

**(NOT) MINCING WORDS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF HOW
GAY AND QUEER MEN MAKE SENSE OF “FAG/GOT”**

by

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Abstract

Twelve gay and queer-identified (gay/queer) men, aged 24 to 62 years, were interviewed regarding their understanding of the terms “fag” and “faggot” and whether the terms can or should be reclaimed by gay/queer men to be used in positive or political ways. Thematic analysis revealed that fag and faggot served multiple functions (e.g., intra-group identification and gender policing) and that participants’ perceptions depended on context. A model is proposed of how gay/queer men separate into three main positions (reclaimers, fence-sitters, and nonreclaimers) based on personal versus social (heterosexual) norms. Participants’ perceptions and understandings of heterosexism are explored in terms of threat appraisals and everyday hassles. Gay/queer identity development are discussed in the context of Cross’ nigrescence theory and Cass’ model for gay and lesbian identity development. Themes of sexism among gay/queer men’s communities were discerned and seemed linked to concepts of heterosexism. Limitations and suggestions for future research are discussed.

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(Not) Mincing Words: A Qualitative Study of How Gay and Queer Men Make Sense of
“Fag/got”

In a recent, brief news interview, openly gay sex columnist Dan Savage was quoted as saying “I love the word faggot. Me and all my faggot friends use the word faggot constantly” (Collins, February 4, 2011). Dan Savage and his circle of friends have reclaimed the term “faggot” for their own use, identifying with it in a positive way. Savage (2010) has created an online campaign called the *It Gets Better Project*, which is a collection of testimonial videos encouraging lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth to have hope and designed to deter LGBTQ youth from committing suicide. While Savage seems to have removed the negativity that he attaches to the term faggot, the word continues to be used as a weapon to attack boys and men, particularly when they are perceived to be gay/queer.

Language, such as the words fag and faggot (fag/got), can be a constant source of negativity and bullying that LGBTQ individuals and those perceived to be nonheterosexual experience daily. In speaking about psychologists who are concerned with the issue of heterosexism, Kitzinger (1996) reflected:

[W]e need to be aware of our politics, to be both self-conscious about the way in which our language reflects or undermines those politics and open to the possibility that there will be political disagreements between us that cannot—and should not—be camouflaged by the dishonest use of words. (p. 17)

Her statement can be applied to LGBTQ community members generally and to gay- and queer-identified (gay/queer) men specifically, in that the nuances of language and the complexities of issues of heterosexism and other oppressions affect the way we communicate, even amongst ourselves, even with the best of intentions. There is power in the language of oppression. It may not be enough to say that, as a community, we are

reclaiming terms for our own use, imposing our own meanings on them. There can be disagreement within our communities as to whether such terms should be or could be reclaimed. I conducted a study that explored the stance of men within the LGBTQ community on the issue of reclaiming fag/got and how they make sense of these terms as used within heterosexual and LGBTQ communities.

Both how gay/queer men are viewed in our society and how they view themselves have, over time, been shaped by and reflected in the medical and psychological fields' historical treatment of homosexuality. I will briefly highlight key points in the construction of the (ab)normality of homosexuality in both medicine and psychology in order to provide context for the rejection, ambivalence and, later, resistance and pride with which gay/queer men express their identity. This will also be tied into the etymology of the words fag and faggot and the current meaning and usage of these terms today.

Constructing Homosexuality

It was in the medical field where homosexuality was first pathologized when von Krafft-Ebing published his *Psychopathia Sexualis* in Germany in the late 19th century, defining it as a “great diminution or complete absence of sexual feeling for the opposite sex, with substitution of sexual feeling and instinct for the same sex (*homo-sexuality* or *contrary sexual instinct* [original emphases])” (von Krafft-Ebing, 1892). Homosexuality was positioned as a deviation from the norm of heterosexuality—a term also coined in *Psychopathia Sexualis*, and ironically one that is dependent on homosexuality for its existence. It was this text that set up the study of homosexuals as pathological, but often curable. Meanwhile, British physician Havelock Ellis (1896) published the first English

journal article on homosexuality “Sexual inversion in men,” which linked homosexuality with gender, leading to much psychological and medical research over the following decades conflating sexual attraction and traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Contrary sexual instinct, sexual inversion and sexual perversion were popular terms used in medical and psychological publications of cases of homosexuality in the late 19th century (Hansen, 1989).

Into the early part of the 20th century, Freud’s theories of psychosexual development encompassed the development of homosexuality, including his theory that humans are born bisexual (Hegarty & Massey, 2006). Despite having lived and worked in a period of Victorian ideals of sex and morality, Freud did not view homosexuality as abnormal (Freud, 1951). However, this relatively progressive view did not become the dominant stance and most research focused on diagnosing or identifying homosexuals as deviant (Kitzinger & Coyle, 2002; Minton, 1997). As homosexuality had already been linked with gender, tests to determine sexual orientation often included measures of gender expression or identification, such as a subscale of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) (Hathaway & McKinley, 1940; Kinsman & Gentile, 2009). Gay men were thought to be too feminine to be soldiers (Shilts, 1993).

Homosexuals came to be viewed as a threat to national security and, therefore, to be screened out of civil service positions; a view promoted by the influential Senator Joseph McCarthy in the United States (Kinsman & Gentile, 2009; Shilts, 1993). There was a strong negativity attached to being homosexual, particularly in North America, and it was this negativity that seemed to be normalized by the disciplines of medicine and psychology.

The work of Alfred Kinsey in the post-World War Two period is seen as having had a positive effect on the gay community, in that his work suggested that homosexuality was a normal variation in human sexuality (Minton, 1997). In the 1950s, Evelyn Hooker (1957) published research on the social lives of homosexual men, framing them as a minority out-group as opposed to a population of sexual/gender deviants. It has been argued that Hooker’s and Kinsey’s work contributed to both the eruption of the Gay Rights Movement in North America (Hegarty & Massey, 2006; Kitzinger & Coyle, 2002; Minton, 1997) and the subsequent depathologization of homosexuality by the American Psychiatric Association (APA).

