia del commento. In uno studio di Sounders e Seen (2009), i partecipanti leggevano uno scenario in cui era descritta una discussione tra un uomo e una donna. I due protagonisti dello scenario dovevano scegliere un gruppo di persone che fossero in grado di sopravvivere su un'isola deserta (si veda procedura Swim et al., 2001). Ai partecipanti maschi era chiesto di leggere e immedesimarsi nel protagonista maschile dello scenario, il quale esprimeva commenti sessisti che si riferivano ai ruoli di genere (e.g., "Una delle donne dovrà cucinare") oppure alla sessualità (e.g., "Ci servono più donne, magari una come te che possa soddisfare gli uomini"). La protagonista dello scenario poteva ignorare o rispondere all'offesa in diversi modi: con un'affermazione non ostile (e.g., "il tuo comportamento è inappropriato"), un'affermazione ostile (e.g., "senti coglione, smettila di fare questi patetici commenti sessisti"), un'esclamazione (e.g., "Oddio, non posso credere che stai dicendo questo!") o un'espressione sarcastica (e.g., detto ridendo: "Hey, questi commenti adulatori funzionano sempre con le donne? O sono io l'unica che non gradisce essere molestata verbalmente?"). Il compito dei partecipanti maschi era quello di indicare le emozioni ed opinioni che avevano provato maggiormente. I risultati evidenziarono che i partecipanti tendevano ad avere opinioni e sentimenti più negativi verso la donna che reagiva, valutandola come maggiormente irritante e con minor integrità morale, soprattutto quando l'offesa sessista era rappresentata da commenti sui ruoli di genere, che erano percepiti come meno

pregiudiziali. Inoltre, qualora il commento era relativo ai ruoli di genere, i partecipanti si sentivano meno in colpa e meno propensi a prendere la reazione della donna seriamente, e più intenzionati a reagire sminuendo o sdrammatizzando la situazione.

2.2.2. Conseguenze del linguaggio omofobo sugli eterosessuali

Il linguaggio omofobo viene appreso in età scolare, prima della maturità sessuale e di una chiara identificazione dell'orientamento sessuale (Plumer, 2001). Durante questo periodo, il significato del termine frocio, per esempio, non ha un riferimento all'orientamento sessuale, sebbene non sia utilizzato in maniera indiscriminata. Esso è infatti utilizzato per indicare individui che sono timidi, deboli o non conformi al gruppo dei pari. Nella fase adolescenziale il linguaggio omofobo acquisisce il suo significato di denigrazione dell'orientamento sessuale. In questa fase, sebbene esso venga utilizzato per indicare individui con orientamento sessuale minoritario, esso può essere impiegato per insultare coetanei, non necessariamente omosessuali (Silverschanz, Cortina, Konik, & Magley, 2008). Preston e Stanley (1987) riportano che gli studenti delle scuole secondarie considerano il termine *frocio* l'offesa peggiore che possano ricevere. Inoltre, Burn (2000) attraverso l'analisi delle motivazioni legate all'uso degli epiteti omofobi, evidenzia che l'uso di tale linguaggio è legato alla necessità di distanziare psicologicamente gli individui definiti in maniera denigratoria dal gruppo dei maschi, considerandoli un sottogruppo non conforme al modello maschile. Questo tuttavia ha degli effetti sul benessere psicologico anche di coloro che non sono i destinatari dell'offesa, secondo la definizione prima fornita. A tale proposito una ricerca di Silverschanz e collaboratori (Silverschanz et al. 2008) ha evidenziato che, non solo gli omosessuali, ma anche gli eterosessuali che erano stati sia spettatori che vittime di insulti omofobi riportavano una maggiore ansia e depressione, ma anche una minore

accettazione sociale che si ripercuoteva nelle relazioni all'interno dell'ambiente universitario.

Gli effetti di un esposizione al linguaggio omofobo sono stati studiati soprattutto in relazione ad etichette denigratorie isolate da qualsiasi contesto sociale (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007; 2008; Carnaghi, Maass, & Fasoli, in corso di stampa; Carnaghi, Maass, Castelli, & Puvia, 2011). Inizialmente, Carnaghi e Maass (2008; Esperimento 1) hanno confrontato i giudizi di offesa relativi ad etichette categoriali (i.e., *gay* e *omosessuale*) e denigratorie (i.e., *frocio* e *culattone*), e ad insulti irrilevanti per l'omosessualità ma altamente (i.e., *coglione* e *stronzo*) o moderatamente offensivi (i.e., *sciocco* e *stupido*). I risultati evidenziarono che i partecipanti eterosessuali ed omosessuali erano in accordo nel giudicare le etichette denigratorie come i termini più offensivi per riferirsi alle persone gay. Nonostante tale consapevolezza relativa al grado di offesa, l'esposizione a termini come *frocio* pare influenzare negativamente la percezione e gli atteggiamenti degli eterosessuali verso gli omosessuali.

In alcuni studi sulle etichette denigratorie a carattere omofobo, Carnaghi e collaboratori (Carnaghi & Maass, 2008; Carnaghi et al., 2011) hanno analizzato gli effetti di tale linguaggio offensivo sulle associazioni mentali che derivavano dalla lettura di parole. I partecipanti dovevano riportare i primi tre concetti che venivano loro in mente quando leggevano l'etichetta categoriale *gay*, ossia un termine neutro che definisce un gruppo, oppure l'etichetta denigratoria *frocio*, e successivamente valutare la valenza di ciascuna delle loro associazioni. I risultati di tali ricerche mostrano che le libere associazioni alle etichette categoriali e denigratorie differiscono prevalentemente in termini di valenza. Infatti, i concetti associati ai termini denigratori avevano una valenza maggiormente negativa di quelli riportati per le etichette categoriali. In un'altra ricerca, Carnaghi e Maass (2007) procedettero ad analizzare l'attivazione dello stereotipo. In un

compito di decisione lessicale venivano presentati dei tratti, sia positivi che negativi, stereotipici (e.g., sensibile), contro-stereotipici (e.g., forte) o irrilevanti (e.g., onesto) per gli omosessuali, preceduti subliminalmente da un'etichetta categoriale (i.e., *omosessuale* e *gay*) o denigratoria (i.e., *frocio* e *culattone*). Le analisi sui tempi di reazione allo stimolo misero in evidenza che entrambe le etichette attivavano lo stereotipo legato agli omosessuali, ma solo quelle denigratorie inducevano al pregiudizio. I partecipanti eterosessuali, infatti, mostrarono di essere meno veloci a rispondere agli stimoli positivi quando erano sottoposti al prime denigratorio rispetto quello categoriale. Le conseguenze delle etichette omofobe sul pregiudizio sono state evidenziate ulteriormente in uno studio recente (Carnaghi, Maass, Castelli & Puvia, 2011). Dopo essere stati esposti ad un'etichetta categoriale o denigratoria in un compito di associazione libera, i partecipanti mostravano un atteggiamento maggiormente negativo verso il gruppo degli omosessuali nella condizione denigratoria rispetto a quella categoriale.

Conseguenze di tipo valutativo al linguaggio omofobo emergono anche nello studio di Goodman, Scheel, Alexander e Eidelman (2008). In tale ricerca i partecipanti dovevano prendere parte ad una attività di gruppo guidati da un leader, che era un collaboratore dello sperimentatore, e successivamente riportare dei giudizi sul leader e sugli altri membri del gruppo. Gli sperimentatori manipolarono l'orientamento sessuale del leader (omosessuale vs. eterosessuale), che era reso noto ai partecipanti durante la discussione dal leader stesso (riferendosi alla sua ragazza o ragazzo). Inoltre, alcuni partecipanti erano esposti ad un commento omofobo sul leader, ossia un' espressione di disgusto per il suo orientamento sessuale espressa dallo sperimentatore, e altri a nessun commento. Di conseguenza lo studio presentava tre condizioni sperimentali: commento omofobo verso il leader omosessuale, nessun commento e leader omosessuale, e nessun

commento e leader eterosessuale. Nello specifico, i risultati mostrarono che il leader era giudicato come meno competente ed era oggetto di un comportamento non verbale maggiormente negativo (e.g., risate di scherno, scuotere la testa in segno di disapprovazione, ecc) nella condizione di commento omofobo. Era quindi l'esposizione a un commento omofobo, e non tanto il sapere che il leader fosse omosessuale, a fare emergere un comportamento negativo. Questo risultato può essere spiegato come l'esito di un processo di conformismo nei confronti di un membro dell'in-group che induceva i partecipanti eterosessuali a conformarsi ad un atteggiamento negativo espresso dallo sperimentatore eterosessuale.

Avendo degli effetti di tipo valutativo e sul pregiudizio, l'esposizione ad un linguaggio omofobo potrebbe suscitare comportamenti di esclusione e isolamento degli omosessuali ma, a nostra conoscenza, tale conseguenza non è stato fino ad ora studiata. Esistono, tuttavia, evidenze che dimostrano la presenza di reazioni automatiche di rifiuto e rigetto degli stessi termini denigratori che descrivono gli omosessuali (Carnaghi & Maass, 2006). In questo caso, la reazione è legata al linguaggio di per sé ma potrebbe essere indicativa di alcune spiacevoli conseguenze. Utilizzando il paradigma di approccio-evitamento (Paladino e Castelli, 2008) è stata analizzata la reazione automatica ad etichette categoriali (e.g., *gay*) e denigratorie (e.g., *frocio*). Nello studio i partecipanti dovevano categorizzare degli stimoli come riferibili a categorie non sociali (e.g., *bottiglia*) o a gruppi sociali (e.g., Americani), utilizzando due tasti di risposta posti sulla tastiera posizionata in modo perpendicolare allo schermo, in modo un tasto fosse vicino allo schermo (tasto di approccio) ed uno lontano (tasto di evitamento). Tra gli stimoli riferiti ai gruppi sociali erano inserite anche etichette categoriali e denigratorie che descrivevano alcuni gruppi che erano l'oggetto d'interesse dello studio (i.e., omosessuali e meridionali). L'analisi dei tempi di reazione per le etichette ha mostrato

che non c'erano differenze nella velocità con cui i partecipanti evitavano entrambe le tipologie di etichette, mentre si differenziavano nei movimenti di approccio i quali erano più veloci verso le etichette categoriali rispetto a quelle denigratorie. Sembra quindi che quando un gruppo viene descritto da termini offensivi vi sia una reazione automatica di non approccio. Tale reazione all'etichetta potrebbe spiegare fenomeni di distanza dagli omosessuali quando etichettati in modo denigratorio. Alla base di questo fenomeno, almeno per i partecipanti di sesso maschile, ci potrebbe essere il bisogno di affermare la loro identità eterosessuale (Herek, 1989). A tale proposito, Carnaghi, Maass e Fasoli (2011) hanno mostrato che maschi eterosessuali esposti sia subliminalmente che sovralimanlemte ad etichette denigratorie di tipo omofobo (vs. etichette categoriali), tendevano ad accentuare la loro mascolinità e necessità di distinguersi dagli omosessuali, specialmente quando l'epiteto omofobo era associato ad una maggiore valenza negativa. La necessità di esplicitare la propria eterosessualità quando esposti ad etichette omofobe potrebbe spiegare anche fenomeni di esclusione nelle interazioni interpersonali. Gli studi sulle etichette omofobe hanno quindi fino ad ora mostrato come il linguaggio omofobo, anche quando isolato dal contesto, abbia implicazioni rilevanti sulla percezione, sull'atteggiamento ed anche sul comportamento verso i destinatari dell'offesa da parte degli spettatori.

Infine, uno studio recente (Dickter, Kittel & Gyurovski, 2011) ha analizzato le conseguenze di una situazione in cui un individuo esprimeva un commento omofobo verso una persona omosessuale, e una persona eterosessuale reagiva rispondendo in modo assertivo (i.e., "non puoi insultarlo in questo modo, o dire che la sua opinione non conta solo perché è omosessuale. Lo trovo molto offensivo quindi non dirlo ancora"), non assertivo (i.e., "quest'affermazione è maleducata, dovresti abbassare il tono un po', qualcuno potrebbe offendersi") oppure non rispondeva all'offesa (i.e., "beh, credo che

perderà questa occasione"). Gli autori manipolarono anche la gravità dell'offesa. Nel caso di offesa grave, il commentatore diceva "ha senso dato che è uno stupido frocio [...]" mentre nel caso di offesa moderata diceva "ha senso dato che è gay [...]". Successivamente ai partecipanti eterosessuali era chiesto di giudicare il grado di piacevolezza, rispetto e moralità di colui che aveva espresso il commento e colui che aveva reagito. I risultati mostrarono che il commentatore omofobo era valutato in modo più negativo quando il commento era molto offensivo, ed era rispettato meno quando suscitava una reazione di protesta assertiva piuttosto che nessuna reazione. Allo stesso tempo, indipendentemente dal tipo di protesta, colui che reagiva ad un commento fortemente offensivo era maggiormente rispettato, apprezzato e visto come più morale rispetto a quando non si opponeva. Questi risultati evidenziano ancora una volta che le valutazioni degli spettatori sono influenzate dall'atteggiamento di altri membri del gruppo di appartenenza. Infatti, qualora una persona eterosessuale reagisce condannando un commento omofobo, i partecipanti eterosessuali tendono a conformarsi alla posizione di colui che reagisce, apprezzandolo maggiormente e valutando negativamente il commentatore.

2.2.3. Discussione

Il linguaggio denigratorio esercita un impatto anche su coloro che vi sono esposti in modo involontario e non ne sono i destinatari. In particolare, in questo paragrafo ho analizzato le conseguenze del linguaggio sessista sugli uomini e del linguaggio omofobo sugli eterosessuali, e sottolineerò ora possibili somiglianze e differenze.

Dalle ricerche presentate emerge che gli spettatori riconoscono il linguaggio sessista e omofobo come offensivo e inappropriato in modo simile ai destinatari (Barreto e Ellemers, 2005; Carnaghi & Maass, 2008). Tuttavia, gli effetti sono diversi e probabilmente queste differenze sono riconducibili alla norma sociale di riferimento. Il

linguaggio riconosciuto come sessista non sembra suscitare forti reazioni negative (e.g., rabbia) negli uomini, tuttavia determina valutazioni negative nei confronti di colui che esprime commenti sessisti, influenzando positivamente l'atteggiamento degli spettatori nei confronti delle donne. Quando però i commenti sessisti non sono percepiti come offensivi, come ad esempio nel caso delle barzellette o commenti sui ruoli di genere, coloro che mostrano alti livelli di sessismo tendono a mostrare una maggiore tolleranza al sessismo e a gradire meno le reazioni di protesta delle donne (Ford, 2000; Ford et al., 2001; Saunders & Seen, 2009). Ciò suggerisce che percepire un' offesa come grave e chiaramente pregiudizievole determina la consapevolezza nello spettatore che tale linguaggio è inappropriato. Ciò rende saliente una norma condivisa di condanna di tale linguaggio, con la conseguenza che le persone tendono a non mostrare il loro pregiudizio. Al contrario, qualora il linguaggio non è riconosciuto come offensivo, la norma sociale non sembra essere rilevante consentendo l'espressione di un atteggiamento negativo da parte di persone ad alti livelli di pregiudizio. Questo avviene negli uomini esposti ad un linguaggio sessista, il quale è socialmente ritenuto inopportuno.

Per gli eterosessuali, non sembra essere la gravità dell'offesa quanto piuttosto il comportamento dei membri dell'in-group ad influenzare le loro reazioni. Essi infatti, quando esposti ad un linguaggio omofobo, sembrano adeguare il loro atteggiamento e comportamento a quello messo in atto da altre persone eterosessuali (Dickter et al., 2011; Goodman et al., 2008), e ciò può essere spiegato in funzione del fatto che nella nostra società non sembra esservi una norma condivisa di condanna dell'omofobia (Jellison et al., 2004). Di conseguenza, quando non è presente alcuna forma di protesta da parte di eterosessuali (Dickter et al., 2011) o il linguaggio omofobo è isolato dal contesto, come nel caso degli studi sulle etichette denigratorie (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007;

Carnaghi, Maass, Castelli, & Puvia, 2011), allora tale linguaggio appare alimentare il pregiudizio verso gli omosessuali.

Riassumendo, gli studi relativi agli effetti del linguaggio denigratorio sugli spettatori suggeriscono come il suo contributo nell'alimentare il pregiudizio dipenda non solo dalla percezione di gravità dell'offesa ma anche dalla sua accettabilità sociale. Se la norma socialmente condivisa è di condanna dell'uso di un linguaggio omofobo e/o sessista gli spettatori non si adattano ad esso, evitando di esprimere il pregiudizio. Al contrario, qualora sia presente una norma condivisa che tollera il pregiudizio e il linguaggio denigratorio, fintanto che esso non è esplicitamente condannato da reazioni di protesta da parte degli spettatori stessi, gli spettatori paiono adeguarsi ad esso. In altri termini il linguaggio denigratorio alimenterebbe il pregiudizio soprattutto quando non vi è una reazione di dissenso ad esso.

2.3. Conclusioni

Questa rassegna ha analizzato gli effetti del linguaggio denigratorio, nelle sue forme sessiste e omofobe, su coloro che sono destinatari dell'offesa e coloro che ne sono spettatori.

Le ricerche illustrate mostrano che nessuno risulta essere immune all'esposizione al linguaggio denigratorio. Da un lato, il linguaggio sessista e quello omofobo hanno un impatto negativo sullo stato emotivo, benessere e stigmatizzazione delle donne e degli omosessuali. Dall'altro, il linguaggio denigratorio sembra favorire un atteggiamento negativo da parte degli spettatori nei confronti dei destinatari, soprattutto quando non riconosciuto come offensivo. Sebbene siano stati condotti studi differenti per il linguaggio sessista e quello omofobo, sembra che la presenza di una norma condivisa che condanni l'utilizzo di un linguaggio denigratorio, come nel caso del sessismo, oppure la reazione di protesta da parte di persone che non sono oggetto

dell’offesa, come per il linguaggio omofobo, determini la consapevolezza che tale linguaggio è inappropriato in quanto espressione di pregiudizio. Ciò influenza i giudizi e gli atteggiamenti degli spettatori, i quali tendono a conformarsi alla norma o al gruppo. Di conseguenza, utilizzare un linguaggio denigratorio può contribuire alla persistenza del pregiudizio in funzione dell’importanza delle norme sociali e del loro consolidamento nella società.

È quindi auspicabile che un linguaggio denigratorio per riferirsi a donne e omosessuali venga condannato e non utilizzato. Sebbene vi siano posizioni opposte relativamente all’utilizzo di un linguaggio politicamente corretto, poiché per alcuni è limitante della libertà di espressione mentre per altri deve sancire i contesti di utilizzo più appropriati, è necessario tenere presente che la semplice esposizione involontaria ad un linguaggio denigratorio ha un forte impatto su destinatari e spettatori. Infatti, sebbene condannato nel suo utilizzo, la semplice esposizione ha conseguenze negative sulla perpetuazione del pregiudizio che possono successivamente influenzare le interazioni interpersonali ed intergruppo che avvengono nella vita quotidiana.

Chapter 3

On the effects of derogatory language: Exposure to homophobic epithets leads to dehumanization and physical distance toward homosexuals

In 2006 the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) produced a short video for the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHO) that is celebrated every May 17. The video emphasized the fact that gay people are often the target of discrimination, and are often insultingly referred to by derogatory epithets such as *queer* and *faggot*. Despite the existence of normative prescriptions that prohibit their use, homophobic epithets are present in everyday language (D'Augelli & Hersberg, 1993; Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009; Swim, Pearson, & Johnston, 2008). For example, Swim and colleagues (Swim et al., 2008; Swim, Johnston, & Pearson, 2009) found that participants indicated to have overheard two homophobic hassles per week, and the 58.1% of these hassles were verbal attack such as homophobic epithets.

Homophobic epithets, such as *queer*, *fag*, and *culattone* (in Italian), are examples of derogatory group labels (DGL; Allport, 1954; Simon & Greenberg, 1996). Simon & Greenberg (1996) defined DGLs as a "highly emotionally charged terms" that unequivocally refer to a specific social category and convey a strong negative attitude about the group they address (Simon & Greenberg, 1996; p. 1195). Research suggests that the use of homophobic labels may be the result of two different motives. On one hand, homophobic epithets are used to express prejudice and derogation toward gays (Pascoe, 2007; Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010). On the other hand, as homophobia arises

from the need to affirm masculinity in heterosexual men (Herek, 1990; Kimmel, 1994), homophobic epithets may also be used to prove heterosexual identity and to conform to heterosexist cultural norms (Brun, 2000; Plummer, 2001; Mc Creary, 1993). For this reason the homophobic terms are further used to offend heterosexual men (Burn, 2000). Given this state of affairs, gay-bashing epithets are symptoms of the pervasiveness of homophobia in our society. The question that we will address in the present research is whether the exposure to homophobic epithets also contributes to its persistence. Specifically, we examine whether being subjected to homophobic epithets affect the heterosexuals' attitudes and behaviors toward homosexuals, increasing their expression of prejudice toward the target of the slurs.

Studies on the exposure to homophobic language, including homophobic epithets, have mostly focused on their impact on the target of such slurs. Indeed, it has been shown that homophobic epithets negatively affect homosexuals' well-being (Lewis, Derlega, Berndt, Morris, & Rose, 2001; Swim, Johnston, & Pearson, 2009), their willingness of coming out (Burn, Kadlec, & Rexer, 2005), and contribute to internalization of the stigma (Carnaghi, Castelli, & Comisso, 2011; Meyer, 1995).

Only few studies have examined how heterosexuals react to the overhearing of homophobic epithets. In particular, in a series of studies Carnaghi and Maass (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007; 2008) compared the effects of an incidental exposure to homophobic epithets (e.g., *faggot*) or to category labels (e.g., *gay*) on stereotype activation. Participants were subliminally primed with homophobic or category labels in a lexical decision task where both positive and negative stereotypic, counter-stereotypic and irrelevant traits for homosexuals were used as stimuli. Results showed that homophobic epithets activated less positive associations than those activated by category labels. Furthermore, Carnaghi, Maass and Fasoli (2011) showed that the exposure to

homophobic epithets enhanced heterosexual men's need to affirm their heterosexual identity and their need to distinguish themselves from homosexuals (i.e., gender identity), but not from women (i.e., gender).

Taken together these findings suggest that words like *fag* and *fairy* are not only the symptom but also one of the means through which homophobia spreads and persists in our society, and contributes to the stigmatization of gay men. In the present research we intend to further establish this phenomena by investigating the effects of the exposure to homophobic (vs. category) labels on two distinct classes of stigma-triggered responses, namely the perceivers' dehumanization of homosexuals and the perceivers' physical distance from a gay target. The current endeavor is guided by our conviction that the homophobic labels would stress the social stigma associated to homosexuals thus contributing to enhance heterosexuals' homophobic reactions. These claims are in line with Simon and Greenberg's (1996) definition of DGLs as labels that "can negate a person or group's culture, heritage, and family in one word, by dehumanizing the person or group" (p. 1196). Therefore, this set of studies intended to offer the first empirical test to the effects of the gay-bashing language on the dehumanization of homosexuals as a whole.

Dehumanization

According to Haslam (2006) there are two types of dehumanization, as there are two senses of humanness that can be denied: Human Nature (HN) and Human Uniqueness (HU). HN refers to the attributes that are typical of all human beings, such as emotionality, warmth, openness and agency. HU involves a distinction between humans and animals, and it is related to specifically human characteristics (i.e., refinement, civility, sociability and cognition). Each of these types of humanness involves a specific form of dehumanization. When HN is denied, people are perceived as rigid, less warmth

and agentic, that is less human and more like an object or a machine. The denial of HN characteristics conveys to a *mechanistic dehumanization* (Haslam, Bain, Douge, Lee & Bastian, 2005; Loughnan & Haslam, 2007). On the contrary the denial of HU implies an *animalistic dehumanization* as typical human characteristics like morality, rationality and refinement are denied, enhancing the similarity with animals. In the present research we will exclusively focus on animalistic dehumanization and on previous work that has highlighted this phenomena. Indeed, animalistic dehumanization is the denial of humanity mostly studied in intergroup relations (Bain, Park, Kwok, & Haslam, 2009; Leyens, Cortes, Demulin, Dovidio, Fiske, Gaunt, Paladino, et al., 2003), and it is also the only one that was investigated on groups characterized by their sexual orientation (Brown & Hegarty, 2005).

Research inspired by infra-humanization theory (Leyens, Paladino, Rodriguez, Vaes, Demoulin, Rodriguez, & Gaunt, 2000) offers several instances of animalistic dehumanization in intergroup relations. According to infra-humanization theory people have the tendency to perceive the out-group and its members as less human than the in-group and its members. Dehumanization may thus reflect the tendency to humanize the in-group and/or to deny the humanity of the out-group. This main prediction of infra-humanization theory has been successfully validated in several studies and using different types of measures. Focusing on the attribution of uniquely human characteristics (attribute-base approach; Loughnan, Haslam, & Kashima, 2009), Leyens and colleagues (Leyens et al., 2000; Leyens, Rodriguez, Rodriguez, Gaunt, Paladino, Vaes et al., 2001; Paladino, Leyens, Rodriguez, Rodriguez, Gaunt, & Demoulin, 2002) have found that participants attributed more secondary and uniquely human emotions to the in-group than the out-group (see also Bain et al., 2009; Haslam, Bain, Douge, Lee & Bastian, 2005). Using a different approach (i.e., metaphor-based approach), Viki,

Winchester, Titshall, Chisango, Pina and Russell (2006; Study 4) showed that words related with the human concept are more frequently associated with the in-group than the out-group (see also Loughnan & Haslam, 2007). More recently Paladino and Vaes (2009; see also Vaes & Paladino, 2010) demonstrated that out-group dehumanization can be revealed also looking at the human content of the in-group and out-group characteristics. The same characteristics in fact become more human when considered typical of the in-group rather than the out-group.

Research on infra-humanization theory (for a recent review see Vaes, Paladino, & Miranda, in press) suggests that out-group dehumanization is a generalized phenomena among ethnic and national groups, but not between groups that differentiate on sexual orientation. To our present knowledge, only Brown and Hegarty (2005) addressed this issue and found that heterosexuals did not infra-humanize homosexuals. Indeed, participants in their study attributed more secondary and uniquely-human emotions to straight women than to lesbians and to gay men than to straight men. According to Brown and Hegarty, this finding suggests that secondary and uniquely human emotions were ascribed according to gender and sexual stereotypes (Kite & Deaux, 1987) rather than along in-group/out-group distinction.

Following Simon and Greenberg's (1996) suggestion, in the present research we suggest that homophobic language may alter the human perception and trigger dehumanization of the gays. As a matter of fact, in a recent review, Vaes and colleagues (Vaes, ,Paladino, & Miranda, in press) noted that humanity is especially denied to low status and marginalized out-groups (Harris & Fiske, 2006; Vaes & Paladino, 2010). Therefore, since homophobic language derogates and marginalizes homosexuality, these denigrating labels may further make gay men a group at specific risk of dehumanization. Hence, we should expect that gays would be perceived as less human

by heterosexuals who were exposed to an homophobic epithet than by heterosexuals who were exposed to a category label.

Physical distance

In psychological research physical distance has been treated as a proxy of feelings (Brady & Waljer, 1978), type of relationship (Hall, 1966), and attitudes toward the partner of the interaction (Patterson & Lee, 1970; Wolfgang & Wolfgang, 1971). Indeed, people tend to maintain a greater physical distance toward dissimilar others (Snyder & Endelman, 1979), out-group members (Novelli, Dury, & Reicher, 2010) and person who are negatively stereotyped (Macrae, Bodenhausen, Milne, & Jetten, 1994). Hence, an increasing in physical distance may reveal the tendency to exclude and marginalize a person.

To our knowledge, physical distance as a subtle proxy of social exclusion has not yet been studied in the context of homophobia. Research in this domain has rather focused on the desired social distance, showing that the endorsement of homophobic beliefs is associated with greater avoidance of contact with homosexuals (Gowen & Britt, 2006). In the present research, we focused on the physical rather than the desired social distance. In doing so, we intend to investigate the behavioral effects of the exposure to a linguistic cue of marginalization, such as the homophobic language. We reasoned that homophobic language stigmatizes homosexuality and produces social exclusion of homosexuals. Therefore, we hypothesized that the physical distance toward a gay man would increase when heterosexuals are presented with a homophobic rather than with a category label.

Overview of the studies

The present research aimed to investigate whether the exposure to homophobic epithets trigger homophobic responses. In particular, across two studies we examined

the effect of presentation of a homophobic epithet (vs. category label vs. generic insult), on dehumanization (Study 1 and 2) and an increase in physical distance toward homosexuals (Study 2). To establish whether the effect of homophobic epithets is specific we introduced also a condition in which an equally negative, but gay-irrelevant insult was presented. In Study 1 we supraliminally exposed (Italian) participants to the different types of labels (homophobic vs. category vs. generic insult) and measured the perception of homosexuals and heterosexuals. In Study 2 we replicated and extended findings of Study 1. The study was conducted in a different cultural and linguistic context (Australia) and participants were subliminally primed either with a homophobic epithet, a category label, or a generic gay-irrelevant slur. The attribution of humanity to homosexuals and heterosexuals, and the physical distance toward a gay interlocutor were assessed as dependent measures.

Brown and Hegarty (2005) found that heterosexuals did not dehumanize homosexuals. However, following Simon and Greenberg's (1996) definition of derogatory group labels, we expected that homophobic epithets would elicit dehumanization of homosexuals. Specifically, we hypothesized that fewer human characteristics would be associated to homosexuals in the homophobic compared to the category label and generic insult condition. In addition, we predicted that this tendency to dehumanize homosexuals when presented with a homophobic epithet would also lead heterosexual participants to perceive them as less human than the heterosexuals. In Study 2 we investigated whether the negative impact on participants' perception of homosexuals would also extend to their behavior. We hypothesized that when exposed to homophobic epithets (vs. category label vs. generic insult) heterosexual participants would show a greater physical distance toward a gay man. Finally, as the effect of homophobic epithets is not referable to its negative valence but to the gay-bashing

content, we predict that homophobic epithets and not the generic insult would lead to dehumanization and an increase in physical distance.

3.1. Study 1

In the first study we examined whether the homophobic epithets triggers a denial of the humanity of gays. Participants completed a free association task similar to that used in previous studies (Carnaghi & Maass, 2008, see also Carnaghi, Maass, & Fasoli, 2011). Participants had to report the three concepts that they immediately associated to a series of stimuli-words, among which a category labels (e.g., *gay*), a homophobic epithet (e.g., *faggot*) or a generic insult (e.g., *asshole*) was presented. Differently from Carnaghi and colleagues, (Carnaghi & Maass, 2008; Carnaghi et al., 2011), here we asked participants to rate the relevance, instead of the valence, of their associations to the stimuli-words. This is to avoid emphasizing the evaluative dimension of their associations. This task was followed by Viki et al.'s (2006) dehumanization measure, in which participants were asked to associate (human-related and animal-related) words to heterosexuals and homosexuals. In the homophobic epithet compared to the category label and the generic insult condition we expected that participants (1) would decrease the number of human-related words associated to homosexuals and (2) associate fewer of these words to homosexuals than heterosexuals.

3.1.1. Method

Participants

Ninety-five students of the Universities of Padua and of Verona (59 males; M_{age} = 23.56, *SD* = 4.87) took voluntarily part in this study. In the experimental sample, 59.8% of the participants were Catholics, 1.1% Buddhists, 1.1% Muslims, 29.3 % atheists and 8.7% did not specify their religious affiliation. Moreover, 53.4% were left-wing voters while 42.3% were right wing voters. Two male participants who identified themselves

as homosexuals were excluded from the analyses, leaving the final sample of 93 heterosexual participants.

Procedure

Participants were recruited in the libraries and public areas of the University campuses. They were told that the experiment comprised two distinct and ostensibly unrelated tasks. S,pecifically, they were informed that we were investigating the way people freely associate concepts. As part of the cover story, they first received the *Free association task*. Specifically, and following the procedure outlined by Carnaghi and Maass (2008; see also Carnaghi et al., 2011), participants were presented with 5 stimuli-words and asked to write down the first three words that came up to their mind. Participants first read 4 fillers-words (i.e., sun, American, crapper, table), after which they were exposed to the prime word. Depending on the experimental condition, the prime-word was either a category label (i.e., *gay* or *omosessuale* [homosexual]), a homophobic epithet (i.e., *frocio* [faggot] or *culattone* [fairy]) or a generic insult (i.e., *coglione* [asshole]). We decided to rely on this generic insult since previous research showed that 'asshole' did not differ from the homophobic epithets in terms of valence and offensiveness, although it is unequivocally unrelated to sexual orientation issues (Carnaghi & Maass, 2008). Once they completed the association task, participants were instructed to return to each association word and to rate how related it was to the stimulus-word on a 3-point scale from 1 (completely irrelevant) to 3 (completely relevant).

Participants were then introduced to the *dehumanization task* (Viki et al., 2006). Ostensibly, participants were told that the task they were about to perform dealt with the way people associated concepts to social categories. Specifically, they were told that each participant was going to rate two randomly assigned groups and that in their case

these groups turned out to be the heterosexuals and the homosexuals (the order was counterbalanced). Then, following Viki et al.'s (2006) procedure, they were presented with twenty words, and asked to select 8 or 9 words that they would associate with heterosexuals and homosexuals (the order was counterbalanced). The twenty words comprised ten animal-related words (i.e., pedigree [pedigree], natura [nature], animale [animal], specie [species], meticcio [mongrel], zampa [paw], selvaggio [wild], branco [herd], istinti [instinct], cucciolo [cub]) and ten human-related words (i.e. cittadino [citizen] , capelli [hair], bocca [mouth], gente [folk], persona [person], etnia [ethnic], cultura [culture], faccia [face],umano [human] and piede [feet]). Two randomly generated word orders were created. The order of words presented was counterbalanced across participants. These stimuli-words were chosen on the basis of a pilot study, in which a small sample of university students (N = 7 male and N = 8 female students, M_{age} = 22.33, *SD* = 1.65) were asked to rate these words, among others, on 7-points scale on humanity (1= very animal like; 7 = very human like) and on valence (1= completely negative; 7 = completely positive). A t-test analysis showed that the 10 human-related (*M* = 6.34, *SD* = .31) were judged on average as more human than the animal-related words (*M* = 2.45, *SD* = .61), $t(14) = 19.84$, $p < .001$, $d = 10.60$, even though they did not differ in terms of valence, $t(14) = -.44$, $p = .66$, $d = .23$, (animal-related: *M* = 4.53, *SD* = .47 and human-related: *M* = 4.59, *SD* = .60).

Then, participants' contact with homosexuals (Van Dick, Wagner, Pettigrew, Christ, Wolf, Petzel, Castro, & Jackson, 2004) as well as participants' number of homosexual friends were assessed. Finally, participants completed the *Inclusion of Other in the Self scale* (IOS; Aron, Aron & Smollan, 1992). The IOS scale is a graphic measure used for representing the relationship between the self and a close other. The scale consisted of seven couples of circles. In each figure the circle represent the self and the

other, in our case the gay person who they knew best. The figures corresponded to different degree of closeness, from two close but not overlapping circles, to two almost completely overlapped circles. Participants had to choose the figure that better represented their relation with the gay person.[2]

At the end of the questionnaire participants indicated their gender, age, sexual and political orientation, religious affiliation, and they were completely debriefed and thanked for their participation.

3.1.2. Results

Dehumanization.

For each participant, human-related and animal-related words associated to the heterosexuals and the homosexuals were summed and entered in a 2 (Group: heterosexuals vs. homosexuals) x 2 (Type of Word: animal-related vs. human-related) x 3 (Condition: category label vs. homophobic epithet vs. generic insult) x 2 (Gender: male vs. female) ANOVA in which the first two variables were treated as within-participants and the last two as between-participants factors. Results showed a significant main effect of Type of Word, $F(1, 87) = 100.45$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .54$, evidencing that participants chose more human-related ($M = 5.36$, $SD = 1.27$) than animal-related words ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.12$). Moreover, analyses yielded a significant interaction between Type of Word and Condition, $F(2, 87) = 4.13$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .09$, and between Group and Condition, $F(2, 87) = 3.26$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .07$, that were qualified by a three-way interaction. More

[2] A 3 (Condition: category label vs. homophobic epithet vs. generic insult) x 2 (Gender: male vs. female) ANOVA was performed on contacts and closeness (IOS) separately. Analyses yielded significant main significant effects of Gender on contact, $F(1, 87) = 5.23$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .06$, and closeness, $F(1, 86) = 8.72$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .09$, Results showed that male participants reported less contacts ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.24$) and closeness ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.66$), than females ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.15$ and $M = 3.60$, $SD = 2.02$, respectively). Note, however, that male and females participants were equally distributed between conditions. Analyses yielded no main effects of Condition (both *ps'* > .20), nor any significant interactions between Gender and Condition (both *ps*' > .60) on both the dependent variables.

importantly for our purposes, the expected Group X Type of Word X Condition interaction was significant, $F(2, 87) = 3.91$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .08$. As shown in Table 1, human-related words were less attributed to the homosexuals in the homophobic epithet (M = 4.23, SD = 1.45) than the category label (M = 5.61, SD = 1.54, $p < .001$) and the generic insult condition (M = 5.71, SD =1.22, $p < .001$). No significant differences between conditions emerged for the heterosexual target group, suggesting that the type of label did not influence the perception of heterosexuals' humanity. Conversely, participants attributed to more animal-related words to the homosexuals in the homophobic epithet (M = 3.84, SD = 1.51), than in the category label (M = 2.87, SD = 1.18, $p < .05$), and in the generic insult condition (M = 3.29, SD = 1.39, $p = .09$), although this last comparison fell short of significance. Furthermore, pairwise comparisons between groups showed that in the homophobic epithet, participants attributed less human-related words to the homosexuals (M = 4.23, SD =1.48) than the heterosexuals (M = 5.32, SD =1.22; $p < .001$), but this was not found in not in category label ($p = .58$) and generic insult condition (p = .79). Interestingly, although marginally different, the attribution of animal-related words was slightly greater towards the homosexuals (M = 3.84, SD = 1.51) than towards heterosexuals (M = 3.19, SD = 1.17; $p = .09$) only when participants were exposed to a homophobic slur. Taking together, this pattern of results suggested that the exposure to homophobic epithets led to the dehumanization of homosexuals.