Homophobia and Heterosexism

After the APA voted to remove homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) in 1973, psychological research shifted from its earlier focus on the cause and curing of homosexuality to issues of discrimination and equality, largely employing approaches common to research in racism and sexism (Hegarty & Massey, 2006; Kitzinger & Coyle, 2002). The focus shifted from the problem of homosexuality to the problem of negative attitudes toward homosexuality and to the “homosexual situation as experienced and perceived by homosexuals themselves” (Cass, 1984, p. 143). George Weinberg (1972) is often attributed with popularizing the term “homophobia” to refer to negativity toward homosexuals in his book *Society and the Healthy Homosexual* (Herek, 1994; Neisen, 1990). It may also have been derived from Churchill’s term “homoerotophobia” in his 1967 publication *Homosexual Behaviors Among Males: A Cross-Cultural and Cross-Species Investigation* (Churchill, 1967; Hegarty & Massey, 2006; Neisen, 1990). Toward the end of the 1970s, research had shown that “phobia”

was a bit of a misnomer in that homophobes did not display the physiological responses common to other clinical phobias (Mosher & O’Grady, 1979; Shields & Harriman, 1984). Nevertheless, the term did catch on and is still popularly used as a catchall term for negative attitudes and behaviours toward persons perceived to be homosexual or bisexual.

Gregory Herek (n.d.), a psychologist who developed the Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men (ATLG) Scale, expressed another limitation of the term homophobia in that it does not account for the larger social problem of prejudice and discrimination (P/D) experienced by actual and perceived nonheterosexuals. It especially does not account for systemic instances of discrimination against nonheterosexuals that are built into laws, policies and institutions (Herek, n.d.), such as same-sex marriage laws, spousal benefits, medical visitation rights and adoption, to name a few. Homophobia seems inadequate for capturing the breadth of nonheterosexuals’ experience of P/D.

At the same time that homophobia was beginning to lose some of its usefulness as an operational definition in the late 1970s, the term “heterosexism” was beginning to gain some support in academic communities. Heterosexism is the general assumption that heterosexuality is the norm; consequently, all other sexual orientations and genders that push or reject the boundaries of traditional sex roles are devalued. Herek (1990) refers to heterosexism as:

[A]n ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any nonheterosexual form of behavior [sic], identity, relationship, or community. Like racism, sexism, and other ideologies of oppression, heterosexism is manifested in both societal customs and institutions, such as religion and the legal system (referred to here as *cultural heterosexism* [original emphasis]) and in

individual attitudes and behaviors [sic] (referred to here as *psychological heterosexism* [original emphasis]). (pp. 316-317)

This term promotes the view of nonheterosexuals as a minority group, not dissimilar to a racialized group, and one that is negatively impacted by sexist social norms.

Heterosexism comprises negative attitudes and behaviours (both overt and subtle) toward any expression of sexuality that does not conform to heterosexual, gender-appropriate behaviour. It also encompasses the negative systems in place that prevent nonheterosexual persons from fully accessing resources, services and social capital available to those who express traditional heterosexual behaviours, desires and identities.

For the purposes of this study I chose to use the term heterosexism, as I believe it captures both the subtle and more overt P/D that nonheterosexuals face on a daily basis. In addition, heterosexism seems broad enough to capture individual attitudinal and behavioural instances of discrimination, while acknowledging the important element of power differentials and structural inequalities. Heterosexism, then, reflects both prejudice (attitude) and discrimination (behaviour), at an individual, interpersonal level, and institutional/societal level.

Everyday Prejudice and Discrimination

Prejudice and discrimination (P/D) have largely been studied in psychology through the assessment of negative actions and attitudes of the perpetrator. Though there has been work over the decades that explores P/D from the point of view of the target, it has never caught on as the predominant approach in psychological research (Swim & Stangor, 1998). There are, however, important insights that can be gleaned through studying oppression through the eyes of the oppressed. As Swim and Stangor (1998) suggested, feminist psychologists have uncovered new and nuanced realities of sexism by

studying women’s perspectives and giving voice to the targets. From the experience of targets we may learn strategies that they use to deal with the P/D that they experience.

Essed (1990) took the perspective of 14 Surinamese-Dutch and 11 African-American women in a study she conducted in the Netherlands and the United States. Through her interview study, she learned that women of Surinamese descent in the Netherlands and African-American women all reported living with daily incidents, hassles and negative pressures that reminded them of their lower status in a society that favours individuals of European descent in general and men of European descent specifically. She learned that many of these daily occurrences are subtle and covert such that it is not often easy to pinpoint the exactness of the wrong. She called this subtle, constant prejudice experienced by persons of colour “everyday racism” and wrote that it “often seems to be a matter of incidental and trivial unfairness ... yet this covert racism can have serious consequences” (Essed, 1990, p. 259).

Swim and Stangor (1998) built on this concept of everyday racism saying that, “[these everyday] encounters are not rare and isolated experiences but are recurrent and familiar events that can be considered commonplace” (p. 37), and that this type of P/D can “affect people’s choices about what to say in certain interactions, how to present themselves, and where to socialize, live, go to college, and work” (p. 39). Targets of P/D have agency. They make choices about how to deal with the negativity they regularly receive—whether or not the negativity is perceived as intentional—and these choices sometimes include whether targets recognize negativity as discrimination at all. It has been difficult for social psychologists to study subtle or covert prejudices in a lab. These

events can be fleeting, multi-layered and then they must be perceived as negative by the target.

One of the ways to understand how targets understand prejudice and discrimination has come from a focus on an appraisal process, based on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) cognitive appraisal perspective, whereby individuals first decide whether they have been discriminated against and, if so, determine the level of threat posed by the discriminatory event and whether they have the resources to cope with the level of threat, a concept added by Feldman Barrett and Fong (as cited in Feldman Barrett & Swim, 1998). More specifically, when assessing potentially discriminatory events, a target will first judge whether the incident is acceptable and provide a reason for why it is not acceptable. Individuals may attribute the event to their identification with a particular group, for example gay/queer, depending on their individual previous experiences with P/D. Making this initial appraisal often depends on an individual's sensitivity to P/D. This approach to threat appraisal has been elaborated upon by Feldman Barrett and Fong using signal detection theory (SDT), which was originally used in physical perceptual testing, but later applied to judgments regarding social psychological phenomena (Feldman Barrett & Swim, 1998).