There were also significant effects that involved participants' Gender but they did not affect our predicted results.[3]

[3] Analysis yielded a significant interaction between Group and Gender, $F(1, 87) = 6.13$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .07$, that was qualified by the Group by Type of Word by Gender interaction, $F(1, 87) = 7.64$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .08$. Males associated less human-related words to the homosexuals (M = 5.09, SD = 1.73) than the heterosexuals (M = 5.63, SD = 1.37; $p < .001$) as well as more animal-related words to the homosexuals (M = 3.67, SD = 1.52) than the heterosexuals (M = 3.00, SD = 1.19; $p < .01$). Females showed only a tendency to associated less human-related words to the homosexuals (M = 5.33, SD = 1.24) than the

Table 1. Means (and Standard Deviations) of Human-related and Animal-related words attributed to Groups between Conditions (Study 1)

		GROUP X TYPE OF WORD		
		Category labels	*Homophobic epithets*	*Generic insult*
Human-related	Heterosexuals	5.55 (1.46)[a]	5.32 (1.22)[a]	5.77 (1.45)[a]
	Homosexuals	5.61 (1.54)[a]	4.23 (1.48)[b]	5.71 (1.22)[a]
Animal-related	Heterosexuals	2.97 (1.28)[c]	3.19 (1.17)[c]	3.03 (1.30)[c]
	Homosexuals	2.87 (1.18)[c]	3.84 (1.51)[d]	3.29 (1.39)[c]

Note. Means that not share the same subscript differ reliably from each other ($p < .05$)

3.1.3. Discussion

The results of the Study 1 showed that homophobic language fostered dehumanization of homosexuals. When participants were confronted with a homophobic epithet (vs. a category label or a generic insult), a decrease in the attribution of human-related words to the homosexuals was observed. Interestingly, the exposure to the homophobic labels also led heterosexual participants to attribute less human-related words to the homosexuals than the heterosexuals, a finding that is consistent with an out-group dehumanization effect. In the other conditions (when participants were primed with a category label or a generic insult), consistent with Brown and Hegarty (2005), we found no evidence of' dehumanization of homosexuals. Thus, dehumanization of homosexuals was uniquely evident in the homophobic epithet condition. The fact that the homophobic epithets, but not the generic insult nor the category label, triggered dehumanization of the homosexuals supports the hypothesis that is the specific gay-bashing content of the labels and not merely its negative tone or the categorization *tout-court* that influenced the perception of the target group along the human-related dimension.

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heterosexuals (M = 5.42, SD = 1.45; p = .09). Importantly, the four-way interaction between Gender, Group, Type of Word and Condition was not significant, $F(2, 87) = .80$, $p = .45$, $\eta^2 = .02$.

The current results highlight the effects of homophobic epithets on the dehumanization of homosexuals. However, one could argue that the explicit exposure to a derogatory group label, such as fag, could have been taken as an indicator of an anti-gay context (Lehavot & Lambert, 2007). Had this been the case, participants displayed higher levels of gays' dehumanization in the homophobic label condition as they perceived that homophobia was tolerated, if not promoted by the researcher. In Study 2 we attempted to overcome this limitation by presenting the homophobic epithets subliminally. In addition to this goal, Study 2 aimed at replicating and extending findings of Study 1.

3.2. Study 2

In Study 2 we aimed to consolidate and extend the results of Study 1 in several respects. First of all we wanted to replicate the effect of homophobic language on dehumanization of gay men in a different country. For this reason Study 2 was conducted in Australia. A recent study (Flood & Hamilton, 2005) has shown that especially outside the cities and in some specific Australian states (e.g., Queensland and Tasmania), homosexuals are still targets of discrimination and homophobic remarks. Although not immune to homophobia, Australia appears to be a more tolerant country than Italy (Kelley, 2001). Therefore, collecting data in Australia gave us the opportunity to replicate the effect of homophobic language in a different cultural and linguistic context.

Also in Study 2, we wanted to extend previous findings by examining the effects of homophobic epithets on a difficult to control reaction to homosexuals, namely the non-verbal behavior of physical distance. Although physical distance is at least in part ruled by cultural norms (Evans, Lepore & Allen, 2000), the increase in the distance one takes from another individual can be used as a proxy for social exclusion (Priest &

Sawyer, 1967). We argued that homophobic language contributes to marginalize homosexuals. We thus expected an increase in the physical distance when participants were exposed with a homophobic epithet (vs. category label and vs. generic insult).

In Study 2 we also introduced some variations in the procedure to better understand the nature of the consequences of the homophobic epithets. One could in fact argue that the effect we observed in Study 1 was more a reaction to a researcher who gave a questionnaire that included a homophobic epithet, rather than a reaction to the exposure to a homophobic epithet *tout-court*. To overcome this limitation, in Study 2 participants were subliminally presented with a homophobic epithet (for a similar procedure see Carnaghi, Maass, & Fasoli, 2011). Thus participants, being unaware of the prime, could not use it to infer the attitude of the researcher toward homosexuals and to control their reactions in line with him. If the dehumanization of homosexuals was due to the exposure to the homophobic epithet rather than a reaction to a homophobic researcher, regardless the subliminal nature of the prime, we should replicate findings of Study 1 and find that participants attribute less human-related words to homosexuals when primed with a homophobic epithet. To further address a potential role of affiliative motivation and tolerance to homophobic slurs at the end of the questionnaire, we added some questions to assess whether the homophobic epithet affected the perception of the researcher (i.e., likeability, homophobic) and the tolerance to homophobic slurs.

Furthermore, as we wanted to establish whether the effect of homophobic epithet on dehumanization was moderated by valence, in Study 2 both positive and negative human-related and animal-related words were included in the list provided to participants to describe homosexuals and heterosexuals.

Finally, we also included a scale of blatant animalistic dehumanization and a scale assessing willingness to take collective action in support of gay marriage.

3.2.1. Method

Participants

The research was advertised on University of Queensland hosted online experimental participation system, and participants received a reward of A$10 in exchange for their participation. Sixty-one participants, mainly students of University of Queensland (28 males and 33 females) took part in the study, with an age range of 17 to 50 years (M_{age} = 22.90, *SD* = 5.20). A homosexual participant was excluded from the analysis, leaving a sample of 60.

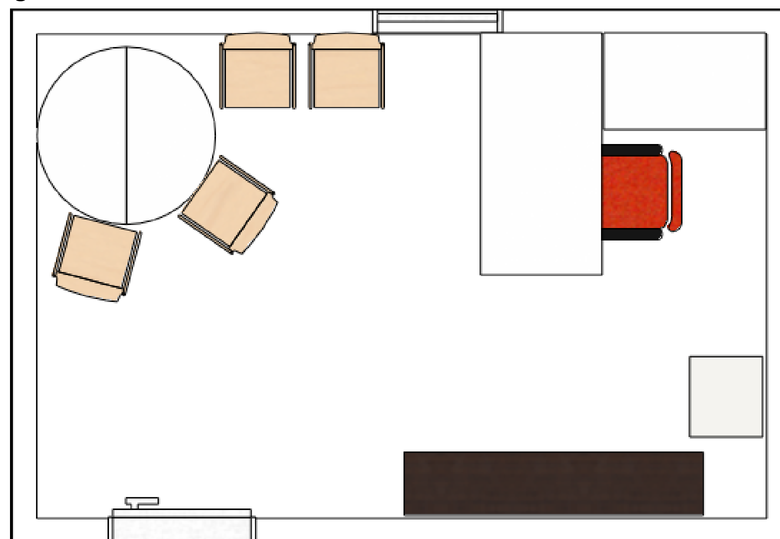
Procedure

This study involved several tasks. First, participants were introduced to a computer task in which they had to indicate if the number of circles presented on the screen was even or odd. Following Bargh and colleagues' (Bargh, Chen & Burrows, 1996; see also Carnghi et al., 2011) procedure this task served as the experimental manipulation. Depending on the condition, participants were subliminally primed with a category label (i.e., *gay*), a homophobic epithet (i.e., *faggot*) or a generic insult (i.e., *asshole*). The task consisted of 40 trials. On each trial the subliminal prime (i.e., gay vs. faggot vs. asshole) was followed by a first mask (a series of 13 black cross-hatched) and by a second mask (a number of circles, between 4 and 24 circles randomly presented on the screen) for 13 ms each. Then participants were then asked to indicate as quickly and accurately as possible if the number of circles (that randomly varied between 5 to25) presented in a target picture was even or odd, pressing one of two response-keys ("D" and "K") on the keyboard. Participants completed all the 40 trials. Reaction times

were not recorded, as the task served as manipulation rather than as a dependent variable of interest.

Following this, participants were informed that they were going to meet a person to talk about the situation of the homosexuals at the University of Queensland. Little general information on the individual to be interacted with was given. The researcher informed participants that the person was a male student of the University of Queensland, his name was Mark, and he was the same age as the participant. To make the group membership of the fictitious person salient, participants were told Mark was gay. The researcher then asked participants to take two chairs, one for themselves and one for Mark, and to place them in the room wherever they wanted. The initial disposition of chairs and furniture (Figure 1) was arranged in a way that there was free space in the centre of the room to create a setting for the interaction. Following Novelli and colleagues' (Novelli et al., 2010) procedure, a physical distance index was calculated. Measures were taken of each of the four leg-to-leg distances plus the distance between the middle of the front edge of the base of the seats. The distance index was formed based on the mean of the five measurements.

Figure 1



Then, while the researcher went outside the laboratory to supposedly call the gay interaction partner, participants completed a questionnaire that included the Viki et al.'s (2006) measure of subtle *dehumanization*, a scale assessing the *Animalistic dehumanization* of homosexuals and heterosexuals, and a scale assessing willingness to take *collective action* in favor of a gay rights issue. Before completing these measures, participants were asked to report demographic information (i.e., age, gender, and sexual orientation). As in Study 1, in the subtle dehumanization task participants selected words for each group from a list of 20 given words. In this study half of the 10 human-related and of the 10 animal-related words were positive and the other half were negative. These stimuli were taken from Viki and colleagues (Viki et al., 2006; Study 4). The blatant Animalistic dehumanization measure comprised of 6 items (Bastian & Haslam, 2010). Only the items of Human Uniqueness were considered and adapted to our groups (i.e. heterosexuals and homosexuals). Three items assessed High Human Uniqueness (i.e., "I think homosexuals/heterosexuals are refined and cultured") and three assessed Low Human Uniqueness (i.e., "I think homosexuals/heterosexuals lack self-restraint, like animals"). Participants provided their answer by using a response format ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). A measure of *Collective Action* in favor of same-sex marriage followed. At the time in which we ran the experiment, there was a strong public debate in Queensland about the changing legislation to allow same-sex marriage. Participants were asked to indicate how willing they would be to engage in eight activities in support of gay marriage (i.e., sign a petition, join an e-mail list, volunteer with pro-gay marriage groups, wear a badge supporting gay marriage, go to a meeting, convince a friend to support gay marriage, vote for a candidate who agrees with pro gay-marriage, and recruit other people). The answers were provided on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (very unwilling) to 7 (very willing).

In the last part of the questionnaire the political orientation, the number of homosexual friends and closeness on the IOS scale (Aron et al., 1992) as in Study 1 were reported.[4] To assess the tolerance about discrimination towards gay men (*Social norms*), participants were asked to indicate how much they thought it was socially acceptable to use the following. Three of those labels were exactly those used as primes in the study (i.e., *gay*, *faggot*, *asshole*) and other two were fillers (i.e., *bitch* and *boong* - a slur for Australian aboriginals). Participants provided their responses on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1(not at all) to 5 (very much). In order to assess *Affiliative Motivation* we relied on the items outlined by Lun, Sinclair, Whitchurch and Glenn (2007). Specifically, 5 items were used to assess the liking for the researcher (i.e., "How friendly was the researcher?") and the quality of the interaction with him (i.e. "How smooth was the interaction with the researcher?"), and the motivation to get along with him (i.e., "How much have you tried to agree with the researcher's opinion?"). Another item was aimed to assess the perceived homophobic attitudes of the researcher (i.e., "How important do you think not being homophobic is to the researcher?"). Participants answered on 7-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). Finally, they were thanked and debriefed.

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[4] An univariate analysis of variance considering Condition (category label vs. homophobic epithet vs. generic insult) and Gender (male vs. female) as between-participants variables was performed on Closeness (IOS). Analysis yielded no significant main effect of Condition, $F(2, 52) = 2.25$, $p = .11$, $\eta^2 = .08$, neither Gender, $F(1, 52) = .01$, $p = .92$, $\eta^2 = .00$. However, a significant interaction between Condition and Gender, $F(2, 52) = 3.66$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .12$, emerged. Male participants reported a weaker closeness in the homophobic epithet ($M = 1.45$, $SD = 1.37$) than category label ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.86$; $p < .05$) and generic insult condition ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.77$; $p = .06$), whereas females did not show any differences between conditions. Comparisons between gender showed instead that only in the homophobic epithet conditions males ($M = 1.45$, $SD = 1.37$) reported less closeness than females ($M = 3.22$, $SE = 1.48$)
Moreover, the same analysis on the number of gay friends yielded a marginal effect of Condition, $F(2, 52) = 2.78$, $p = .07$, $\eta^2 = .10$, , evidencing that participants reported to have less gay friends in the homophobic epithet ($M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.73$) than category label ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 3.20$; $p = .09$) and generic insult condition ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 4.10$; $p < .05$). No effect of Gender neither significant interaction were found.

3.2.2. Results

Physical distance

We conducted a univariate analysis of variance on the index of Physical distance with Condition (category label vs. homophobic epithet vs. generic insult) and Gender (male vs. female) as between-participants variables. Result showed a significant main effect only of Condition, $F(2, 53) = 3.50$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .12$, showing that participants sat more distant from the homosexual student when they were primed with a homophobic epithet ($M = 107.53$, $SD = 15.71$) than with the category label ($M = 99.63$, $SD = 11.23$; $p < .05$) or the generic insult ($M = 97.61$, $SD = 9.16$; $p < .05$). The category label and the generic insult condition did not differ ($p = .66$).

Dehumanization

A 2 (Group: heterosexuals vs. homosexuals) x 2 (Type of Word: human-related vs. animal-related) x 2 (Valence: positive vs. negative) x 3 Condition (category label vs. homophobic epithet vs. generic insult) x 2 Gender (male vs. female) repeated measures ANOVA was performed on participants' words attribution. The first three factors were treated as within-participant factors, whereas the last two were between-participant factors. Analysis yielded significant main effects of Group, $F(1, 54) = 8.05$, $p < .005$, $\eta^2 = .13$, showing that participants attributed more words to the heterosexuals ($M = 2.16$, $SD = .31$) than to the homosexuals ($M = 2.05$, $SD = .22$). Moreover the main effects of Type of Word, $F(1, 54) = 29.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .35$, and Valence, $F(1, 54) = 84.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .61$, revealed that participants attributed more human-related ($M = 2.47$, $SD = .62$) than animal-related words ($M = 1.74$, $SD = .49$), and more positive ($M = 2.66$, $SD = .50$) than negative words ($M = 1.56$, $SD = .50$) to the both groups. All these three factors (Group,

Type of Word and Valence) interacted significantly, $F(1, 54) = 5.12$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .09$.[5] This interaction was indicative of neither a generalized dehumanization of homosexuals nor a bias in favor of homosexuals. Pairwise comparisons showed that more positive than negative words were associated to both groups, regardless the type of word (human-related vs. animal-related, all *ps*' < .001). At the same time, participants attributed more positive human-related than positive animal-related words to both groups (all *ps*' < .001). Conversely, negative human-related and negative animal-related words were equally associated to heterosexuals ($M = 1.70$, $SD = 1.05$ vs. $M = 1.52$, $SD = .95$, respectively), but not to homosexuals where negative human-related words were selected to a greater extent ($M = 1.97$, $SD = .96$) than negative animal-related words ($M = 1.05$, $SD = 1.00$; $p < .001$). Moreover, no differential attribution to the heterosexuals and the homosexuals of both positive and negative human related words was found (all *ps*' > .20). A similar result was found for positive animal-related stimuli as they were equally attributed to both groups ($p = .71$). The only difference in the attribution to the heterosexuals and the homosexuals concerned the negative animal-related words as these stimuli were attributed to a larger extent to heterosexuals ($M = 1.52$, $SD = .95$) than homosexuals ($M = 1.05$, $SD = 1.00$; $p < .01$).

More importantly, the predicted significant interaction between Group, Type of Word and Condition was also found, $F(2, 54) = 4.14$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .13$. Consistently with Study 1, the perception of homosexual's humanity changed depending on type of group labels participants were presented with. As shown by post-hoc analysis (LSD), participants attributed less human-related words to the homosexuals in the homophobic epithet ($M = 4.20$, $SD = .89$) than both the category label ($M = 5.35$, $SD = 1.31$, $p < .05$)

[5] A marginal significant interaction between Group and Type of label also was found, $F(2,54) = 3.21$, $p = .08$, but it was qualified by the significant three way interactions.

and the generic insult condition (M = 5.30, SD = 1.71, $p < .005$). On the contrary, animal-related words were strongly attributed to the homosexuals in the homophobic epithet condition (M = 3.70, SD = .57) than the category label (M = 2.75, SD = 1.11; $p < .01$). No significant difference emerged between homophobic epithet (M = 3.70, SD = .57) and generic insult condition (M = 3.22, SD = 1.12; p= .18; Table 2). Differences between the attribution of words to the homosexuals and to the heterosexuals were also considered. Data showed that participants tended to dehumanized homosexuals in the homophobic epithet condition by selecting less human-related words for the homosexuals (M = 4.20, SD = .89) than the heterosexuals (M = 4. 08, SD = 1.43; p = .09). In the category label and the generic insult conditions no differences were found, showing that a tendency to see homosexuals as less human than heterosexual emerged only when participants were primed with a homophobic epithet. For animal-related stimuli, in both category label and generic insult condition these words were attributed to a weaker extent to the homosexuals than the heterosexuals (both $ps < .05$; see Table 2), whereas in the homophobic epithet condition animal-related words were equally attributed to the homosexuals (M = 3.70, SD = .57) and the heterosexuals (M = 3.60, SD = 1.27; p = .71).