SDT was originally used to study individual responses to perceiving or attempting to perceive weak signals, making it particularly useful in talking about everyday P/D, which is often subtle or covert. SDT also looks at sensitivity and response style or bias, two subprocesses in judgment calls. Sensitivity is affected by individual perceptual differences and consists of recognizing P/D when it is present or noting its absence when it is not. Besides the individual's perceptive abilities, a person's sensitivity is also

influenced by the ambiguity of the event. An individual's sensitivity may be connected to how knowledgeable they are about social interactions and prejudice, which can come from their own experiences, the shared experiences of friends or family, or explicit training (Essed, 1990; Feldman Barrett & Swim, 1998). Sensitivity generally makes persons more aware of their environments and the social interactions within those environments. Therefore it is fair to say that a person who has experienced and recognized P/D may be expected to be more sensitive to detecting it in future events. This may occasionally cause some out-group members to say things like “they're playing the gay card again,” or “everything's homophobic to them,” or “don't be so sensitive, can't you take a joke?” I believed that participants in my research might perceive fag/got as a heterosexist threat, even when used by other gay/queer men, and that this might be an especially ambiguous experience to be read as prejudice or discrimination.

Response bias refers to an individual's tendency to respond in one way over another. This bias is influenced by an individual's assumptions about the likelihood of prejudice or discrimination occurring in a given situation, as well as their perceptions of the costs of missing an actual discriminatory event or misperceiving a non-discriminatory event as discriminatory. According to Feldman Barrett and Swim (1998), when a person believes that an environment has a high likelihood of prejudice or discrimination, their individual threshold for determining prejudice or discrimination will be lower. Alternatively, when an individual believes there is little likelihood of prejudice or discrimination in a particular context, their threshold will tend to be higher. Not detecting prejudice or discrimination can have a negative effect on self-esteem, for example, by causing a person to attribute negativity from the other to oneself and taking

the blame for the other’s negativity. False alarms, however, can detract from interpersonal relationships with the others involved. They may also cause people to avoid situations for fear of prejudice or discrimination that may not, in fact, exist. These types of costs are weighed in an individual’s appraisal of whether an incident is discriminatory. I kept concepts in the research on everyday prejudice and discrimination in mind during the interviews and subsequent analyses.

The role of identity

I assumed for the purposes of this study that how gay/queer men interpreted their environment would likely be related to the nature of their identification with being gay/queer and how they perceive their position in a heterosexist society. In the racism literature, for example, Black identity in African American culture has been studied as the process of nigrescence whereby a Black person moves from the internalization of racism through to the internalization of Black identity (Cross & Strauss, 1998). Cross’ model supported the study of the changing experience of the targets of P/D, as well as the psychological impact and coping strategies that arise to deal with racist encounters. Nigrescence theory delimits a process of development of Black identity, and its “parallel can be found in the consciousness-raising process experienced by women in their metamorphosis from non-feminist-to-feminist, or the *coming out* [original emphasis] process of gays and lesbians” (Cross, 1994, p. 120).

The nigrescence model consists of five stages: *pre-encounter*, where the individual may have little identification with a particular group or even have self-hatred; *encounter*, an event or series of events that shakes the individual’s identity and makes them question their pre-change self and look at a potential new identity in a more positive

light; *immersion-emersion* into a new identity, often a time of great inner conflict where one's worldview is transformed, old values and beliefs questioned and a new identity is tried-out; *internalization*, where the new identity is no longer thought about as consciously, it has assumed prominence as the individual's identity; and *internalization-commitment*, where individuals are secure and stable enough in their identity that they can interact with out-group members without experiencing tensions or questioning their own identity (Cross, 1994).

Constantine, Watt, Gainor, and Warren (2005) explicitly drew a parallel between ethnic and homosexual identity, stating that, “[m]uch like Black Americans ... gay men, lesbians and bisexual individuals must also work to a positive identity in the wake of societal oppression” (Constantine, Watt, Gainor, & Warren, 2005, p. 102). Constantine et al. went on to highlight several models of gay and lesbian identity development and coming out models. I had some reservations about drawing too close a connection between the experience of oppression based on skin colour with oppression based on sexual orientation. In my experience as a human rights advisor I have learned that members of one group do not necessarily like being compared to members of another group. It feels somewhat reductionistic for me to assume that gay/queer men's struggles have been the same as those of women and men of colour. It risks ignoring, for example, the racism that is present in the gay/queer community and leaves little space for the voice of gay/queer men of colour. However, I decided that the theory behind the nigrescence model might prove to be a useful guide in understanding gay/queer men's relationship with the dominant, heterosexual group.

Vivienne Cass (1984) created one of the earliest lesbian and gay identity development models, which included six stages: *identity confusion*, where an individual is unsure about their sexual attractions; *identity comparison*, a stage at which an individual considers the potential of being lesbian/gay; *identity tolerance* is a time of seeking out other lesbian/gay people to associate with and becoming more comfortable with the idea of being lesbian/gay; *identity acceptance* is a time of greater positivity with being lesbian/gay and increased involvement with the LGBTQ community; *identity pride* is often associated with a coming out experience and may be a point of dichotomizing gay as good and straight as bad; and *identity synthesis*, where an individual has integrated their lesbian/gay identity with all aspects of their lives, it becomes just a part of the whole (Cass, 1984; Constantine et al., 2005).

I felt that the Cross and Cass models of identity development might be useful in understanding participants' point-of-view as they discuss their understanding of fag/got and their relationship to the dominant, heterosexual group. However, I expected that there might be some limitations in adhering too rigidly to either model. Nigrescence was developed by Cross in an effort to understand the process individuals may go through in understanding and identifying with Black culture, not LGBTQ culture(s). And Cass' model of homosexual development centred on a process of coming out, which seems conflated with identifying as a member of the LGBTQ community. Personally, I have always only experienced attractions to men and never thought of myself as heterosexual. I had coming out experiences, but they did not mark the beginning of an identity change process and I thought that this might be the case for some of the participants as well. Additionally, Cross includes a realization of oppression, a societal positioning or

questioning that seems to be missing from Cass’ model. Consequently, I worked with both identity models in order to view identity development from different angles, using triangulation in order to gain a clearer, richer perception of how the participants have experienced their own development as gay/queer men (Parker, 2004).

The research I undertook was also intended to examine how participants’ various stages of identity development might relate to how they perceive fag/got and incidents of P/D. Keeping in mind SDT, discussed earlier, it may be the case that a gay/queer man in the pre-encounter or identity confusion stage would not be as sensitive to heterosexism or would have a higher threshold, so that discriminatory appraisals may not occur, or may be misinterpreted and therefore potentially damaging to the targets’ self-esteem if they internalize the negativity. In contrast, a gay/queer man in the immersion-emersion or identity pride stage may be hyper aware of heterosexism and have a very low threshold for detecting heterosexist incidents. These latter stages can come with a lot of anger, politicization, confusion (Cass, 1984; Cross 1994) and may follow from an encounter or encounters with everyday heterosexism. While I did not set out to conduct a correlational study, I have tried to account for some of the differences in participants’ experience of fag/got using these identity development models.

The Power of Language as Reclamation and/or Weapon

In her discussion of the concept of racism, Essed (1990) differentiated between racism and racial prejudice. She noted that an act of racism required an imbalance of power in that the perpetrator of a racist act is in a position of power over the target. However, Essed’s concept of power-dependent discrimination did not cover instances in which members of the in-group turn on each other. Muscio (2002) discussed the issue of

acrimony among women who “choose to be catty, cruel, prejudiced, competitive or jealous of each other” (p.129) instead of being supportive. She discussed how women wield power against each other, something particularly evident in the divide between bio-women and trans-women around issues such as the exclusion of all but “womyn-born-womyn” (Muscio, 2000, p. 254) from the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. This was partly an issue of language in terms of defining woman. The womyn with the power, womyn-born-womyn, were exercising their privilege in setting the criteria for inclusion in—and exclusion from—this festival. Just as this could be seen as an example of women being sexist to other women, I was equally interested in my study in a gay/queer man being heterosexist to another gay/queer man. I took this to be either intentionally by using the word faggot as a put-down, as I have personally experienced, or indirectly by attempting to reclaim the term and using it around other gay/queer men who have no desire to reclaim the term. Drawing from the incident outlined above, I discussed with participants their experiences of negativity coming from other men who identify as gay/queer, their perceptions of its intentionality and the link, if any, with the attempted reclamation of fag/got.

Faggot and fag. There is debate about the actual origins of faggot and its use as a derogatory term for gay men. Often sources refer to Europe in 13th and 14th centuries when the bundles of sticks that fuelled the fires used to burn heretics were referred to as faggots. From the 16th through to the 19th century the term was used in reference to women as nagging wives, and in 18th century boys’ schools in England faggots referred to younger boys who would do chores for older boys as if they were slaves (van der Mark, 2007). Pierce (2001) argued that the first appearance of the word faggot was

actually in 1914 in a dictionary of American slang. Fag may be a derivative of faggot, although it may also have been related to a reference to cigarette, in that it was once believed to be effeminate to smoke (Richter, 1993). But all agree that by the 20th century the term faggot was used in Canada and the United States to refer to effeminate boys or men. As homosexuality in men was linked to effeminacy as shown above in examples of the history of medical and psychological conflation of sexual orientation and gender, it makes sense that fag/got would come to be used in reference to boys and men perceived to be gay/queer.

There does not seem to be a reference for lesbians that is equivalent to faggot. “Dyke” is used in reference to lesbian women, but it seems to be on a similar level to fag, at least the popular usage of dyke and fag in the queer communities to which I belong. There are sexist terms that are meant to denigrate women, such as “bitch” and “cunt.” Cunt seems to have a similar impact, in terms of seriousness, as faggot, but its use is not reserved for lesbian women. Rather, the word cunt seems to be used to police gender, keeping women in their subordinate social position relative to men. Cunt is experiencing somewhat of a reclamation among some feminists and queer-identified women, particularly in reference to the sexual expression and empowerment of their bodies (Muscio, 2002). The word faggot seems to hold a special place in discriminatory attacks, although it is not restricted to degrading gay/queer men, or men who are believed to have sex or relationships with other men. Faggot is also used in gender policing, attempting to enforce the expression of traditional gender roles (i.e., what it means to be a man) as dictated by social norms (Pascoe, 2005).

In one study of bullying and heteronormativity, the authors note that, “The average student of diverse sexuality hears eight homophobic insults per day with one third from faculty and staff” (Sweet & DesRoches, 2007, p. 173). Another study, in Australia, looked at the usage of the word faggot with a sample of adult men (Plummer, 2001). The participants told stories of using faggot as early as elementary school, but not necessarily in reference to homosexuality. It was reserved as the worst slur to use on another boy and the message was clear; one did not want to be called a faggot. It was used toward other boys who were not acting appropriately masculine, were not sporty, were too smart, or simply expressed emotions too freely. It was in adolescence that faggot took on a heterosexual connotation (Plummer, 2001).

For this study, I explored whether there is a difference between faggot and fag and what each of these words meant and I have attempted to decipher what those differences in meaning or connotation may be. Meanwhile, both faggot and fag are terms that are currently used by some men who identify as gay/queer in an attempt to take back the power associated with these terms and to use them in positive and reaffirming ways (Kitzinger, 1996; Pierce, 2001), as demonstrated in the Dan Savage quote earlier. However, there is disagreement within the community as to whether this is desirable or even possible (Barsotti, 2009; Lewis, 2010; van der Mark, 2007).

Language reclamation. Brontsema (2004), in her article on the reclamation of queer, said:

Hate speech intended to disable its target simultaneously enables its very resistance; its injurious power is the same fuel that feeds the fire of its counter-appropriation. Laying claim to the forbidden, the word as weapon is taken up and taken back by those it seeks to shackle—a self-emancipation that defies hegemonic linguistic ownership and the (ab)use of power. Linguistic reclamation,

also known as linguistic resignification or reappropriation, refers to the appropriation of a pejorative epithet by its target(s). (p. 1)

Jane Hill (2008) discussed linguistic appropriation in terms of White racism, whereby the White majority adopts terms from non-White groups, claims them as their own, imbues them with the dominant group's meaning and then attempts to deny the use of these terms by the original group from which the terms were stolen. In order to do this successfully, the “dominant group must control the institutions through which linguistic resources circulate, such as markets, media, schools, and the legal system” (p. 159). This need for institutional control would seemingly make it difficult for gay/queer men to determine the meaning and usage of fag/got, yet it does not prevent oppressed groups from attempting to take back the power of oppressive language. I was interested in exploring what the effects might be of using reclaimed terms around individuals in one's own community who may not support the use of those terms. I hoped to explore whether gay/queer men believed that they could be heterosexist toward other gay/queer men by using fag/got around individuals who have not reclaimed it. I also was interested in whether the perception of fag/got changes, depending on the context; that individuals might be offended by the use of fag/got in one context but not in another.