Table 2. Means (and Standard Deviation) of Human-related and Animal-related words attributed to Groups between Conditions (Study 2).

		Category labels	*Homophobic epithets*	*Generic insult*
Human-related	Heterosexuals	4.75 (1.44)^{a}	4.80 (1.43)^{ac}	5.15 (1.69)^{a}
	Homosexuals	5.35 (1.30)^{a}	4.20 (.89)^{bc}	5.30 (1.72)^{a}
Animal-related	Heterosexuals	3.90 (1.11)^{c}	3.60 (1.27)^{c}	3.65 (1.31)^{c}
	Homosexuals	2.75 (1.12)^{d}	3.70 (.57)^{ce}	3.30 (1.36)^{de}

Note. Means that not share the same subscript differ reliably from each other ($p < .05$)

Moreover, there was also a marginally significant four-way interaction between Group, Type of Word, Valence and Condition, $F(2, 54) = 2.86$, $p = .07$, $\eta^2 = .10$. This interaction suggests that the homophobic prime especially decreased the association of

homosexuals with positive human-related stimuli. In fact, the tendency to perceive the homosexuals as less human in the homophobic epithet (vs. category label vs. generic insult) condition held only for positive human-related words. Positive human-related words were in fact less attributed to the homosexuals in the homophobic epithet (*M* = 2.35, *SD* = .99) rather than category label (*M* = 3.55, *SD* = .99) and generic insult condition (*M* = 3.20, *SD* = 1.10). No difference emerged for the attribution of negative human-related words to the homosexuals and the heterosexuals. Comparing the attribution of words to the heterosexuals and the homosexuals LSD's test showed that only in the homophobic epithet condition positive human-related words were less associated to homosexuals (*M* = 2.35, *SD* = .99) than to heterosexuals (*M* = 3.10, *SD* = 1.12; $p < .01$). The homophobic prime (i.e., *faggot*) also affected the attribution of negative animal-related words. In the homophobic epithet condition (*M* = 1.50, *SD* = .83) homosexuals were associated to more negative animal-related words than in category label (*M* = .90, *SD* = .97; $p < .05$) and generic insult condition (*M* = .75, *SD* = 1.07; $p < .05$). Finally participants associated a greater number of negative animal-related words to heterosexuals than homosexuals in all conditions, except when exposed to the homophobic epithet (Table 3). As in Study 1, gender of participants did not affect the predicted results.[6]

[6] Analysis yielded a significant interaction between Group and Gender, $F(1,54) = 4.66$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .08$, showing that males, but not females, attributed more words to heterosexuals (*M* = 2.21, *SE* = .06) than homosexuals (*M* = 2.00, *SE* = .04; $p < .001$). Also, a significant four-way interaction between Type of Word, Valence, Condition and Gender, $F(2,54) = 3.08$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2 = .10$, emerged. Given that this interaction did not involve group factor it is not further analyzed. Female participants, but not males, selected less positive human-related words in the homophobic epithet (*M* = 2.61, *SE* = .31) than in the category label (*M* = 3.50, *SE* = .25) and the generic insult conditions (*M* = 3.45, *SE* = .28). In contrast, negative human-related words were associated by females more in the generic insult (*M* = 2.41, *SE* = .22) than in the category label (*M* = 1.69, *SE* = .20) and homophobic epithet conditions (*M* = 1.61, *SE* = .24). At the same time females tended to attribute less negative animal-related words when they were primed with a generic slur rather than other labels (all *ps* < .08). Finally, comparing males and female attributions, post-hoc analysis (LSD) showed gender differences only in the control condition, where females attributed more negative human-related

Table 3. Means (and Standard Deviation) of Positive and Negative Human-related and Animal-related words attributed to Groups between Conditions (Study 2)

			Category	*Homophobic*	*Insult*
POSITVE	**Human-related**	Heterosexuals	3.10 (1.12)	3.10 (1.12)	3.40 (.94)
		Homosexuals	3.55 (1.19)	2.35 (.99)	3.20 (1.10)
	Animal-related	Heterosexuals	2.40 (.88)	2.10 (1.02)	2.20 (1.15)
		Homosexuals	1.85 (.99)	2.20 (.89)	2.45 (1.05)
NEGATIVE	**Human-related**	Heterosexuals	1.65 (.93)	1.70 (.92)	1.75 (1.29)
		Homosexuals	1.80 (.77)	1.85 (.81)	2.25 (1.21)
	Animal-related	Heterosexuals	1.45 (.22)	1.47 (.21)	1.60 (.21)
		Homosexuals	.90 (.97)	1.50 (.83)	.75 (1.07)

Animalistic dehumanization

The scales of animalistic dehumanization of heterosexuals (α = .56) and homosexuals (α = .52) showed a modest internal consistency. Despite that, we constructed an index of Human Uniqueness (HU) by reverse scoring of Low HU items and adding them to High HU items for both homosexuals and heterosexuals. Therefore the higher the score, the greater the attribution of HU to the group is. The HU index was entered in a 2(Group: heterosexuals vs. homosexuals) x 3 (Condition: category label vs. homophobic epithet vs. generic insult) x 2 (Gender: male vs. female) ANOVA with the first factor varying within and the others between participants. Analysis on HU yielded neither a significant main effect of Group, $F(1, 54) = 2.77$, $p = .10$, $\eta^2 = .05$, nor Condition, $F(2, 54) = 1.40$, $p = .25$, $\eta^2 = .05$, nor a significant interaction, $F(2, 54) = .87$, $p = .43$, $\eta^2 = .03$. No effect of Gender emerged.[7]

($M = 2.41$, $SD = .22$) and less negative animal-related words ($M = .77$, $SE = .22$) than males ($M = 1.50$, $SE = .24$ and $M = 1.61$, $SD = .25$, respectively).

[7] No main effect of Gender, $F(1, 54) = 1.47$, $p = .23$, $\eta^2 = .03$, neither a significant interaction between Gender and Group, $F(1, 54) = 2.36$, $p = .13$, $\eta^2 = .04$, nor of Gender by Group by Condition, $F(2, 54) = 1.37$, $p = .26$, $\eta^2 = .05$.

Collective action

The Collective Action index showed a good internal consistency (α = .91). A 3 (Condition: category vs. homophobic vs. generic insult) x 2 (Gender: male vs. female) ANOVA on Collective Action index revealed no significant main effects neither interaction. Participants' willingness to support a gay-related issue like same-sex marriage was not influenced by the type of label to which they were exposed, $F(2,54) = .36$, $p = .70$, $\eta^2 = 01$. In fact, participants reported similar levels of willingness to take a collective action in the homophobic epithet ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.55$), category label ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.59$; $p = .61$) and generic insult ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.34$; $p = .35$) conditions.

Affiliative Motivation

Following Lun et al. (2007), the five items were averaged to form an index of Affiliative Motivation that showed a great internal consistency (α = .88). A 3 (Condition: category label vs. homophobic epithet vs. generic insult) x 2 (Gender: male vs. female) ANOVA on Affiliative Motivation was performed. Results revealed no significant effect of Condition, $F(2, 54) = .98$, $p = .38$, $\eta^2 = .03$, nor of Gender, $F(1, 54) = .31$, $p = .58$, $\eta^2 = .01$, nor a significant interaction, $F(2, 54) = .22$, $p = .80$, $\eta^2 = .01$, was found. As to the specific item "How important do you think not being homophobic is to the researcher?"(perception of the homophobia of the researcher), it was entered separately in the same ANOVA. However, no effects of Condition, $F(2, 54) = .09$, $p = .91$, $\eta^2 = .00$, nor of Gender, $F(1, 54) = 1.82$, $p = .18$, $\eta^2 = .03$, nor a significant interaction, $F(2, 54) = 1.68$, $p = .20$, $\eta^2 = .06$, was found.

Social Norms

We conducted a 3 (Term: gay vs. faggot vs. asshole) x 3 (Condition: category label vs. homophobic epithet vs. generic insult) x 2 (Gender: male vs. female) ANOVA on social acceptability of each term, where the first was a within-participant and the last two

between-participant factors. Analysis yielded a main effect of Term, $F(2, 54) = 51.45$, $p < .001$, showing that *gay* ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.14$) was rated as more acceptable than *faggot* ($M = 1.72$, $SD = .99$; $p < .001$) and “asshole” ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 1.25$; $p < .001$). Also a significant main effect of Gender emerged, $F(1, 54) = 18.89$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .26$. Male participants ($M = 3.06$, $SD = .78$) reported in general that is more acceptable to use all these terms than female participants ($M = 2.20$, $SD = .70$). Interestingly, condition did not affect participants’ evaluation and no significant interactions were found.

3.2.3. Discussion

Study 2 provided further evidence on the consequences of being exposed to a homophobic epithet. Even though participants were subliminally primed and therefore not aware of the homophobic epithet, the results of Study 1 were replicated. As in Study 1, when homosexuals were portrayed in a derogatory way (vs. category labels vs. generic insult) heterosexual participants decreased their attribution of human-related words to homosexuals. Findings of Study 2 suggested also that homophobic epithets primarily decreased the association of homosexuals with positive, rather than negative human-related words. This shows that the denial of gays’ humanity was largely related to the positive dimension. Moreover, and in line to previous findings, the dehumanization of homosexuals emerged only when participants were subjected to a target-specific slurs (i.e., *faggot*) rather than a generic insult (i.e., *asshole*), showing again that was not only the negative tone of the labels that induced the denial of target humanness.

The replication of results of Study 1 using a subliminal prime suggests that the effect of homophobic epithets on dehumanization in our study was not attributable to an affiliative motivation, or to a temporary change in the acceptance of homophobic language. In that regard, we did not find that homophobic epithets led to a perception of

the researcher as homophobic, increasing the tendency to get along with the researcher or leading to a greater acceptability of gay-bashing slurs. Thus, in our study it seemed that the effects of homophobic epithets on dehumanization and physical distance could not be explained by these processes (i.e., affiliative motivation and social norms). Furthermore, this effect cannot be explained as a function of cultural factors as in Study 2 we replicated found a similar pattern of results in Australia to what had previously emerged in Study 1 in Italy.

In addition, for the first time Study 2 showed that homophobic epithets have an impact on non-verbal behavior. As hypothesized, the homophobic epithet elicited a greater physical distance toward gay people, suggesting that homophobic language may contribute to social exclusion and marginalization of gays. At the same time we did not find any effect of homophobic epithets on the explicit measures of animalistic dehumanization, nor on the willingness to support a relevant gay issue (i.e., same-sex marriage). It is noteworthy that the Human Uniqueness scales showed modest reliability for both heterosexuals and homosexuals, suggesting that the items of the scale may fail to effectively assess the construct under consideration. Moreover, a possible explanation of the lack of an effect of homophobic epithets on the explicit measures could be related to the fact that after being exposed to the labels (i.e., homophobic, category or generic insult) and before filling in the questionnaire participants were informed that they were going to meet a gay student to discuss gay-related issues. This could have motivated heterosexuals participants to control their responses in order to not express prejudice.

3.3. General discussion

Homophobia is a pervasive phenomenon (Marsiglio, 1993; Plummer, 1995). The use of homophobic epithets is one of the most common ways to derogate gay people (Swim et al., 2008). On one hand, homosexuals who are the target of such epithets

presented low level of well being and higher levels of stigma internalization (Swim et al., 2009; Carnaghi, Castelli & Comisso, 2011); on the other hand, heterosexuals who are accidentally exposed to these gay-bashing labels ended up displaying higher level of in-group identification (Carnaghi, Maass, & Fasoli, 2011) and out-group denigration (Carnaghi & Maass, 2008). The present research aimed to further investigate whether and how homophobic epithets affect heterosexuals' perceptions of and behavior toward gay people on two stigma-relevant dimensions. Indeed, we examined the impact of homophobic slurs on the dehumanization and the physical distance as expressions of prejudice and marginalization towards homosexuals. Across two studies we showed that after the exposure to homophobic epithets like *faggot,* heterosexual participants tended to deny humanness to homosexuals and ended up perceiving them as less human than heterosexuals. Moreover, in Study 2 we found that homophobic epithets also impacted on heterosexuals' non-verbal behavior. Indeed, after being exposed to a homophobic slur, participants maintained a greater physical distance from a gay man whom they had to interact with. Interestingly, the higher dehumanization of homosexuals and the greater physical distance toward homosexuals emerged both when the homophobic epithet was supralimianlly (Study 1) or subliminally (Study 2) presented. These results underline that derogatory language can affect heterosexuals' reactions even when not consciously elaborated.

In addition, this research highlights that is not the negative tone of the slurs that affects the perceived humanness of gays and the behavior toward homosexuals. Indeed, although gay-irrelevant slurs, like *asshole*, and the homophobic epithet like *faggot* are equally negative and similarly offensive (Carnaghi & Maass, 2008), only the gay-bashing language triggered the dehumanization of gays and bolster the physical distance that participants took from a gay individual.

The present findings extend previous research on the effects of homophobic labels. Previous research has shown that the exposure to homophobic epithets lead to conceive the situation in terms of intergroup relations (Carnaghi & Maass, 2008), to an activation of less favorable and hostile associations toward homosexuals (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007; 2008), and to a tendency of heterosexual men to emphasize their heterosexual identity (Carnaghi et al, 2011). Here, we showed that being subjected to a derogatory label referring to gays also affects the human perception and the behavior toward homosexuals. After exposure to these labels, homosexuals start to be marginalized and seen as people belonging to a lower order of humanity. This last finding is consistent with Simon and Greenberg's claim (1996) that the process of dehumanization was as a central aspect of derogatory group labels. Taken together these findings suggest that homophobic epithets *per se* can have a negative impact on heterosexuals' cognitive and behavioral reactions toward gay men, perpetuating homophobia. In fact, not only using homophobic epithets expresses prejudicial beliefs, but being exposed to these slurs also elicits prejudice toward the target. However, future studies should verify the validity of Simon and Greenberg's (1996) intuition investigating also other derogatory group labels (e.g. *nigger* for Blacks).

Our results also contribute to the understanding of the process of dehumanization. Indeed, previous research has identified several moderators of dehumanization, namely intergroup boundaries (i.e., status and power), ideologies (i.e., justification of wrongdoing) and intergroup relations (i.e., conflict, in-group identification and salience of the out-group; for a recent review, see Vaes, Paladino & Miranda, in press). In the present research we suggested that linguistic factors, such as the derogatory labels, may contribute in stressing the dehumanization of the target of such a slur. Our findings suggest that derogatory epithets can jeopardize the humanity of

a group leading to its dehumanization. Following this line of reasoning, groups such as homosexuals, for which derogatory labels are available and frequently used, are potentially at risk of being dehumanized. Another interesting suggestion of the present research is that dehumanization is not just a matter of intergroup differentiation. Although the social categorization was equally salient in all experimental conditions, namely in the homophobic and in the category label condition, out-group dehumanization emerged only when the group was labeled in derogatory way. Likely the homophobic epithets changed the content of the category and made intergroup differentiation more meaningful.

Finally, this work underlines the importance of avoiding the use of homophobic epithets in particular and derogatory language in general. Allport (1954) stated that spoken abuse is an expression of prejudice. In a similar way, using homophobic epithets represent a way for people to express their prejudice toward homosexuals. However, homophobic epithets play also a role in the perpetuation of homophobia. Indeed, being involuntarily exposed to these slurs affect heterosexuals' human perception, attitude and behavior toward gay people. As a consequence, the exposure to homophobic epithets not only have a negative impact on the target (Goodman et al., 2008; Swim et al., 2009), but also subtlety affect the way in which the audience acts. Avoiding the use of homophobic epithets may help to decrease the persistence of homophobia. This advice is in line with concerns related to a politically correct language. At that regard, linguistic prescriptions should state social contexts and situations in which usages of homophobic language is inappropriate. However, in line with previous research (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007; 2008; Carnaghi et al., 2011), our findings suggest that the merely exposure to homophobic epithets *per se* leads to prejudice. As a matter of fact, in these research

homophobic epithets were a-contextualized and in some cases subliminally presented. Thus, the use of homophobic slurs seems to always be harmful.

Limitations and future directions

The current research presents several limitations. First, we have shown that homophobic epithets elicit dehumanization of homosexuals, but we did not consider both gay men and lesbian women as Brown and Hegarty (2005) did. Moreover, we did not analyze heterosexuals' personal attitude toward homosexuals as a potential moderator. Thus, future research could investigate whether homophobic epithets would differently affect heterosexuals' perception and behavior toward gays depending on their personal attitudes. Then, these findings could be extended in a linguistic context where derogatory labels for lesbians are available and frequently used. In particular, in the Italian language there are no DGLs for lesbians. Sometimes people use the label *lella* to describe lesbians, but the term has not a disparaging tone as it originally describes women registered to the LLI (i.e., Lista Lesbica Italiana). Other languages, contain derogatory words to refer to lesbians as, for instance, the term *dyke* in English or *tortillera* in Spanish.

Moreover, as mentioned above, the current research has investigated the impact of isolated homophobic epithets. Less is known about the consequences of contextualized homophobic slurs on heterosexuals. Future research could investigate and compare situations in which heterosexuals would be subjected to isolated or contextualized homophobic epithets in order to test the role of contextual factors as potential moderators of the effect.

Furthermore, our research could give new insights about the processes involved in the effect of derogatory labels. We advance a possible explanation related to socio-cultural knowledge. As people have learnt and interiorized a stigmatized conception of

homosexuals, the exposure to homophobic slurs could elicit and enforce stigmatization of homosexuals. As a matter of fact, homophobic epithets could implicitly highlight negative associations to homosexuals that are shared in our society. As a consequence, none of us are immune to the consequences of these slurs. In fact, both men and women have been subjected to the same culturally shared stigma about gay men, as well as to a hierarchical view of the society in which some groups are placed higher than others. Homophobic epithets emphasize gay men's inferiority. As a consequence, although heterosexual women represent a stigmatized group that generally shows positive more attitudes toward gay men than heterosexual men (Herek, 2000; Kite & Whitley, 1996), when exposed to homophobic epithets both sexes could perceive homosexuals as a group on a lower order of the hierarchy, and so keep a distance from them. This is in line with the fact that in our society homophobia is not strictly condemned (Jellison et al., 2004), suggesting that heterosexual men and women both have a tendency to tolerate and show such prejudice. In addition, we could expect that the need to prove heterosexuality and masculinity has a crucial role for heterosexual men. This need, which is emphasized by homophobic slurs (Caranghi et al., 2011), should enhance the negative attitude and behavior when gay men are labeled in a derogatory way.[8]

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[8] This research has been conducted in collaboration with Prof. Maria Paola Paladino (University of Trento), Dr. Andrea Carnaghi (University of Trieste), Prof. Jolanda Jetten, Dr. Brock Bastian, and Dr, Paul Bain (University of Queensland).

Chapter 4

Social acceptability of Sexist Derogatory and Sexist Objectifying labels

Sexist slurs represent a class of derogatory group labels (DGLs) that refer to women in a disparaging manner. These terms typically point to minority groups with the clear intent to harm or offend the target group. Several studies have highlighted that sexist language is frequently used in western society (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). A study by Swim and colleagues (Swim et al., 2001) found that 75% of women reported at least one sexist hassle within the prior three days. Specifically, 35% of the female participants stated that they have been target or witness to gender stereotyping comments (e.g., 'you are a woman so fold my laundry'), while 31% had been exposed to derogatory sexist labels (e.g., 'bitch'), and 23% to had overheard sexual objectification comments (e.g., 'that's a nice boulder holder') that referred to themselves, other women, or women in general. Furthermore, Van Oudenhoven and colleagues (Van Oudenhoven, De Raad, Akevis-Leherpeux, Boski, Brunborg et al., 2008) and Preston and Stanley (1987) analyzed the perceived offensiveness of a specific class of sexist episodes, namely derogatory sexist labels. Specifically, the authors experimentally varied the gender of the person making women-bashing comments. They found that female participants tended to perceive these comments to be more offensive than male participants regardless of the gender of the speaker (Van Oudenhoven et al., 2008). However, when the participants were required to identify the most offensive comments addressed to a woman (Preston & Stanley, 1987; James, 1998), men and women equally pointed to the

same class of sexist labels, namely those labels that portrayed women along the sexual looseness (e.g. bitch, slut, cunt). However, although women and men converge in identifying sexist derogatory labels as the most offensive way to address a woman, they perceived how offensive these sexist terms were differently. Notwithstanding the importance of understanding the social perception of the sexist labels, this line of work failed to analyze how these labels could be perceived differently depending on the context in which they were used. Empirical efforts have limited the prior investigation to the gender of the participants and to the gender of the user. Interestingly, the importance of contextual factors beyond the gender of the user has been stressed by a different, but related line of work; research on taboo terms (Jay, 1992; Jay, 2009; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). Specifically, these empirical efforts investigated whether offensive terms, such as 'cunt' and 'cocksucker' were perceived differently depending on the participants' gender, whether the expression of these terms was public and private (e.g., office vs. dorm), and the social status of the user (e.g. a dean, a janitor or a student). The results attested that taboo terms were judged to be more offensive and less appropriate when used in public rather than a private situation and when used by a person of high status rather than in equal status.

The current research took advantage of these two strands of research namely the work on sexist labels and taboo terms and tested whether distinct contextual factors could moderate the social acceptability of sexist slurs. We analyzed the social acceptability of these terms because this dimension highly correlates with prejudice towards the target group (Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002). Specifically, we tested whether the acceptability of sexist labels would vary according to the context and the type of relationship the user and the target shared. Specifically, we compared the use of sexist slurs in a private context, such as an intimate relationship, with usage in a public

context, such as working context, in which the user had either a higher or equal status to the target. Moreover, in line with previous research on this issue, we assessed whether the gender of the participants and the gender of the user had an impact on the acceptability of women-bashing terms. Finally, we assessed the perception of sexist slurs in a non-contextual, isolated manner.

Sexist labels

The cognitive representation of DGLs varies along two distinct dimensions namely valence and the complexity (Mullen, 2001; Mullen & Johnson, 1993; Mullen, Rozell, & Johnson, 2000). In the valence dimension, DGLs could be classified with respect to their evaluative tone. In the complexity dimension, DGLs could be differentiated on the basis of the number of clusters that captured the different content of the ethnophaulisms that referred to a given group (e.g. physical traits, personal traits, personal names, food habits, etc; see Allen, 1983). For instance, Italians could be portrayed with terms related to the criminality (e.g., *mafia*) and with labels related to typical Italian foods (e.g., *spaghetti* and *pizza*). Looking at their complexity, these two classes of terms address two distinct stereotypical representations of Italians and convey a negative and a flattering image of the group, respectively.

As for the sexist labels, empirical efforts on this issue have mainly investigated the perceived offensiveness of a single cluster of these labels, namely the *Sexist Derogatory Labels* (SDLs) such as *bitch* or *slut*. This cluster of labels derogate women by stressing hostile stereotypes of females along with a dimension of promiscuity and sexual looseness dimension (Preston & Stanley, 1987; Coyne, Sherman, & O'Brien, 1978) in which women's morality is denied. It is likely that this type of label underlines contempt and disgust toward women. However, women can also be addressed with terms such as *hot-chick* (in English), or *figa* (in Italian), namely *Sexist Objectifying Labels*

(SOLs). On the one hand, this class of sexist labels stresses women's physical appearance, attractiveness, and women's conformity to society's beauty-related standards (Allen, 1983). On the other hand, this class of sexist labels communicates the subordinate status of women with respect to men's sexual desires, which reduces the target to an instrumental object for men's sexual interest. We argued that SOL would lead to similar judgments of pleasantness and slightly offensiveness by women and men as both perceive these terms as an appreciation of women's attractiveness and sexual appeal.

In the current study we analyzed the perceived acceptability of SDLs, such as *bitch*, *slut*, and *whore*, and SOLs, such as *hot-chick*, *babe*, and *pussy*. In doing so we could extend previous findings on the social perception of sexist labels to SOLs, which are a novel, unexplored cluster of DGLs. Specifically, and before studying how people handled these labels in different social contexts, we would investigate the perceived offensiveness, pleasantness, frequency, and social acceptability of both SDLs and SOLs in an isolated, non-socially embedded context of judgment. In line with the distinction between content and valence of ethnophaulisms outlined by Mullen and colleagues (Mullen, 2001; Mullen & Johnson, 1993), we tested whether the distinct content expressed by SDLs and SOLs would be differently associated to the valence dimension. In particular, we hypothesized that SDLs would be appraised as more offensive and unpleasant than SOLs, while this latter class of labels would be perceived as neutral in terms of offensiveness (Hypothesis 1). Therefore, we would expect participants to rate SDL sas less socially acceptable than SOLs (Hypothesis 2).

Contextual factors and sexist labels

Sexist episodes emerge in a variety of social settings, such as intimate relationships (e.g., friendship, love relationship) and workplaces (Klonoff & Landrine, 1995; Matteson &

Moradi, 2005). Given this state of affairs, we examined the acceptability of SDLs and SOLs in three types of relationship: an affective and intimate relationship, a working relationship in which the user of the slurs either held a higher status than the target or held a position of equal status with the target.

We focused on these relationships and contexts for several reasons. First, the use of derogatory language (e.g. ageist language) could be considered as less appropriate in non-intimate rather than intimate relationships (Nussbaum, Pitts, Huber, Krieger & Ohs, 2005). Second, slurs used by a friend or a partner could be reframed in light of a positive intimate relationship and lead to a higher rate of acceptability (Kleinman, Ezzel & Forst, 2009). Third, the use of sexist slurs is strongly condemned in the working context as it can be perceived as an expression of gender harassment and mobbing specially; in particular when spoken by a supervisor (Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995; see also the existence of an anti-sexual harassment code in the European Union Directive 2002/73/EC). On the basis of the above considerations, we hypothesized that sexist slurs would be seen as more acceptable when stated in an affective relationship rather than in the workplace, and the acceptability of these labels would be even lower when stated by a person holding a higher status position than the target (Hypothesis 3). Finally, as sexual harassment is usually perpetuated by men rather than women (Gutek, 1985; Hulin, Fitzgerand, & Drasgow, 1997), we thus would expect the participants to consider the use of sexist slurs more inappropriate in a workplace if they are stated by a man rather than a women (Hypothesis 4).

4.1. Pre-test

Three participants (2 females and 1 male ranging in age from 23 to 26 years old) were asked to think about all of the labels that people commonly use to portray women

in a sexist manner. We obtained a full list of 13 labels.[9] We included all of these labels in the study, but in the analysis, we considered only the six labels that were better suited to the two investigated clusters: SDLs (i.e., *puttana* [bitch], *troia* [whore], *zoccola* [slut]) and SOLs (i.e., *figa* [pussy], *gnocca* [hot-chick], *bona* [hot-chick]).

4.2. Method

Participants

Forty-three participants voluntarily took part in this experiment. Six of the participants were excluded because they did not complete all of the questionnaire's scales and one participant did not specify his or her gender, leaving a final sample of thirty-six participants (N = 19 females, N =17 males, M_{age} = 22.22, *SD* = 6.94). With regards to political orientation, the sample was equally divided between left (45.8%) and right wing (49.2%) supporters. Moreover, the 58.3 % of the sample had earned a high school diploma, 30.6 % a Bachelor degree, and the 5.6% a Master degree, while the 5.5% of the participants did not specify their level of education.

Procedure

Participants were recruited via email and a link to an online survey was provided. After being informed about the aim of the research, participants consented to taking part in the study. Next, we told them that we were interested in the way people perceive labels that portrayed women and presented them with 13 sexist labels one at a time. Note that the experimental sexist labels used were exactly those emerged in the pretest.

First, the labels were presented isolated from context and participants judged how much pleasant or offensive each label was with respect to three positively

[9] Participants reported the following list of terms: *pupa* [babe], *puttana* [*bitch*], *troia* [whore], *zoccola* [slut], *bambola* [doll], *figa* [pussy], *bona* [hot-chick], *gnocca* [hot-Chick], *baldracca* [whore], *sgualdrina* [whore], sbarbina, velina, and bagascia. On notes we reported analyses considering each label of the two clusters (SDLs and SOLs).

evaluated adjectives (i.e. pleasant, gratifying, and respectful) and three negatively evaluated adjectives (i.e. offensive, humiliating and derogatory) on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (completely). Moreover, participants were asked to indicate how frequent was the use of each term (i.e. “How commonly is this term used?”) and rate the acceptability of each label (i.e. “How socially acceptable is this term?” and “How morally acceptable is this term?”) by means of a 7-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (completely).

Next, participants were asked to report how acceptable it was for a speaker to use a sexist slur towards a woman target. Specifically, we manipulated the type of label and the gender of the user (i.e. male vs. female). In order to analyze the type of social context on participants’ reactions we forward manipulated the type of relationship in which the speaker used the sexist term. Specifically, in the affective relationship condition participants imagined that the user and the target had a relevant relationship such as love or friendship. Two additional conditions referred to usage in a work-related context. In the higher status user condition the user had a high status position, such as a boss, and the target held a position subordinate to the user. In contrast, in the equal status condition both the user and the target shared the same status in a work-related context (e.g. colleagues).

At the end of the questionnaire participants reported their age, gender, level of education and political orientation.

4.3. Results

Preliminary analysis

The internal consistency for positive adjectives ranged from $\alpha = .74$ to $\alpha = .87$, while negative adjectives varied from $\alpha = .68$ to $\alpha = .87$. Given the reasonable level of consistency, we first averaged the participants’ ratings on positive and negative

adjectives. Therefore, we considered two distinct indexes of *Offensiveness* and *Pleasantness* given the bi-factorial architecture of group related attitudes (Katz & Braly, 1933) and the potentially selective effects of sexist slurs on the two evaluative dimensions (see Carnaghi & Maass, 2007).

Since the internal consistency of acceptability reached a reasonable level for both SDLs (α = .79) and SOLs (α = .89), we formed an *Acceptability* index averaging participants' ratings on these items. Therefore, the higher the score the more acceptable the labels.

Main analyses

Frequency of sexist slurs.

A simple t-test evidenced that both the SDLs and SOLs were higher and significantly different from the mid-point of the scale ($t(35) = 7.03$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.37$ and $t(35) = 11.04$, $p < .001$, $d = 3.73$, respectively), indicating that participants considered the target labels as frequently used terms. In addition, a 2 (Gender: male vs. female) x 2 (Type of Label: SDL vs. SOL) ANOVA on Frequency was performed. Data showed a main effect of Type of Label, $F(1, 34) = 5.33$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .14$, indicating that SDLs ($M = 5.47$, $SD = 1.26$) were rated as less commonly used than SOLs ($M = 5.86$, $SD = 1.01$). Moreover, no effect of Gender, $F(1, 34) = 2.21$, $p = .15$, $\eta^2 = .06$, was found suggesting that both male and female participants equally considered these classes of slurs as frequently used terms. This effect was not modified by an interaction with the Type of labels, $F(1, 34) = 1.05$, $p = .31$, $\eta^2 = .03$.[10]

[10] Frequency index was also entered in a 2 (Gender: male vs. female) x 6 (Labels: Bona vs. Figa vs. Gnocca vs. Puttana vs. Troia vs. Zoccola) ANOVA. A main effect of Labels, $F(5, 165) = 7.19$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .18$, was found. Pair-ways comparisons indicated that "figa" ($M = 6.10$, $SE = .22$) and "gnocca" ($M = 6.31$, $SE = .21$) were more commonly used than "bona" ($M = 5.08$, $SE = .25$), "puttana" ($M = 5.53$, $SE = .25$), "troia" ($M = 5.28$, $SE = .25$) and "zoccola" ($M = 5.45$, $SE = .24$), whereas no difference emerged between these last four labels.

Offensiveness and Pleasantness of sexist slurs.

First, a one-sample t-test was performed on each class of labels to assess whether the participants' responses differed from the mid-point of the scale. Analysis on pleasantness showed that both SDLs, $t(35) = -80.75$, $p < .001$, $d = 27.29$, and SOLs, $t(35) = -6.13$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.07$, significantly and negatively differed from the mid-point of the scale suggesting an low overall attribution of pleasantness to both types of labels. At the same time, participants reported higher offensiveness for SDLs, $t(35) = 24.41$, $p < .001$, $d = 8.25$, while the perceived offensiveness of the SOLs did not differ from the mid-point of the scale, $t(35) = .28$, $p = .86$, $d = .06$. Said otherwise, the SDLs were clearly perceived as disparaging while the SOLs were judged as neither offensive nor inoffensive although not pleasant.

Then, we performed a 2 (Gender: male vs. female) x 2 (Type of Label: SDL vs. SOL) x 2(Judgment: offensive vs. pleasant) ANOVA on participants' ratings. A main effect of Type Label, $F(1, 34) = 20.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .37$, emerged suggesting that participants reported higher ratings for SDLs ($M = 3.87$, $SD = .29$) than SOLs ($M = 3.35$; $SD = .65$). Moreover, a significant main effect of Judgment, $F(1, 34) = 219.27$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .87$, indicated that sexist labels were generally rated as more offensive ($M = 5.36$; $SD = .92$) than pleasant ($M = 1.87$; $SD = .71$). These main effects were qualified by the two-way interaction between Type of Label and Judgment, $F(1, 34) = 125.58$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .79$. In line with Hypothesis 1, pair-ways comparisons showed that SDLs ($M = 6.67$, $SD = .65$) were considered more offensive than SOLs ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.53$; $p < .001$). In addition, the former ($M = 1.07$, $SD = .22$) were judged to be less pleasant than the latter ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.30$; $p < .001$). Furthermore, a significant interaction between Gender and Judgment was found, $F(1,34) = 4.17$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .11$, suggesting that female participants

rated the sexist labels to be more offensive (M = 5.64, SD = .92) than did males (M = 5.04, SD = .83), whereas no differences emerged between the responses of female and male participants on the pleasantness dimension (M = 1.70, SD = .75 and M = 2.05, SD = .63, respectively). Finally, no other significant interactions with gender were found. These results confirmed, albeit out of context, that women tended to perceive sexist labels as much more offensive than men.[11]

Table 1. Means (and Standard Deviation) of Offensiveness and Pleasantness

	Offensiveness	*Pleasantness*
SDL	6.67 (.65)[a]	1.07 (.21)[c]
SOL	4.05 (1.52)[b]	2.67 (1.30)[d]

Note. Offensiveness and Pleasantness ratings range from 1 to 7. Means that not share the same subscript differ reliably from each other (p < .05).

Acceptability of sexist slurs.

One-sample t-tests were performed on both classes of sexist labels to examine whether participants' responses on the acceptability index differed on the mid-point of the scale. Analysis revealed that both types of labels significantly differed from the mid-point of the scale (SDL: t(35) = -5.98, p < .001, d = 2.02 and SOL: t(35) = 3.02, p < .01, d =

[11] We also tested the difference on offensiveness and pleasantness between each label of the two clusters. A 2 (Gender: male vs. female) x 6 (Label: Bona vs. Figa vs. Gnocca vs. Puttana vs. Troia vs. Zoccola) ANOVA was performed on the Offensiveness and Pleasantness index, separately.
Analysis on the Offensiveness yielded also a main effect of Labels, F(5, 165) = 61.03, p < .001, η^2 = .65, proving that all the labels differed from each other with the exception of the term "gnocca" (M = 4.00, SE = .29) that showed the same level of offensiveness of "bona" (M = 3.77, SE = .28; p = .20) and "figa" (M = 4.35, SE = .29; p = .23). Note also that the difference between "puttana" (M = 6.39, SE = .21) and "zoccola" (M = 6.72, SE = .11; p = .08) was only marginally significant. A main effect of Gender was found, F(1, 33) = 4.25, p < .05, η^2 = .11, showing that males (M = 5.04, SE = .22) rated all the labels as less offensive than female (M = 5.66, SE = .21).No significant interaction between Gender and Labels, F(5, 165) = 1.42, p = .22, η^2 = .04, was found.
Analysis on Pleasantness showed a main effect of Label, F(5, 170) = 38.134, p < .001, η^2 = .53, evidencing an overall difference between labels in their level of pleasantness. Nonetheless there were some exceptions like "bona" (M = 2.57, SE = .23) and "figa" (M = 2.50, SE = .26; p = .78) that were considered as equally pleasant, and "troia" (M = 1.04, SE = .03) that was rated unpleasant similarly to "puttana" (M = 1.00, SE = .00; p = .14) and "zoccola" (M = 1.19, SE = .10; p = .11). In contrast, "puttana" was rated as partially more unpleasant than "zoccola" (p = .06). No significant effect of Gender, F(1, 34) = 2.27, p = .14, η^2 = .06, nor interaction between Gender and Labels, F(5, 170) = 1.06, p = .39, η^2 = .03, emerged.

1.02). Said otherwise, data showed that SDLs (M = 2.70, SD = 1.30) were considered socially inacceptable (i.e., the ratings were lower than the mid-point of the scale), while participants reported higher ratings for SOLs (M = 4.68, SD = 1.35), which showed that they judged these labels slightly more acceptable.

A 2 (Gender: male vs. female) x 2 (Type of Label: SDL vs. OL) ANOVA was performed on the Acceptability score, with the first factor as a between-participants and the second as a within-participants variable. In line with Hypothesis 2, analysis yielded a main effect of Type of Label, $F(1, 34) = 83.92$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .71$, which showed that SDLs (M = 2.70, SD = 1.30) were judged to be less socially accepted than SOLs (M = 4.68, SD = 1.35). Moreover, data revealed neither a main effect of Gender, $F(1, 34) = 2.18$, $p = .15$, $\eta^2 = .06$, nor a significant Gender by Type of Labels interaction, $F(1, 34) = .18$, $p = .68$, $\eta^2 = .00$.[12]

Acceptability of contextualized sexist slurs.