Brontsema (2004) discussed the reclamation of the word queer and argued that there were three main positions group members took in the support or opposition of reclaiming derogatory terms. First, the pejorative meaning of the negative term is viewed as inseparable from the word itself and so reclamation is opposed. According to Brontsema, this tends to be the view of persons who believe the meaning of words to be unchanging. Second, is the position that the pejorative meaning can be made neutral or even positive and therefore reclamation is supported. Brontsema discusses this as mostly

the position of persons who have never experienced being attacked by the term and, as far as queer is concerned, there may be a generation gap. Finally, there is the position that the pejorative meaning cannot be separated from the word and reclamation is supported. In this way, persons using the term queer highlight the stigma that the word imposes, calling into question the very concept of normalcy and drawing a distinction between in-group and out-group members (Brontsema, 2004). I kept these three positions in mind during the analyses for this study as I considered that it would be possible that gay/queer men may express similar positions on fag/got.

Three main research questions guided this project. First, how do gay/queer men negotiate the usage of fag/got? This question encompassed the meanings of fag/got, and why some gay/queer men like the terms and some do not. Secondly, is language reclamation related to gay/queer identity development? This is where I intended to use the Cross (1994) and Cass (1984) development models as lenses through which to view positions on reclaiming fag/got. And finally, is fag/got perceived as heterosexist, particularly when used by gay/queer men? This covered understandings and experiences of heterosexism and everyday heterosexism, detecting prejudice and discrimination in the environment, and whether it is possible for gay/queer men to be heterosexist toward each other. These broad questions framed my thesis and provided the direction for data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Method

For this study I chose a qualitative methodology, which differed from quantitative approaches in that it involved an inductive process, starting with the individual voices of the participants, who were viewed as experts on their own experience. Because of the

socially constructed nature of phenomena of interest, I took a social constructionist and critical psychological position in that I did not assume the existence of an essential truth (Charmaz, 1995; 2006). Rather, I assumed that the understandings and findings of this study were the co-creation of reality between researcher and participants (Charmaz, 1995) and I have endeavoured to discern meanings and uses of the words faggot and fag for gay/queer men. My biases as researcher were taken into account in this process of knowledge co-creation through the use of reflexive journaling, as they were expected to influence the angles from which this issue was viewed and reported (Morrow, 2005).

I identify as a man who is both gay and two-spirited. I have had experience working in a human rights role where I regularly dealt with complaints regarding the Ontario Human Rights Code, including harassment and discrimination based on sex, gender and sexual orientation. I was part of a team that designed and facilitated a campaign to educate and provide resources for students, staff, faculty and administration in a higher education institution. This helped sensitize me to issues faced by members of LGBTQ communities, on both interpersonal and systemic levels. I have been involved in several LGBTQ community organizations as member, volunteer and occasional board member, including queer choirs and a two-spirit social/cultural group where I witnessed and experienced how queer-identified individuals interact and at times conflict. In my interpretations and inductive processing during this study, I drew, in part, on skills developed through my work and LGBTQ community experiences, and the insights into issues faced daily by persons who identify as queer.

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of men who identified as gay, queer, homo, heteroflexible and attracted to more than one gender (Table 1), largely in Eastern Ontario, with one participant in Southern Ontario, and one in Western Canada. I sent recruiting emails to listserves such as Pink Triangle Services, the Ottawa Gay Men’s Chorus, Carleton University’s GLBTQ Centre, University of Ottawa’s Pride Centre, Algonquin College’s Positive Space program and Pride Centre, and posted notices on Facebook pages for Queer Ottawa, Ours Ottawa Bears and Bi Men Ottawa. Interested persons contacted me for more information or to set up interview appointments through a Gmail account that I had created for this study or through my personal Facebook profile. Snowball sampling methods were employed, particularly in cases where I was hoping to speak with individuals with certain expertise, such as more fluid expression of gender or concepts of gender, or to speak with individuals with specific positive or negative opinions of faggot and fag. A total of 12 individuals were interviewed, at which point there seemed to be no new relevant information provided by additional interviews and as such, I decided that I had reached the point of theoretical sufficiency (Charmaz, 2006; Dey, 1993).

Every effort was made to ensure diversity in the participants, including a broad range of ages, socio-economic statuses and, when possible, ethno-cultural identities (Table 1). There is some cultural diversity in my sample, in that I spoke with several French Canadians, Anglo Canadians, one participant with Mediterranean/South American cultural influences and one with South Asian background. However, there was only one participant who identified as a person of colour, and he discussed racialization as being

Table 1

Participant characteristics

Pseudonym	Sexual Orientation	Gender	Age	Profession	SES*	Ethnicity	Education
Adam	Queer	Man	30	Social Worker	M	South Asian	Bachelor
Carlino	Homosexual	Man	50	Self-Employed	M	South American & Mediterranean	Masters
Dick	Queer	Man	42	Self-Employed	LM	European Descent	Bachelor
Fay	Queer	Man	50	Self-Employed	W	European Descent	Some post-secondary
Jake	Gay	Man	59	Civil Servant	UM	French-Canadian	Bachelor
James	Gay	Man	24	Graduate Student	UM	European Descent	PhD Candidate
John	Gay	Man	62	Retired Principal	UM	French-Canadian	2 Bachelors
Michael	Gay	Man	55	Executive Director	UM	French-Canadian	EMBA
Nicholas	Attracted to more than one gender	Trans Man	31	Graduate Student	M	European Descent	Masters Candidate
Ryan	Gay	Man	30	Technology Retail	W	European Descent	Some community college
Sheldon	Homo	Man	27	Graduate Student	M	European Descent	2 nd MA
Terrance	Heteroflexible	Man	49	Self-Employed	W	European Descent	Bachelor

*Socioeconomic Status: M=Middle Class, LM=Lower Middle Class, UM=Upper Middle Class,

W=Working Class

an important part of his identity as a queer man, particularly in terms of status within the community. I was unable to recruit more participants who identified as men of colour. The youngest was 24 years of age and the oldest was 62. The mean age of my participants was 42.42 years (median 45.5). I tried to recruit younger participants, but was unable to get commitment from a few potential participants who initially indicated an interest.

There was some diversity in terms of education levels of the participants, but overall it was a highly educated sample. Most participants had university level educations, including five out of the 12 having at least some graduate level education. It was difficult to find men who identified as bisexual. This seemed to be mostly an issue with the label. Three participants, Terrance, Adam and Nicholas, each talked about having attractions to more than just men, but did not feel that gender binary reflected in “bi” fully encompassed their sexual attractions and so I chose to drop this category from groups of interest in this study. Finally, there was a range of socio-economic statuses from working class through upper-middle class.