To test how sexist slurs were socially accepted in different social contexts we analyzed participants' reactions to these slurs when these slurs were rooted in distinct types of relationship. We entered participants' responses about the acceptability item into a 2 (Gender: male vs. female) x 2 (Type of label: SDL vs. OL) x 3 (Type of Relationship: affective vs. higher status user vs. equal status user) x 2 (Gender of the user: male vs. female) ANOVA with the first factor as a between-participants and the others factors as within-participants variables. In line with our previous results and

[12] Differences between all the labels were analyzed. The 2 (Gender: male vs. female) x 6 (Labels: Bona vs. Figa vs. Gnocca vs. Puttana vs. Troia vs. Zoccola) ANOVA on the Acceptability score evidenced a main effect of Label, $F(5, 170) = 34.31$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .50$. Pair-ways comparison showed that "bona", "figa", "gnocca" were more accepted than all the other labels. At the same time "figa" (M = 4.43, SE = .26) was assessed as less acceptable than "gnocca" (M = 4.96, SE = .27; $p < .05$), and "zoccola" (M = 3.28, SE = .28) was rated as less unaccepted than both "puttana" (M = 2.48, SE = .27; $p < .01$) and "troia" (M = 2.28, SE = .23; $p < .001$). No significant main effect of Gender, $F(1, 34) = 2.19$, $p = .15$, $\eta^2 = .06$, neither Gender per Label interaction, $F(5, 170) = .60$, $p = .70$, $\eta^2 = .02$, were found.

Hypothesis 2, analysis showed a main effect of Type of Label, $F(1, 34) = 79.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .70$, showing that when used in a social situation the SDLs ($M = 1.27$, $SD = .43$) were judged as less acceptable than the SOLs ($M = 2.33$, $SD = .90$). Moreover, confirming Hypothesis 3, the main effect of the Type of relationship was also significant, $F(2, 68) = 69.41$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .67$, showing a higher acceptability of the sexist slurs in the affective relationship ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 1.08$) than in both work contexts (both *ps*' < .001). In addition, a significant difference was found between the condition of higher status user ($M = 1.21$, $SD = .44$) and equal status user ($M = 1.43$, $SD = .70$; $p < .05$) condition, suggesting that the use of sexist slurs was less tolerated when used by a higher status person. This pattern of results was moderated by the class of sexist slurs, as shown by the Type of Label and Type of Relationship interaction, $F(2, 68) = 48.94$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .59$. An overall tendency to rate SDLs as less acceptable than SOLs emerged in all types of relationship (Table 2). In particular, pairwise comparisons showed that SDLs were more accepted in the affective ($M = 1.58$, $SD = .84$) than in both the higher status ($M = 1.06$, $SD = .23$; $p < .001$) and the equal status user conditions ($M = 1.16$, $SD = .40$; $p < .001$), and these two last conditions tended to not differ from each other ($p = .09$). Similarly, SOLs were accepted more in the affective ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.69$) than in both work-related contexts (both ps' < .001). Nonetheless, the acceptability of the SOLs was even lower in the higher status user condition ($M = 1.35$, $SD = .70$) than in the equal status user condition ($M = 1.70$, $SD = 1.08$; $p < .05$). Said otherwise, use of SDLs in a work-related context was always considered inappropriate while use of SOLs by an individual in a superior status position was more strongly condemned than when he/she was a peer of the target.

Table 2. Means and (Standard Deviation) of Acceptability of Types of Labels in function of the Type of Relationship

	Affective	*High user status*	*Equal user status*
SDL	1.58 (.84)[a]	1.06 (.24)[b]	1.16, (.40)[b]
SOL	3.93 (1.69)[c]	1.35 (.70)[d]	1.70 (1.08)[e]

Note. Acceptability ratings range from 1 to 7. Means that not share the same subscript on the row differ reliably from each other ($p < .05$).

Furthermore, a main effect of the Gender of the user was found $F(1, 34) = 6.29$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .16$. Specifically, participants considered the use of sexist labels by a woman ($M = 1.85$, $SD = .65$) to be more acceptable than by a man ($M = 1.74$, $SD = .58$). The Gender of the user interacted also with the Type of Label and the Type of Relationship, $F(2, 68) = 3.61$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .10$. As for affective relationship, SDLs were more accepted when used by a woman ($M = 1.73$, $SD = 1.06$) than by a man ($M = 1.43$, $SD = .76$; $p < .05$). moreover, the same SDLs were equally judged to be less socially acceptable in any work related context, regardless of the gender of the user. As for the acceptability of SOLs, in a work-related context regardless of the status of the user, these slurs tended to be tolerated more when used by a female rather than by a male user (both *ps*' = .06), whereas no difference in terms of gender user was found in the affective relationship condition (Table 3). This result partially supported Hypothesis 4 as it suggested that the gender of the user only influenced the acceptability of SOLs, but not SDLs, in a work-related context.

Table 3. Means and (Standard deviation) of Acceptability between Type of Label, Type of Relationship and Gender of the user

	User	*Affective*	*High status user*	*Equal status user*
SDL	Male	1.43 (.76)[a]	1.06 (.23)[b]	1.12 (.29)[c]
	Female	1.73 (1.06)[d]	1.06 (.23)[b]	1.20 (.55)[bc]
SOL	Male	3.91 (1.71)[e]	1.30 (.67)[f]	1.63 (1.04)[g]
	Female	3.95 (1.77)[e]	1.41 (.76)[h]	1.77 (1.17)[i]

Note. Acceptability ratings range from 1 to 7. Means that not share the same subscript on the row differ reliably from each other ($p < .05$).

Furthermore, no significant main effect of the Gender of participants, $F(1, 34) = 2.32$, $p = .14$, $\eta^2 = .06$, neither significant interaction emerged indicating that the acceptability of sexist slurs by both female ($M = 1.66$, $SD = .69$) and male participants ($M = 1.96$, $SE = .44$) was perceived equally regardless of the type of relationship and the gender of the user.

4.4. Discussion

Sexist slurs are commonly used in western society (Swim et al., 2001) and people can be involuntarily exposed to them in different social situations. This study investigated how the social acceptability of sexist slurs changes depending on contextual factors. Importantly, for the first time we examined not only SDLs, but also SOLs, which are another class of sexist slurs. Although previous research has mainly focused on SDLs, our data suggestes that studying SOLs is relevant because, at least in the Italian society, they are more frequently used than SDLs.

Moreover, these two types of sexist slurs were differently evaluated. In line with previous research (Preston & Stanley, 1987; Van Oudenhoven et al, 2008), our findings showed that sexist slurs emphasizing women's sexual looseness (i.e., SDLs) were perceived as strongly offensive and unpleasant. In addition, we evidenced that sexist slurs that enhanced women's attractiveness (i.e., SOLs) were instead perceived as neither offensive nor inoffensive and unpleasant. Judgments of offensiveness, but not those of pleasantness, were also affected by gender of participants as women rated sexist slurs as much more offensive than men. However, both male and female participants agreed in rating SDLs as more offensive, less pleasant and frequent than SOLs. Thus, the different evaluations of SDLs and SOLs emphasize the distinction of these two classes of sexist slurs suggesting that they could also be differently tolerated. In that regard, we extended previous findings on this issue investigating whether these

two classes of sexist slurs differ in terms of their social acceptability. On the basis of their content and evaluative tone, we expected that SDLs would be less tolerated than SOLs. This was proven to be the case as participants indicated that SOLs were much more socially accepted than SDLs. Moreover, this result was evidenced for both male and female participants. The lack of a gender effect on social acceptability could be explained by the fact that both sexes have been raised in the same cultural context and have interiorized to the same extent the inappropriate tone of these slurs.

To sum up, our results support the distinction between the two classes of sexist slurs, namely SDLs and SOLs. In particular, even though they differ on their content, our results highlighted that SOLs were less unpleasant, offensive, and condemned than SDLs. Furthermore, the main goal of the present research was to examine whether the social acceptability of sexist slurs varies between different social contexts. In particular, we manipulated two main contextual factors: the type of relationship and the gender of the sexist slurs' user. It has been shown that contextual factors, such as formal and intimate contexts, affect the perception of offensive language (Jay et al., 2009, Nussbaum, Pitts, Huber, Krieger & Ohs, 2005). As a matter of fact, in an affective relationship slurs maight be tolerated (Kleinman, Ezzel, & Forst, 2009) whereas in a public situation the use of derogatory terms is strongly condemned (Jay et al., 2009). In line with these claims, our results showed that the acceptability of sexist labels changed across different types of relationship. In general, both SDLs and SOLs were more accepted when used in an affective relationship, such as love or friendship, rather than in a formal context such as a workplace. Unexpectedly, we found that in an affective relationship the gender of the user turned out to be a crucial variable in the perceived acceptability of the use of SDLs but not SOLs. Indeed, in an intimate relationship, SDLs were more tolerated when used by a woman than a man. This could be explained by the fact that when used by a woman

to address another woman, SDLs could be reframed in a positive way (Kleinman, Ezzel, & Forst, 2009) and increase cohesion between people belonging to the same group (Leech,1983; Pfister, 2010). At the same time, this effect was not found when the user was a man engaged in an affective relationship with a female target. In this case, even though usage was slightly more acceptable than in other public contexts, blatant sexist slurs such as SDLs remained negatively connoted when they are used by an out-group member. In contrast, usage of SOLs was slightly tolerated in an intimate relationship when used either by a man or by a woman. As SOLs are considered to be frequently and socially accepted terms, it is possible that their connotation neither positively nor negatively increases depending on the gender of the user with whom the target shares a close intimacy and so are equally tolerated in the two conditions.

Furthermore, in line with research on taboo terms (Jay, 1992; Jay et al., 2009) and on sexual harassment (Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Gutek et al., 1983), the acceptance of sexist slurs in a work-related context depends on both the user's status and gender. We found different outcomes for SDLs and SOLs. Indeed, the status and gender of the user tended to not affect the acceptability of SDLs in work-related settings as this class of slurs is never tolerated. This lack of effect due to contextual factors is probably caused by the blatant negative tone of SDLs, which are clearly recognized as inappropriate. In contrast, acceptance of SOLs was affected by both the status and gender of the user. As a matter of fact, data showed that SOLs were strongly condemned when used by a man who held a higher status position than the target. Said otherwise, these results testified that the sexual connotation of this class of DGLs is perceived as a sexual harassment. Indeed the use of SDLs in a work-related context is less acceptable when used by a man rather than a woman, especially when the male perpetuator holds a higher than an equal status position when compared to the victim of such women-bashing labels.

Taken together, and similar to research about taboo terms, these results show that contextual factors influence the acceptability of sexist slurs, especially when their prejudiced connotation is not evident, as in the case of SOLs. Although SOLs are generally processed as not offensive nor inoffensive and slightly acceptable, in certain contexts they cannot be tolerated. Indeed, in a formal context, such as the workplace, SOLs are clearly and strongly condemned when used by a man in a powerful position rather than a female in a powerless position. This suggests that in those situations, SOLs are processed as episodes of sexual harassment. This idea was corroborated by the fact that both men and women condemned the use of SDLs. Thus, while SOLs have a flattering and ambivalent connotation, the use of this class of subtle sexist slurs is perceived as an expression of harassment only when the intent of the user could be considered as harmful and contrary to social norms. For this reason, our findings provide new evidence about the acceptability of sexist slurs and new insights to the debate on the condemnation of verbal harassment toward women in a public context. In particular, our findings suggest the importance of taking into account the distinction between SDLs and SOLs as well as the different contextual factors.[13]

[13] This Study was conducted in collaboration with Prof. Maria Paola Paladino (University of Trento) and Dr Andrea Carnaghi (University of Trieste). Data were collected by Claudia Huduibro Pomarolli as a part of her internship.

Chapter 5

The impact of Sexist Slurs on women' hostile sexism

Social groups could be labeled either in an almost neutral manner, by means of the category group labels (CGLs) or, at least in certain cases, in an insulting fashion by the corresponding derogatory group labels (DGLs). According to Simon and Greenberg (1996), DGL could be defined as "highly emotionally charged terms that can in a single word convey a strong negative attitude about another individual or group" (p. 1195). This definition rested on the idea that the negative evaluative tone of the DGLs could account for the negative attitudes they conveyed toward the groups they target. Empirical efforts on homophobic epithets (Carnaghi & Maass, 2008; Carnaghi, Maass, & Fasoli, 2011), on ethnic derogatory labels (Simon & Greenberg, 1996), and on professional derogatory labels (Gadon & Craig, 2009) confirmed the quoted definition. Indeed, in the research participants were typically exposed to either a CGL or to a DGL and asked to report their attitudes toward the target of these slurs. Results indicated that, compared to CGLs, DGLs increased implicit and explicit negative evaluation of the target. These results were interpreted in light of the *valence-based hypothesis*, according to which the negative tone of the DGLs spilled over into the evaluation of the target of the insults.

However, DGLs not only provided an evaluative connotation of the target of such slurs but also could be taken as a rough index of the status of the target in the society

(Mullen & Johnson, 1993; Mullen, Rozell, & Johnson, 2001). As a matter of fact, DGLs allowed members of dominant groups to affirm their distance as well as their superiority with respect to those groups that are the targets of DGL (Carnaghi, Maass, & Fasoli, 2011). Along this line, Lerner (1976) documented that men preferred to use slightly sexist terms rather than the neutral category terms when they referred to women to convey and bolster the differential status between genders. These results could be interpreted as a function of the *status-based hypothesis*, suggesting that the degrading content of the DGL diminished the perceived status of the target group.

In the current set of studies, we intended to test the contribution of the valence-based processes and of the status-based processes, triggered by the DGL, in shaping people's attitudes toward the target group. Specifically, the present work focused on DGL referring to women, namely sexist slurs and relied on two distinct classes of sexist labels: Sexist Derogatory Labels (e.g., *bitch*) and the Sexist Objectifying Labels (e.g., *hot-chick*). These types of labels differed according to their valence. Indeed, the former were highly offensive while the latter were slightly less unpleasant and potentially misperceived as non-offending terms but were comparable in affirming a subaltern status of women as the target group. By virtue of their nature, these two classes of sexist labels were well suited to test the relative contribution of the valence and status-based hypotheses in molding perceivers' attitudes toward the target group. Specifically, we assessed the impact of these two classes of sexist labels on women's attitudes toward the in-group. The current endeavor was guided by the fact that, with few exceptions (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007), empirical efforts on the role of DGL in determining people's attitudes toward the target group, have more often tackled this issue by analyzing the majority perspective (Carnaghi & Maass, 2008; Greenberg & Pyszczynsky, 1985; Simon & Greenberg, 1996) leaving, at least in part, unexplored the reactions of the minority

groups that are the targets of these group-bashing labels. In fact, although several studies have addressed how women react toward sexist remarks (Dood, Giuliano, Boutell, & Moran, 2002; Swim & Heyers, 1999; Van Oudehnoven et al., 2008), at our knowledge, no research has analyzed the impact of these labels on women's attitudes toward their in-group. This set of studies tackled the consequences of sexist labels on women's reactions toward their own group rather than women's reactions toward a person using sexist language. At the same time, the present studies aimed to provide a better understanding of the way the linguistic devices, such as the sexist labels, could lead minority targets to endorse those beliefs that sustained their low and subaltern status.

Sexist Attitudes and Sexist Labels

Prejudice has been traditionally conceptualized as a negative feelings or an antipathy toward the out-group (Allport, 1954). However, attitudes toward women could not be considered as a unique valence-based dimension. Indeed, recent theoretical and empirical efforts (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Glick, Fiske, Mladinic, Saiz, Abrams, Maaser, et al., 2000) have shown that sexism was an ambivalent construct that consisted of both hostility and benevolence toward women. *Hostile sexism* (HS) referred to antipathy toward women who were negatively represented as temptress and manipulative, incompetent and deserving a male guidance. *Benevolent sexism* (BS), instead, idealized women who were seen as nice, emotional, and men's "biggest pleasure". Thus, these two domains of ambivalent sexism led to different valenced views of women. Indeed, as shown by Glick and Fiske (1996), HS was related to ascribing negative feminine traits (e.g. whiny, spineless) to women in order to maintain differentiation between sexes and underlined that men were better than women (*competitive gender differentiation*). In contrast, BS was related to positive gender stereotyping (e.g. helpful, gentle)

emphasizing the view that women and men were complementary with respect to their traditional gender roles (*complementary gender differentiation*). In addition, and from the HS perspective, women were seen as sexual objects that used sexuality to manipulate men (*heterosexual hostility*) whereas BS involved a romantic view of sexual relationship between men and women (*intimate heterosexuality*; Fiske & Glick, 1996). These two views of women were in line with the "Madonna/whore" dichotomy suggested by Tavris and Wade (1984) in which women "are placed either on a pedestal or in the gutter" (Sibley & Wilson, 2004; p. 688). Finally, HS stated that women have to be controlled and dominated by men (*dominative paternalism*) while BS supported the dependency of women on the men's protection (*protective paternalism*). As a consequence, it has been evidenced that men showed an increase of hostile sexist attitudes toward sexual negative female subtype (i.e., promiscuous) and more benevolent sexism toward positive sexual subtype (i.e., chaste; Sibley & Wilson, 2004). Furthermore, while people typically perceived the HS as a clear negative view of women, the negative connotation of the BS turned out to be difficult to detect (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Dardenne, Dumont, & Bollier, 2007). As a matter of fact, benevolent sexist beliefs were often misinterpreted as positive claims about women (Glick & Fiske, 1996) and, differently from HS, fostered the idea that being a women had some advantages (Becker & Wright, 2011).

In the current set of studies, the present work tracked any change in women's HS and BS when they were exposed either to sexist slurs or to category group labels. Specifically, the present study compared the effects of two distinct classes of sexist labels, namely *Sexist Derogatory Labels* (SDLs) and *Sexist Objectifying Labels* (SOLs; see Chapter 4), on participants' hostile sexism. In fact the SDLs pointed to women along the promiscuity and sexual looseness dimensions (e.g. *bitch*, *whore*) and portrayed women

as an inferior, low status group in terms of immoral features. The SOLs, instead, referred to women as objects of men's sexual desire and, emphasizing their attractiveness and sexual objectification (e.g. *hot-chick*, *pussy*), they bolstered the subaltern status of women with respect to men's desires.

Moreover, in a previous study (Chapter 4), we presented participants with these two classes of sexist labels and asked participants to evaluate their offensiveness, pleasantness, and social acceptability. Results attested that, at least in the Italian context, SDL were perceived as strongly offensive, unpleasant, and socially unacceptable while SOL were judged to be neither offensive nor inoffensive, unpleasant and slightly unaccepted. These findings suggested that, at least at the explicit level, SDL should convey a clear negative and more derogatory view of the women compared to SOL.

Given the characteristics of these sexist labels, and because of the negative as well as the subaltern representation of women conveyed by the HS, one would expect that that these labels affected the HS rather the BS. However, the characteristics of these two types of labels would allow one to test the relative contribution of the valence-based and of the status-based hypotheses in molding women's hostility toward their group. Indeed, if the DGL exerted their effects because of the valence to which they rose, one would expect that the two classes of sexist labels would differently impact hostile sexism. In particular, we expected that, compared to CGL, SDL would elicit a stronger hostility toward the in-group than SOL. Because SDL negatively described women we expected that participants exposed to these labels would report stronger endorsement of HS than those participants who were primed by SOL.

At the same time, previous research (Kleinman, Ezzell, & Forst, 2009) suggested that the sexist slurs reinforced the concept of males' dominance even when used by women. In particular, and focusing on the content of the two classes of sexist slurs, the

SDL as well as the SOL portrayed women as an inferior group by stressing the subaltern status of the females compared to status of the males, thus perpetuating gender inequality. Indeed, the SDL reduced women to an inferior rank in an overtly derogatory manner while the SOL emphasized the subordinate role of women to men's sexual desire. Hence, SDL as well SOL, albeit in a different fashion, stressed male dominance and hostility toward women. Therefore, regardless of their distinct evaluative tone, one could suppose that the exposure to SDL as well as to SOL would equally enhance the endorsement of hostile sexism beliefs to a greater extent than CGL. It is worth noticing that this hypothesis was at odds with the predictions derived from the valence-based hypothesis. Indeed, here we argued that the status-related content rather than valence *per se* of these sexist labels would affect women's support of hostile sexist beliefs.

Overview and hypotheses

The present research investigated the impact of sexist slurs on the hostile and benevolent sexism from a target group members' perspective. In two studies we compared the effects of different types of labels referring to women, such as CGL (e.g., *donna* [woman]), SDL (e.g., *puttana* [bitch]), and SOL (e.g., *figa* [pussy]). In Study 1, participants were subliminally primed with one of the *type of labels* (CGL vs. SDL vs. OL), and then completed the Hostile and Benevolent subscale of Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI). In Study 2, previous findings were extended by measuring the endorsement of HS and BS beliefs before and after the subliminal exposure to the labels (CGL vs. SDL vs. SOL).

Across two studies we tested the valence-based and the status-based predictions. In line with the valence-based hypothesis, we expected that, compared to CGL, SDL would induce a higher HS than SOL (Hypothesis 1a). In contrast, and in line with status-

based hypothesis, we predicted that both SDL and SOL would equally elicit a stronger HS than CGL (Hypothesis 1b).

5.1. Study 1

5.1.1. Method

Participants

Forty-four female students from the University of Trieste (M_{age} = 24.26, *SD* = 2.89) voluntarily took part in this experiment. One participant who declared to be non-native Italian speaker was excluded from the analyses.

Procedure

Participants came to the laboratory and were informed that the study consisted of two tasks. First, participants completed a computer task that served as experimental manipulation. Following the subliminal priming procedure outlined by Bargh, Chen, and Burrows (1996; see also Carnaghi, Maass & Fasoli, 2011), participants were asked to take part in an experiment about the estimation of numerical quantity. They were instructed to indicate as quickly and accuratly as possible if the number of dots presented in a target picture was even or odd. Participants completed 40 trials. On each trial, before viewing the target picture, they were subliminally primed with a label followed by two masks (a string of cross-hatchings and a picture of dots, respectively). Depending on the experimental condition, the subliminal prime was a CGL (i.e., *donna* [woman], *ragazza* [girl]), an SDL (i.e., *puttana* [bitch], *troia* [whore]) or an SOL (i.e., *bona* [hot-chick], *figa* [pussy]). Reaction times were not recorded or analyzed.

Then, participants filled out the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996), a 22-item inventory that consisted of two 11-item subscales: *hostile sexism* (e.g., “Women exaggerate problems they have at work”) and *benevolent sexism* (e.g., “Women should be cherished and protected by men”). Answers were reported on a 7-point scale

from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Scale reliability was good for both the HS (α = .85) and BS (α =.77).

Finally, participants reported their demographic information (i.e. age and native language).

5.1.2. Results

Hostile Sexism

We performed a one-way ANOVA on the HS with *type of label* (CL vs. SDL vs. SOL) as a between-participants variable. Analysis yielded a no significant effect of *type of label*, $F(1,40) = 2.37$, $p = .11$, $\eta^2 = .11$. However, a priori contrasts between SDL ($M = 3.57$, $SD = .73$) and SOL ($M = 3.21$, $SD = .60$) showed no differences between the two conditions, $t(40) = -1.24$, $p = .22$, $d = .39$, suggesting that both the labels elicited similar level of HS. Therefore, we proceeded to test the a priori contrast between CGL ($M = 3.00$, $SD = .74$) and sexist slurs. In line with the status-based hypothesis, analysis yielded a marginally significant difference between CGL and sexist slurs (SDL and SOL) indicating that participants tended to report lower level of HS in the CGL than in the other two conditions, $t(40) = -1.79$, $p = .08$, $d = .56$.

Benevolent Sexism

To test the effect of *type of label* (CL vs. SDL vs. SOL) the BS index was submitted to a one-way ANOVA. Results showed no significant effect of *type of label*, $F(1,40) = 1.15$, $p = .33$, $\eta^2 = .05$, indicating that participants reported similar level of BS in all the condition (CGL: $M = 3.52$, $SD = .81$ vs. SOL: $M = 3.80$, $SD = .35$ vs. SDL: $M = 3.40$, $SD = .62$). Moreover, the a priori contrasts showed no significant differences between SDL and SOL, $t(40) = 1.46$, $p = .15$, neither between CGL and sexist slurs (SDL and SOL), $t(40) = .41$, $p = .68$.

5.1.3. Discussion

Results of Study 1 failed to reach a conventional level of significance. Despite the non-significant effect of the general model, a priori contrasts indicated that sexist slurs seemed to equally affect the HS. Female participants exposed to sexist slurs (SDLs and SOLs) tended to increase hostile but not benevolent sexist beliefs, more than when they were exposed to a word that portrayed women in a neutral way (i.e., CGL). These results evidenced that, at least in part, both SDLs and SOLs tended to increase HS compared to CGL, suggesting that it seemed to be the status-related content rather than the valence of the sexist slurs that likely affected female participants' hostile attitudes toward women. This pattern of findings was consistent with the status-based hypothesis and not with the valence-based hypothesis. Moreover, as expected, no effect of the labels on BS was found. This is consistent with the idea that the perception of women as temptresses, as promiscuous, and sexual objects, underlined by SDLs and SOLs respectively, better matched HS beliefs than BS beliefs.

However, Study 1 presented some limits. First, analysis did not reach statistical significance and the number of participants was limited. Second, participants' sexual orientation was not considered. Since ASI may not describe an accurate view of women (e.g. as a romantic partner or sexual object) for homosexuals (Glick & Fiske, 1997) and LGBT individuals could present different levels of ASI than heterosexual individuals, the second study will further collect information about participants' sexual orientation. Thus, and to increase the statistical power of our analysis, we conducted a second study in which ambivalent sexism was measured before and after the participants' exposure to the labels.

5.2. Study 2

5.2.1. Method

Participants

Sixty-nine female students from the University of Trieste participated in this experiment. Nine participants were excluded from the analyses because they identified themselves as either homosexuals or non-native Italian speakers. The final sample comprised 60 heterosexual female participants (M_{age} = 20.45, *SD* = 4.56).

Procedure

Participants took part in two different sessions, namely Time 1 and Time 2. In the first session (Time 1), they completed the ASI (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Both the HS (α = .72) and BS scale (α = .79) at Time 1 showed good internal consistency.

A week later, participants came to the laboratory and took part in the second session (Time 2). They were informed that this session comprised two unrelated tasks. As in Study 1, the first task was a computer task that served as the experimental manipulation. Indeed, participants were subliminally primed either with CGL (i.e., *donna* [woman], *ragazza* [girl]), or with SDL (i.e., *puttana* [bitch], *troia* [whore]) or with SOL (i.e., *bona* [hot-chick], *figa*[pussy]). Subsequently, participants filled in the ASI (HS, α = .80; BS, α = .82).

Finally they reported their demographic information (age, sexual orientation, and native language) and were thanked and debriefed.

5.2.2. Results

Preliminary Analysis

To test possible differences between HS and BS at Time 1 we first conducted a 2 (Sexism: HS vs. BS) x 3 (Type of Labels: CL vs. SDL vs. OL) ANOVA on participants' ratings with the first as a within-participant factor and the second as a between-

participant factor. Analysis yielded no significant effect of Sexism, $F(1, 57) = .87$, $p = .36$, $\eta^2 = .01$, indicating no difference between participants' level of HS ($M = 3.34$, $SE = .09$) and BS ($M = 3.42$, $SE = .08$) at Time 1. Moreover, no significant effect of *type of label* , $F(2, 57) = 1.71$, $p = .19$, $\eta^2 = .06$, neither significant interaction between Sexism and *type of label*, $F(2, 57) = .43$, $p = .65$, $\eta^2 = .01$, were found. These results assured us that the level of both HS and BS at Time 1 did not differ between experimental conditions.

Main Analysis

Hostile Sexism.

To test the effect of the sexist slurs on the Time 2 HS we performed an ANCOVA with *type of label* (CGL vs. SDL vs. SOL) as the between participant factor, controlling for Time 1 HS. Results showed that, as expected, Time 1 HS significantly and positively predicted the Time 2 HS, $F(1, 56) = 67.52$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .55$, indicating a good test-retest reliability. A significant main effect of *type of label*, $F(2, 56) = 5.68$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .71$, was also found. In line with Hypothesis 1b, but contrary to Hypothesis 1a, post-hoc comparisons (LSD) revealed that participants reported lower level of HS when exposed to CGL ($M = 3.08$, $SE = .11$) than when primed with both SDL ($M = 3.56$, $SE = .08$; $p < .001$) and SOL ($M = 3.40$, $SE = .08$; $p < .05$), while no difference emerged between SDL and SOL ($p = .16$).[14]

Benevolent Sexism

The same ANCOVA as above on Time 2 BS was conducted considering *type of label* (CGL vs. SDL vs. SOL) as a between-participant variable and Time 1 BS as a covariate. A significant effect of Time 1 BS, $F(1, 56) = 114.08$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .67$, emerged.

[14] The same ANCOVA on Time 2 HS was conducted considering also the interaction between *type of label* and Time 1 HS. Analysis yielded a main effect of Time 1 HS, $F(1,54) = 66.07$, $p < .001$, and *type of label*, $F(2,54) = 5.51$, $p < .01$. the interaction between the two variables did not reach statistical significance, $F(2,54) = .38$, $p = .67$

The *type of label* main effect failed to reach significance, $F(1, 56) = 1.61$, $p = .21$, $\eta^2 = .05$, suggesting that Time 2 BS was not affected by the subliminal prime.[15]

5.3. Discussion

Study 2 showed again that when exposed to SDL or SOL, rather than a CGL, female participants increased their hostile beliefs but not their benevolent beliefs toward the in-group. Even in this case, and in line with the status-based hypothesis, we found that it was the content of the sexist slurs rather than their valence that impacted women's' beliefs and hostile attitudes toward their group.

5.4. General Discussion

The present research aimed to investigate whether and how sexist slurs enhance women's sexism beliefs toward their in-group. In particular, we distinguished between two classed of sexist slurs, namely SDLs and SOLs, and we considered the two dimensions of ambivalent sexism: HS and BS. We tested two different hypotheses: the valence-based hypothesis suggested a match between the differential evaluative tone of these sexist slurs and their distinct effects on hostile sexism. In sharp contrast, the status-based hypothesis stated a match between the subordination of women conveyed by the content of both sexist slurs and the hostile beliefs that highlighted women's submission to men's dominance. Across two studies, the results supported the status-based prediction. In fact, when female participants were exposed to both SDLs and SOLs they showed higher levels of hostile sexism than participants primed with the CGLs. At the same time, no effects of the type of sexist slurs were found on benevolent sexism.

[15] The same ANCOVA on Time 2 BS was conducted considering also the interaction between *type of label* and Time 1 BS. Analysis yielded a main effect of Time 1 HS, $F(1,54) = 106.95$, $p < .001$. Moreover, no significant effect of *type of label*, $F(2,54) = 1.55$, $p = .22$, neither a significant interaction, $F(2,54) = .52$, $p = .60$, emerged.

The present research shed light on the different processes that could account for the effects of sexist slurs on peoples' attitudes toward the group target of these insults. Specifically, the present data indicate that the detrimental effects of sexist labels on women's attitudes toward their group are slightly independent from the perceived valence of these labels. Therefore, at least for the sexist labels used in this set of studies, the present data suggest that the low-status meaning conveyed by those labels contributes to a greater extent than the valence of the labels in question in shaping the target's attitudes toward the in-group. IN fact, although SOLs are judged to be slightly less offensive and unpleasant than the sexist derogatory labels (Chapter 4), both terms exert a deleterious effects on women's endorsement of the hostile sexist beliefs. Therefore, the status-related content instead of the valence of the sexist labels impacts on the women's hostility toward the in-group. These results are in line with the fact that hostile and benevolent sexism increase or decrease depending on sexual female subtypes (Sibley & Wilson, 2004). In fact, as stated by Glick and Fiske (1997) "specific female subtypes activate either hostile or benevolent sexism but not both" (p. 1331), men show an increase of hostile sexist attitudes toward sexual negative female subtypes (i.e., promiscuous) and more benevolent sexism toward positive sexual subtypes (i.e., chaste). In the present case, SDLs clearly detected the negative female subtype and led to hostile sexist beliefs. At the same time SOLs do not fully fit into one of the "Madonna/whore" dichotomic subtypes (Tavris & Wade, 1984) but otherwise portray women as sexual objects and as a group subordinated to men's desire and dominance. In doing so, as SOLs describe a subtype of women that defies traditional gender roles, they are better related to hostile sexism that enhances men's dominance and heterosexual hostility.

Interestingly, the present results have shown that the incidental exposure to sexist terms, regardless from the type of women-bashing labels, bolsters women's adherence to the hostile and degrading view of their group. These results mirror previous studies on the effects of the homophobic epithets on homosexuals' beliefs about themselves and their in-group. As a matter of fact, Carnaghi, Castelli and Comisso (2011) showed that homophobic epithets bolstered gays' internalized homophobia to a greater extent than category labels, such as *gay*. Similarly, the exposure to a sexist label, regardless from its explicit evaluative tone, would increase women's endorsement of hostile sexist beliefs about their in-group, thus contributing to gender inequalities.

Future research should investigate the impact of the exposure to sexist slurs on behavioral responses, such as applying for a gender typical or atypical jobs/faculties or wearing sexy clothes or internalizing appearance ideals. Specifically, one might test whether these behavioral choices are moderated by the enhancement of women's endorsement of the hostile sexist beliefs as a consequence of the overhearing of sexist labels. Furthermore, in line with results coming from the overhearing of homophobic epithets, attesting that people of the non-target group react in a different way than target group members (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007), future research should compare women and men's reactions in terms of sexism attitudes when primed with sexist or with category labels.[16]

[16] This research has been conducted in collaboration with Dr Andrea Carnaghi and Valentina Piccoli (University of Trieste). Data were collected by Marta Varnerin (Study 1) and by Valentina Piccoli (Study 2) as a part of their internship.

Chapter 6

General Discussion

Prejudice is defined as hostile attitudes and antipathy that people may feel toward an individual because of his/her group membership (Allport, 1954). How can prejudice be expressed? Allport (1954) states that prejudice is expressed thought avoidance, discrimination, physical aggressions, but also by spoken abuse. The use of derogatory language is thus a common way to communicate prejudices. Is there any effect of being exposed to derogatory language? Although derogatory language is typically perceived as a minor form of prejudice, this type of language may have a negative impact on the target and on the non-target group members (i.e., the audience). Evidences about the reactions to derogatory language emerge from research on hate speeches, prejudiced remarks and jokes (see Chapter 2). However, less is known about the effect of a specific class of offensive language, namely *derogatory group labels* (i.e., DGL), in paving the way for prejudice.

The present thesis aimed to better understand the implications of two types of DGLs on the audience and on the target group. Indeed, I analyzed the impact of homophobic epithets on heterosexuals (i.e., audience) and the effects of the sexist slurs on women (i.e., target). In particular, I examined whether and how these DGLs favor the persistence of homophobia and sexism.

We know from the literature that homosexuals and women are stigmatized groups frequently exposed to verbal hassles (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001;

Swim, Person, & Johnston, 2008). At the same time people who are members of the non-target group may be involuntarily subjected to DGLs (see Chapter 2). Until now, to my knowledge, few research have addressed the reactions to specific DGL such as homophobic epithets (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007; 2008; Carnaghi, Maass & Fasoli, 2011) and sexist slurs (Preston & Stanley, 1987; Van Oudehnoven et al., 2008). This set of studies extended and provided new evidence about the consequences of these two types of DGLs.

In Chapter 3 and Chapter 5, differently from previous studies about derogatory language, but similarly to research by Carnaghi and colleagues (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007; 2008; Carnaghi, et al., 2011), I investigated the impact of DGLs, as isolated from the social context, on the expression of prejudice. It has well documented that contextual factors influenced the way in which derogatory language is perceived (Jay, 2009; Jay & Janshewitz, 2008) and may also affect the reactions toward the target. At that regard, in Chapter 4 I also analyzed how contextual factors can influence the social acceptability of a specific class of DGLs, namely sexist slurs. However, investigating the effects of DGLs when isolated consents to examine whether DGLs *per se* elicit prejudice.

Homophobic epithets

In Chapter 3, we investigated the impact of homophobic epithets on heterosexuals. Empirical efforts on this issue have shown that homophobic epithets, compared to category labels, decrease the accessibility of positively valenced associations in a sample of heterosexuals (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007; 2008), increase participants' negative attitudes toward the target (Carnaghi, Maass, Castelli, & Puvia, 2011) and enhance the participants' need to stress their gender identity (Carnaghi, Maass, & Fasoli, 2011). However, our aim was to examine how homophobic epithets perpetuated heterosexuals' prejudice toward homosexuals. In particular, we tested the

effects of the gay-bashing labels on the heterosexuals' dehumanization and non-verbal behavior toward homosexuals. Previous research (Brown & Hegarty, 2005) showed that homosexuals are not denied humanness. As a matter of fact, heterosexuals did not infra-humanize gays on the basis of uniquely human emotions.