Procedure

Participants were pre-screened by email to ensure that they identified as gay or queer, and that they identified as a man. A mutually convenient time for each interview was arranged in a place where the participant felt comfortable and where there were few distractions. Most interviews took place on the Carleton University campus in a quiet semi-private space. Two interviews, Adam and James, were done using video chat as these participants were in other cities but eager to participate. Participants were told in advance of the general topic areas to be discussed so that they were able to give some

thought to these in advance and, as a result, provide rich and detailed responses during the interviews.

Interview duration ranged from 42 to 73 minutes. The average interview length was 57 minutes with a median of 58. The interviews were of sufficient length to allow for rich and detailed responses from the participants. Some participants were more verbose and spoke faster than others, allowing longer responses in shorter periods of time. I was initially concerned about the length of the responses of one participant, Ryan. He was very interested in the subject matter but had a tendency to respond in short sentences and often without much detail. His interview was the shortest of the twelve and was also the one in which I spoke most often, usually rephrasing questions and asking follow-ups and probes in an effort to get more detailed responses. I had to decide whether to include this interview, as I was concerned that there may not be sufficiently rich responses to be of use in this study. However, I decided that there was important information in Ryan’s interview that added to my overall analysis. In addition, Ryan elaborated in email follow-up questions, explaining that he was better at expressing himself through written rather than oral communication.

Before each interview began, participants read, or were read—in cases of video chat interviews—an informed consent document (Appendix A) outlining the nature of the study as well as their right to confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to stop the interview or withdraw from the study at any time. Informed consent also included explicit permission to audio-record the interview, using a digital voice recorder, and assured the participants that all audio files would be destroyed after the interview had been transcribed. In addition, permission to re-contact the participant for follow-up

questions and for member checks, opportunities for participants to give feedback at various stages of analysis, was also requested in the informed consent.

I also used this time before the recorded interview to begin establishing rapport with the participant. This usually consisted of small talk about the weather, the physical space in which the interview was taking place, and about the type of day that the participant had been having so far. This was an attempt to create a comfortable conversational rapport that would continue throughout the interview. My first participant actually commented during the interview about being nervous and wanting to give a good response, which made me more aware of my own approach to the interview and led to my spending a little more time on rapport building even before the recorder was switched on, just to ensure as relaxed an atmosphere as possible for each participant.

After the interview, participants were debriefed verbally and in writing (see Appendix B). By this time, most participants had little left to say about their positions on reclaiming fag/got but many spoke positively about the study itself, the positive experience of the interview, and the value in actually taking the time to have a discussion about language in this way. After each interview I completed a face sheet (Appendix C) for the participant. Each participant was asked for a pseudonym to use in place of his real name. Only two participants, Sheldon and Fay had no preference and I made a suggestion, which each of these participants accepted. Demographic information was collected and recorded on this face sheet. Participants were also asked whether they would be open to doing a member-check, that is, whether they would be willing to comment on part or all of the findings (Morrow, 2005). Participants were then thanked with a card of appreciation and were offered an opportunity to select an item from a bag

of pride/queer/rainbow stickers and buttons as a small token of my appreciation for their time.

After each interview had been transcribed, the transcript was emailed to each participant for comment. Most participants simply indicated that they were satisfied, and had nothing to add or delete. Ryan provided a little more written context for a few of his responses, saying as well that he was more comfortable communicating in writing than he was in-person. Sheldon and Terrance both commented on how odd it was to read their speech patterns, something to which they had not really given much thought to previously. Fay provided a list of corrections in terms of comments that were not clearly deciphered in the transcription process, which he believed was a combination of his accent and regional references from Great Britain that were not common in Canada.

After some initial analysis, a proposed model of how gay/queer men perceive and use fag/got was sent to the participants for comment (Appendix D) along with a brief description of what the model represented. Carlino and Adam replied to say that they believed it looked good. James said that he thought it looked really interesting and that I seemed to be headed in the right direction. Sheldon and Fay asked questions which made me feel as though it was unclear what I was trying to say and that it appeared as though I was creating discrete categories into which all gay/queer men must fit, neatly, in their views on fag/got. I used this feedback to approach my model in a different way, in an attempt to make it more fluid and less discrete. The final model (Figure 1), however, was completed without further feedback from the participants, but reflected the interview data, and addressed concerns raised by the member check.

Interview Protocol

The interviews themselves loosely followed the interview guide (Appendix E), which lists topic areas and potential probe questions. Unlike a structured interview, not all questions were asked of all participants, depending on participants' responses. The probe questions listed served as more of a reminder for me to ensure that as much detail and richness was garnered from the participants' responses as possible. Although the interviews followed a tree-and-branch model (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) in that I tried to ensure that each participant discussed some specific areas of interest, the process was fluid and responsive to the individuality of each participant.

In addition to building conversational rapport prior to the start of the actual interview, as mentioned above, earlier questions in the interview process were quite general and used to establish further rapport with the participant (Charmaz, 2006; Patton, 1990). As suggested by the interview guide, almost every interview began with a discussion of the participant's sexual identity and what it meant to them to identify in that way. In a way I was asking them to tell their coming out stories, which most participants did in some detail. In my personal experience, often when gay or queer men get together, coming out stories are discussed, perhaps to connect with the other on what is usually a common and shared experience, the process of telling others about one's sexual identity or sexual orientation. Some participants shared very detailed personal histories with me and others were more brief, and talked about the processes of coming out, as opposed to their personal experiences. Some participants talked about how they went about the self-disclosure, others spoke about what happened when they self-disclosed. An exception was Ryan. As mentioned above, Ryan later disclosed that he was more comfortable

communicating in writing than face-to-face. This did not seem to be a discomfort with or a lack of rapport with me, specifically, as much as it was Ryan’s personal discomfort with orally discussing his personal views and personal history. He was generous in his written responses to my follow-up questions. In most cases, the coming out question was an effective icebreaker, and allowed for a more fluid conversation as the questions became a little more specific.

As rapport developed the conversation shifted into more detailed questions and some of the more intimate content, such as the participants’ personal experience with everyday heterosexism and the emotions that were involved in those experiences, including discussing specific remembered moments of encountered heterosexism. This was a major area of questioning that changed focus during my data collection process. It was difficult at the outset to develop questions that would elicit detailed responses to the issue of everyday negativity and hassles related to one’s sexual orientation. I settled on questions such as, “Are there times, on a day-to-day basis, that you are more aware of your sexuality than usual,” and, “Can you describe one of those times? What was it that made you think more about your sexuality at that time?” I learned rather quickly that these questions were based on my assumption that participants would have a clear, shared concept of heterosexism. As attitudes and even verbal acts were not usually viewed as acts of heterosexism, it was very difficult to explore the nuances of language as a heterosexist act. Subsequently, I chose to focus less on the perception of fag/got as acts of heterosexism and more on the ways these words were perceived and used, as there seemed to be sufficient material to be analyzed apart from the additional layer of the language as heterosexist.