However, following Simon and Greenberg's (1996) suggestions on the relation between derogatory group labels and the dehumanization of the target of such labels, in my research I hypothesized that the exposure to a homophobic epithet, rather than to the corresponding category labels or generic insult, would elicit the dehumanization of homosexuals. To test this prediction in two studies I exposed heterosexual participants to different types of labels, namely category labels, homophobic epithets, and generic insult and assessed the attribution of human-related and animal-related words both to the homosexuals and heterosexuals as a whole (Viki, Winchester, Titshall, Chisango, Pina, & Russel, 2006). Consistently with my predictions, I found that only when exposed to a homophobic epithet, heterosexual participants denied humanness to homosexuals. Moreover, this effect was found and replicated across different cultural and linguistic contexts, such as Italy and Australia. In Study 2 I further demonstrated for the first time the impact of homophobic epithets on heterosexuals' non-verbal behavior. Stating from the well acknowledged evidence that members of stigmatized groups are often avoided (Herek & Capitano, 1999; Sartorius, & Schulze, 2005; Stephens, & Clark, 1987), I expected that the overhearing of homophobic rather than of category labels would even affect heterosexual participants' physical distance toward gay men. Our findings proved that this was exactly the case. In fact, being exposed to labels like *faggot*, elicited in heterosexual participants the need to maintain physical distance enhancing marginalization of gay men. Furthermore, in my research I verified whether the effect of homophobic epithets on dehumanization and physical distance was only a consequence

of the valence of the term. In doing so, in both the studies I compared the effect of category label and homophobic epithet with those of a generic insult (i.e., *asshole*) that was perceived as equally negative as the DGL in question but irrelevant for sexual orientation. Results of the studies showed that only the homophobic epithet (i.e., *faggot*) triggered negative effects on the dehumanization and on the physical distance toward gays whereas the generic insult did not yield the same outcomes. The fact that these discriminatory responses emerged only when heterosexuals were primed with the target-specific slurs suggested that the content, rather than the valence of the label, matters. I will further discuss this issue later (see paragraph 6.1.2).

To sum up, in the studies presented in Chapter 3 I found that merely exposure to a homophobic epithet elicited dehumanization and marginalization of homosexuals in heterosexuals participants. Thus, homophobic language seems to be not only a way to express but also to perpetuate homophobia.

Sexist slurs

The consequences of sexist language have been widely studied especially with respect to women's' emotional and behavioral reactions (Swim et al., 2001; Swim & Hyers, 1999, see also Chapter 2). However, to my knowledge, no research has specifically focused on DGLs referring to women, namely sexist slurs. Previous studies (Preston & Stanley, 1987; Van Oudhenoven et al., 2008) examined the derogatory terms that men and women use to point out women in different cultures and societies. Moreover, these studies mainly focused on what I called Sexist Derogatory Labels (i.e. SDL) that are words like *bitch* or *whore*. In Chapter 4 I pointed also to another class of sexist slurs, namely Sexist Objectifying Labels (i.e. SOL) like *hot-chick* and *pussy*. These two classes of sexist slurs can be distinguished on the basis of their content. SDL, indeed, emphasize sexual looseness and lack of morality while the SOL highlight the sexual

attractiveness of women. In a study I examined how these sexist slurs were socially accepted across different situations. First of all, my findings evidenced that SDL were judged as socially unacceptable and offensive whereas SOL were rated as neither offensive nor inoffensive, unpleasant but slightly tolerated. Moreover, to my knowledge, no research has investigated whether SDL and SOL differ in terms of social acceptability across different social contexts. In the study presented in Chapter 4 I filled in this gap analyzing situations where the gender of the user and the user-target relationship varied. As shown for taboo terms (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008), sexist slurs were generally more accepted when used in an intimate and private than in public situations as work-related contexts. Furthermore, in a work-related context SDL were assessed as not tolerated words, while SOL were strongly condemned especially when used by a man or by a person in a high status position.

As a second aim of the research on sexist slurs I tested whether and how SDL and SOL affected women attitudes toward their in-group. In Chapter 5 I advanced two distinct hypotheses about the impact of sexist slurs on sexism. In the last decades it has been shown that sexism has an ambivalent connotation. Glick and Fiske (1996), indeed, stated that sexism presents two domains: hostile and benevolent sexism. The former describes a form of aversion/antagonism for gender equality that is related to a negative stereotypic view and sexual objectification of women, while the latter depicts women as the “weaker sex” but idealizes their positive characteristics (e.g., emotionality, sensitivity). Thus, although they are complementary, hostile and benevolent sexism differ in their tone and how they portray women. Based on this evidence, across two studies we tested a valence-based hypothesis suggesting that, compared to a neutral label, SDL would enhance hostile sexism more than SOL. In contrast, status-based hypothesis predicted that both SDL and SOL would emphasize the women’s inferiority

and, as a consequence, they both would increase hostile sexism as it better described the women's subordination and gender inequalities. Our findings provided support for this last prediction evidencing that SDL and SOL equally elicited hostile sexist beliefs toward the in-group. Said otherwise, sexist slurs enhance hostility toward the in-group, a finding that reinforces the idea that DGLs contribute to persistence of sexism.

6.1. Derogatory Group Labels

In this section I first discuss the implications of the present findings in respect to previous literature on derogatory group labels and to two aspects of these slurs (i.e., valence and status). Finally, I take in consideration potential underlying processes that could explain the effects of DGL.

6.1.1. Effects of Derogatory Group Labels

The present work shows that DGL can have an effect on both the target and the audience. In particular, in a different set of studies I extended previous evidence about the consequences of DGLs showing that homophobic epithets affect heterosexuals' reactions toward homosexuals and sexist slurs impact the women's reactions toward the in-group.

Effects of DGL on the audience

Research on DGLs has mainly investigated the effect on the audience in terms of target evaluation. Being exposed to DGLs leads to a negative evaluation (Gadon & Craig,. 2009; Greenberg & Pyszcynski, 1985; Kirkland, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1987) or, at least, to less favorable associations of the target (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007; 2008).

The present work shows, at least for homophobic epithets, that DGLs affect not only the evaluation but also the perceived humanity of homosexuals and the way people behave toward the target. These findings provide new evidence on how language may

elicit and reinforce prejudice. Indeed, DGLs are not only symptoms but also predictors of prejudice. Indeed, regardless from the intent of the speaker, the exposure to DGL affects the cognitive and the behavioral reactions of people that are neither the target nor the user of these slurs. Interestingly, the consequence of being exposed to DGLs emerged even if DGL were presented isolated from social context (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007; Carnaghi, Maass, & Fasoli, 2011; see Chapter 3). Although contextual factors can affect the perception and acceptability of derogatory language (Jay et al., 2008; Chapter 4), and the presence of in-group members may influence the non-target reactions (see Chapter 2), the present set of studies about homophobic epithets shows that at least this specific class of DGLs has negative implications *per se*. This issue is strictly relevant for the consequences of DGL. Indeed, regardless of the intent of the speaker, these social slurs seem to enhance prejudice toward the target to which they refer. So, it does not matter whom the DGL addresses to because, even when no contextual factors are available, DGLs tend to perpetuate prejudice toward the group portray by the slurs. Taking into consideration homophobic epithets, for instance, they are used to insult homosexuals as well as heterosexuals. However, regardless the actual target of the insult, the overhearing of terms like *queer* or *faggot* may arise prejudicial responses toward homosexuals. Thus, the present work suggests that homophobic epithets are not only an evidence of the pervasiveness of homophobia in our society, but they are also one of the mean trough which homophobia is instilled in people mind. However, to make the present results more consistent, future research should investigate and compare the effects of other classes of DGL (e.g., ethnic derogatory labels) when isolated or contextualized in a social situations.

Effects of DGL on the target

The effect of specific DGLs on the target has been less studied. Literature provided some evidence about the consequences of being target of sexist or homophobic hassles on well-being and emotions (Swim et al., 2001; Swim et al., 2009). However, less it is known about the effects on beliefs about the in-group. The present work showed that being exposed to sexist slurs increases hostile beliefs toward women in female participants (Chapter 5). This result mirrors those found on the impact of homophobic epithets. In particular, Carnaghi, Castelli and Comisso (2011) have shown that homosexuals exposed to homophobic epithets increase the tendency to internalize homophobia. Although this finding was much more related to self-perception (e.g., shame for sexual orientation), it is possible that these effects generalize to the group of gay men as a whole. Indeed, similarly to sexist slurs, homophobic epithets or other classes of DGLs could enhance negative beliefs and a stigmatized view of the in-group.

Taken together these findings suggest that for the target members being exposed to DGLs may lead to stigma internalization and, in this respect, they can contribute to maintain prejudice and inequalities. Moreover, DGLs may have more harmful consequences on individuals whom group membership is ascribed rather than achieved. In particular, members of groups distinguish on biological gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity cannot deny their group membership. Moreover, even when individuals try to conceal their membership, as for instance homosexuals who avoid self-disclosure, they may internalize negative beliefs about themselves and the in-group. Differently, achieved or assumed membership (e.g., religion, political party) can be easily changed allowing individuals to avoid stigmatization and prejudice.

6.1.2. Valence or Status?

The definition of DGLs (Simon & Greenberg, 1996) emphasizes two distinct features of these terms. On one hand, DGLs are negative valenced terms that convey negative attitudes toward a group or an individual. In this respect, DGLs differ in their evaluative tone from neutral terms that portray the same group (i.e., category group labels). On the other hand, DGLs represent the target group in a subordinate position and thus underline its inferiority. Mullen and colleagues (Mullen & Johnson, 1993; Mullen, 2001) put in evidence a similar perspective on ethnic DGLs, namely *ethnophaulism*. These DGLs are cognitively represented on two dimensions: valence and complexity. This last dimension refers to the number of clusters that captured the different contents of DGL (e.g., physical traits, food allusions, etc). Research on ethnophaulisms evidenced that salient and stigmatized group are portrayed by more negative and low complex DGLs. Interestingly, compared with valence, complexity of DGLs (i.e., cluster of contents referring to the group) was the strongest predictor of negative consequences as, for instance, exclusion of the target (Mullen & Rice, 2003; Mullen, 2004) and intergroup hostility (Mullen, Calogero, & Leader, 2007).

In a similar vein, the present work suggests that the effects of DGLs are more due to their content rather than their valence. Although I studied different types of DGLs and their impact on different phenomena (i.e., dehumanization, behavior, ambivalent sexism), the results of homophobic epithets and sexist slurs support this suggestion. Indeed, dehumanization and physical interpersonal distance toward gays were elicited only by the specific homophobic DGL and not by an equally offensive but target-unrelated insult (see Chapter 3). In addition, studies about sexist slurs showed that sexist slurs (SDL and SOL) affected the women's beliefs in a similar way, regardless of their offensiveness (see Chapter 5). Thus, it is possible to argue that it is not only the

evaluative tone of DGLs that induces these negative responses, but the specific target-bashing content of slurs. Specifically, the content of DGLs belittles the group in question underling its inferiority and social exclusion. As a consequence, overhearing DGL activates hostility and avoidance toward the derogated group.

6.1.3. Underlying processes

The present work does not offer a complete explanation of the underlying psychological processes about the effects of DGLs.

As for the audience, in Chapter 3 I considered two potential processes that could account for our findings: a change on the acceptability of DGLs and a social tuning process. Previous research has shown that being exposed to prejudiced jokes can lead to a greater tolerance of discrimination in people high in prejudice (Prejudiced Norm Theory; Ford & Ferguson, 2004). At the same time, social acceptability and expression of prejudice goes hand in hand (Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002; Meertens & Pettigrew, 1997). Following this line of reasoning, we expected a possible change on tolerance of DGLs when people were exposed to this type of labels. Thus, we measured participants' acceptability of the terms that we used as primes (i.e., *gay*, *faggot*, *asshole*). Moreover, other research has highlighted that people tend to get along and adapt their judgments to the supposed beliefs of an audience (Lun, Sinclair, Whitchurch, & Glenn, 2007; Sinclair, Hustinger, Skorinko, & Hardin, 2005; Sinclair, Lowery, Hardin, & Colangelo, 2005). In other words, when an important other shows either egalitarian or prejudiced beliefs people may be motivated to endorse similar beliefs. Therefore, as I argued that heterosexual participants' may try to get along with the (supposed) homophobic research (as he provided a questionnaire with the homophobic slur) we measured the liking and affiliative social tuning. In Study 2 on homophobic epithets (Chapter 3) I did not find support for these processes. As a matter of fact, exposure to a

homophobic slur, rather than a category label or generic insult, did not change neither the acceptability of labels like *faggot* and *asshole* nor elicited a tendency to like more the researcher or to get along with him. Although in my data they did not play a role, it is possible that social norms and tuning may have an effect in other contexts. Moreover, it is worth noting that in the study (Study 2, Chapter 3) participants were subliminally primed and, thus, did not consciously elaborated the labels. So, social norms and social tuning should be taken into consideration also in studies where DGLs are explicitly presented. In addition, future research could examine also whether the group membership of the person whom people tend to get along could moderate the reactions. Indeed, it seems that when exposed to DGLs such as homophobic epithets (Goodman, Scheel, Alexander, & Eidelman, 2008; Dickter, Kittel, & Gyurivsky, 2011) and sexist language (Swim & Hyers, 1999; see also Chapter 2) people tend to conform their reactions to those of other in-group members.

Other explanations can be advanced. It is possible that the effects of DGL are due to an activation of culturally shared associations. People have learnt stereotypes about groups and they may tend to endorse and act in line with them (Devine, 1989). At that regard, previous research(Carnaghi & Maass, 2008) has shown, for instance, that heterosexuals differently evaluate concepts that they associate to homophobic DGL rather than to the corresponding category label. In particular, in a free association task participants reported three concepts that came in their mind when they read words like *faggot* or *gay*, and then evaluated their associations. Results attested that the associations to homophobic epithets were rated as more negative than those reported for category labels. Moreover, heterosexuals showed also less automatic approach reactions to homophobic epithets compared to category labels, suggesting that DGLs *per se* elicit a sort of avoidance. In line with this evidence, it is possible to suggest that the

negative representation of minorities, such as homosexuals and women, as stigmatized and inferior groups is emphasized by DGLs. In doing so, DGLs may enhance the gap between the perceivers and the target in terms of status describing the target group (usually represented by a minority group) as a subordinate, negatively evaluated and belonging to lower humanity. As a consequence, DGLs maintain and support prejudice, inequalities and a hierarchical view of the society.

Another explanation involves the role of emotions. Indeed, DGL could emotionally affect the non-target members and these emotions may explain prejudiced reactions. We suggest that DGLs like *faggot* or *bitch*, rather than category labels like *gay* and *woman*, may elicit disgust and anger toward the out-group. In particular, disgust is related to dehumanization (Harris & Fiske, 2006; Haslam, 2006), social exclusion (Cottrel & Neuberg, 2005; Terrizzi, Shook, & Ventis, 2010) and, at least in the case of homosexuals, to negative attitudes (Abrams & Huston, 2006).

As for the target, similar processes can be taken in consideration. Research on the impact of DGL on those individuals that could be potentially victims of this insults showed that the exposure to such labels would bolster the internalization of the negative stigma about the in-group thus deteriorating the self-perception (Carnaghi, Castelli, & Comisso, 2011) as well as the attitude toward the in-group (Chapter 5). Being subjected to target-specific slurs may induce the activation of the negative prejudiced view of the in-group and leads target group members, at least temporaritly, to accept it. When the in-group is portrayed in a derogatory way, the cultural shared stereotypic and stigmatized view of the group may be activated. In doing so, as DGLs stress the group inferiority, individuals who are target of these slurs could experience negative emotions such as shame and humiliation. If this is the case, these emotions may moderate the

impact and the acceptance of the inferiority as well as the stigmatize image of the in-group.

6.2. Limitations and Future directions

Although the present work provides new evidence about the consequences of DGLs, future research could address some of its limitations.

First of all, the current thesis examined only the effects of two classes of DGLs. To generalize the effects of homophobic epithets and sexist slurs, future research should extend the present findings to other types of DGLs, as for example ethnic derogatory labels (i.e., *nigger*). In doing so, they could take into account the perspectives of both the target and the audience. Indeed, I have analyzed here heterosexuals' reaction to homophobic epithets in terms of behavior and dehumanization, and the consequences of sexist slurs on women's beliefs about the in-group. One potential extension of the current findings could be examining men's reactions towards women when exposed to sexist slurs such as the SDL and the SOL. Different hypothesis can be advanced. As for SDL, they could elicit avoidance and social exclusion of women when they are portrayed as promiscuous and immoral. As for SOL, they can lead to a higher men's approach toward women since this class of labels emphasizes women's attractiveness. At the same time, women could react to DGLs acting in line with the negative view (e.g., wearing sexy clothes, or applying for typical or atypical jobs) or keeping distance toward the in-group, for instance, protesting and emphasizing their distinction from sexual negative female subtypes. In addition, dehumanization should be investigated as a possible outcome of other type of DGLs. It is worth noting that in the present research homophobic epithets elicit dehumanization of a group that is usually perceived as fully human. It would be interesting to test the effects of DGLs on other groups that are not generally dehumanized (e.g., women), but also on those to which people usually deny humanness

(e.g., national or ethnic groups). At the same time, also the exposure to DGLs of target group members could induce to dehumanization of the group. As DGLs underline the group inferiority, individuals who belong to the target group could deny humanness to their own group and confirm social stigma.

Second, the role of personal attitudes toward groups that are target of DGLs should be consider as a potential moderator of people's reactions in terms of dehumanization and behavioral avoidance. It is possible that high and low prejudiced individuals, as well as people who have more or less accepted the social stigma, may differently react to DGLs in terms of behavior as well as beliefs about the target groups. This aspect could be also examined in relation to the analysis of underlying processes mentioned above (i.e., culturally shared associations, emotions, social norms). Investigating the underlying processes of DGLs allows to extend previous research and identify the cognitive factors that lead to their consequences.

6.3. Social implications

The present research shows the role that homophobic epithets and sexist slurs play in the perpetuation of homophobia and sexism. The exposure to DGLs could, in fact, have an effect on the way people discriminate the target and support inequalities and status-hierarchical society. As DGLs increase prejudice of the audience and its acceptance by the target, it is evident that none is immune to the consequences of DGLs. Therefore, the use of a non-derogatory language is desirable.

The debate about the politically correct language involves different issues. On one hand, one could argue that language prescriptions curtail freedom of speech and, even when people comply with the norms that condemn the use of derogatory labels, people's negative views towards the target of such labels still remain largely intact. On the other hand, language prescriptions aim to define situations in which offensive language has to

be avoided in order to favor a reduction of prejudice. It has been shown that social context varies the perception and the acceptability of the offensive language (Jay et al, 2008, Chapter 4), and influences the reactions to derogatory language (see Chapter 2). However, in the specific case of DGLs, they seem to enhance prejudice also when presented as a-contextualized or subliminally presented. Thus, the negative outcomes of DGLs need to be considered. Using category group labels such as *gay* and *women*, rather than DGLs (e.g., *faggot* and *bitch*, respectively) may help to decrease, or at least not enhance, stigma and social inequalities. The use of a politically correct language can positively affect all individuals regardless of their membership as audience or as the target group. In addition, it is worth noting that also those DGLs that are socially accepted (e.g., sexist objectifying labels) may negatively affect the perception and the behavior toward the target. Thus, their consequences should be taken in account on this debate, considering that they could have subtle impact in perpetuating prejudice.

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