I used the recent censorship of the full version of the song “Money for Nothing,” by Dire Straits, from private radio stations in Atlantic Canada (Patch, 2011) as my jumping off point to discuss issues such as participants’ understanding of fag/got, views on the concept of language reclamation, and understandings of heterosexism. Nine participants were familiar with this recent event as it received much media coverage and initiated much discussion in both the queer and heterosexual communities. For the other three participants who were unfamiliar with this news story, I described it as a concrete example of the complex debate surrounding language related to gay/queer men; I included the lyrics of the verse containing the word faggot. Participants were then asked, through a variety of questions, to reflect on the incident and discuss their broader views on the use and perception of the words fag and faggot, including positive or negative experiences with the words, positions on language reclamation, and issues of “ownership” of terms that are viewed by some to be derogatory.

After the interviews ended and the participants had been debriefed and thanked, I completed a post-interview comment sheet (Appendix F) in order to record any relevant information about the interview that may not have been apparent in the audio recording, such as physical expressions, and important, relevant environmental contexts that may have an impact on the interpretation of the data. I also used the post-interview comment sheet as an opportunity to briefly evaluate the interview itself and my own performance, in an effort to help make subsequent interviews more effective.

Analysis

A grounded theory approach to data collection and analysis was chosen for this study, as described by Charmaz (1995), as it was conducive to social constructionist and

critical psychology approaches and provided a systematic method that helped maintain scientific rigor. In order to impose as little on the participants as possible, a semi-structured interview guide was used to direct the conversations, though conversations were flexible, allowing participants to discuss topics in ways that were meaningful to them. After the initial three interviews were conducted, I transcribed and analyzed them in order to make decisions on the effectiveness of questions, to consider possible new directions for exploration in future interviews and to assess the overall effectiveness of the process. After this point each interview was transcribed and analyzed before the next interview occurred. Questions were constantly reviewed and altered slightly or deleted where necessary in order to help draw out the richest possible responses from the participants (Charmaz, 2006).

Theoretical sampling was employed in that participants were recruited who were thought to have a potential expertise in certain subject areas (Charmaz, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For example, it became evident that attitudes toward gender or gender roles were related to opinions on fag/got, so I looked for participants who might have a more fluid concept of gender, such as someone who identified as trans, and men who expressed more traditionally feminine type traits. In a process of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 1995) coding of the data collected in each interview was compared with each of the previous interviews, so that these coded meaningful chunks of data would be as consistent as possible. An ongoing memoing process provided an audit trail during all stages of this study, which helped track emerging themes and document analysis-related events.

Charmaz’s (1995, 2006) approach to grounded theory was used in analyzing the data collected in these interviews. NVivo 9 software was used to facilitate the coding and memoing processes, as well as to create some visual representations of the data in order to view possible relationships of themes and categories with one another. Transcripts of each interview were coded into “meaningful chunks” (MacQueen, McLellan, Kay, & Milstein, 1998, p. 33), using active words to capture the essence of these chunks. In vivo codes, using the participants’ own words, were used as codes where possible in order to remain close to the data (Charmaz, 2006). Codes were compared within each interview as well as between interviews, to ensure that they were clearly capturing the same meanings, which also aided in identifying themes in the data (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Memos were used to organize and document the processes of code comparison as well as to help create themes and categories.

A constant comparative method allowed for theoretical sampling in order to achieve theoretical sufficiency (Charmaz, 2006). Once themes had been defined, they were compared against the original codes and the transcripts in order to confirm the accuracy of the themes and to place them back into the context of the participant’s own words. I used a methodological journal to track my thought processes throughout the study and provide evidence of obstacles and analytical decisions, leaving an audit trail for this project.

The analysis process, as described, was concurrent with data collection. After the first three interviews, which were used to establish patterns of responses and to direct the next iterations of data collection, each interview was analyzed and compared with prior interviews before the next interview. I met several times with my thesis supervisor to

discuss the transcripts and to compare initial impressions as to coding and themes. I also met weekly with a group of peers, psychology graduate students, whom I would update on my research progress. This was useful as it was necessary to explain my processes and early analysis in clear and concise ways to allow understanding for those who had not read the transcripts and, in many cases, had no experience with qualitative research. Having others act as sounding boards helped me to make connections and clarify my own understanding of the data in the analysis process. These meetings complemented my reflexive journaling and I believe helped me avoid getting trapped in one way of thinking about my data or the relationships among themes.

This process also helped in my immersion in the data. I read through transcripts several times before coding, and in describing highlights of interviews to my supervisor and my peers, I was developing a greater familiarity with the data which would help me in the coding process and in seeing relationships between categories and themes.

Through this process I have developed a model of how gay/queer men use and perceive the words faggot and fag, particularly as it relates to positions on reclaiming these words.

Results

The results of the 12 interviews analysed in this study are presented in terms of major themes, including: understandings of fag/got, experiences of fag/got, positions on reclaiming fag/got, everyday heterosexism and threat appraisal, gender expression and gender roles, group membership and intra-group distinctions. I have provided quotations from participants' transcribed interviews as examples of the reported themes. A model is proposed, which captures three different stances or positions that gay/queer men seem to take in terms of reclaiming fag/got. Finally, I have categorized participants into stages of

identity development based on the Cross nigrescence model and Cass’ homosexual identity development model in an attempt to explore potential relationships between gay/queer men’s identity development and positions on the reclamation of fag/got.

What’s in a Word?

When asked about the meaning of the words fag and faggot most participants spoke about their beliefs about the words’ origins. Jake, a 59 year-old civil servant of French-Canadian background, spoke about a time when he had responded when someone had used faggot to put him down:

I told him that a faggot is a piece of wood that you burn. A fag, no I don’t know, if you live in Britain, a fag is a cigarette. But in North America, I think that it can be used interchangeably.

Fay, a 50 year-old professional actor and writer from Great Britain also spoke of this commonly accepted etymology, “I grew up with [fags] being cigarettes ... Faggot, ah, it was a meatball or the Italian word for a bassoon. My brother was a bassoonist; a faggoteer.” John, a 62 year-old retired school principal, and spouse of Jake, said that, like the equivalent words in French, it was odd to hear words that have other meanings applied to gay/queer men:

Because in French, the two terms *fifi* and *tapette*, *fifi* is a dog’s name. They have posters saying *fifi* is a dog’s name. *Tapette* is a *tapette à mouche* [fly swatter] to kill the flies ... So I like those posters because they kind of put the reality where it is. And I don’t know if faggot- faggot is a small piece of wood, is a twig ...

John felt that words should maintain their literal meaning and not be used as an insult.

There was general agreement among participants that fag/got had little literal meaning when used as a derogatory label. Sheldon, a 27 year-old graduate student working on his second Master’s degree, said:

I think fag is one of those words that, it basically has no semantic content. Like, it kind of does, you could draw a fag if asked to draw a fag I suppose, or describe

one, but what it actually means, what it actually refers to is a relationship between people, or a way of interpolating yourself in the world.

At times participants did try to use words to draw a picture of what a fag/got would be.

Thirty-one year-old, graduate student, and trans-identified Nicholas’ description summarized what most participants described:

If you’re talking about fags or faggots, you’re talking about fairly effeminate men, who are quite flamboyant ... it’s that very flamboyant, very out, very Buddy Cole kind of, you know. “I’m dripping in femininity and deal with it,” kind of. There’s an attitude to it as well, I think.

Participants who had the most negative associations with fag/got also generally expressed the greatest desire not to be perceived as this type of man, as if this stereotype or this rejection of the social norms of traditional gender expression is a negative thing that should be avoided. The message here is that femininity is valued less than masculinity.

Ryan, a 30 year-old musician in the punk music scene suggested, “[Someone wanting insult another guy] could just call them a girl. Something to emasculate them or possibly demean them.” The issue with femininity will be discussed further below, however, this also leads into how fag/got is used. For Sheldon, the use of fag/got had meaning as opposed to the words themselves. Many participants agreed with this in the sense of the implied meaning of someone calling them a fag/got. As Carlino, a self-employed, 50 year-old, homosexual man, of South American and Mediterranean descent, said, “It’s just the intention that you give it. Because the word actually means something else,” or as Ryan said, “The meaning is whatever you put behind it.”

Fag versus Faggot

Participants felt that there was a distinction to be made between fag and faggot. Fag was perceived to be the less offensive or less negative of the two words. James, a 24 year-old doctoral candidate, thought, “I think fag’s nicer than faggot. Faggot’s more

insulting. Fag is still insulting but not as insulting. I think faggot is a stronger word than fag.” He felt that fag had less impact than faggot when being used as an insult. When I asked Terrance, self-employed, 49 year-old, heteroflexible man of European descent, whether he felt the two words were different, he said, “They are to me (pause). Fag is friendlier.” He would likely be more inclined to use fag than faggot when joking with other men in the rainbow community (as he referred to the LGBTQ community).

Nicholas, as a linguist, thought that some of the distinction might be in terms of the number of syllables:

If you’re going to the extra effort of saying faggot, instead of just fag ... I think the actual time you’re speaking is the same, because you draw fag out and you shorten the syllable even though it’s still stressed (laughs). I’m such a linguist. So it’s not like you’re saying fag to save time. But to say faggot, you’re adding the articulatory gestures of the “it,” you are adding energy and your making it a more complicated thing to say. So I feel like faggot is more serious in the sense that it takes slightly more effort to say.

For Nicholas there seemed to be more intentionality behind the choice to say faggot instead of fag, which possibly communicated a stronger intensity, and in this case a stronger negativity. Fay compared the difference between using faggot instead of fag by saying, “It’s like using your full name instead of part of your name, you know? When your mum was angry with you she would use your full name.” This seems to relate with what Nicholas said in terms of more importance, more intention being placed on the longer moniker.

Sheldon also mentioned a perceived class distinction in his experience with the different usage of fag and faggot, “I think faggot tends to be the lower class use of the word. Like a lower socioeconomic class association.” He also thought that there might be regional differences as well, meaning that one might be able to plot on a map where fag was used relative to faggot. This seemed to be an assumption of an urban/rural

division for Sheldon, which may not be unrelated to his belief in the class distinction; assuming that rural areas may have relatively larger percentages of individuals in lower socio-economic statuses than in more urban centres. Other participants used terms such as “cowboys” (James) and “farmers” (Fay) to describe the type of persons they most strongly associated with being more negative towards gay/queer men. Some participants referred to their “small town” (John, Jake, and Ryan) experiences that were associated with more conservative values and higher instances of negativity toward men who were not perceived to be straight.

In terms of language reclamation, participants felt that if a reclaiming of fag/got were possible, it would likely be that fag would be reclaimed before faggot. “I would think fag is used more,” said Dick, a 42 year-old theatre professional and project manager of British parents. In his experience men in the community seem more likely to call each other fag than faggot. Sheldon had a similar impression, “I think people have spent more effort trying to rehabilitate fag than faggot,” meaning that he feels fag is the more popular term within the gay/queer men’s community. There seems to be a distinction between fag and faggot, and this distinction seems to be that, though both may be offensive and are still used as insults, fag seems to be the less serious of the two words. Faggot may even imply a greater threat of violence.

Fag/got from the Target’s Perspective

Sheldon felt that language is something you use “to do things in the world.” There was much discussion by participants of context and what they perceived a speaker’s purpose was in using fag/got. One function of fag/got was a division in status between individuals. Carlino said, “I think it’s a way to make you feel like you are a

better person than someone else.” Fay agreed with this, defining the slur function of fag/got as:

An intent to say that you don’t belong. Or that you can’t belong. Or we belong more than you do. Those sort of intents, which sets up a completely false sense of what the worlds about. ‘It’s important that our society has this.’

Sheldon spoke of these divisions in terms of social status, “when someone calls you fag, they’re kind of like slotting you into this value hierarchy.” For him, being called fag implied that he was being placed at a lower social status than the person using the word.

This held true within the gay/queer community as well; when fag/got is used in a derogatory way between gay/queer men. When I asked Ryan whether he felt that emasculation using fag/got is generally a way of demeaning people, he replied, “In the gay community, yes.” Participants felt that the biggest issue was not the meaning of the words, but the perceived intent that created the negative experience. This intent was characterized as one person attempting to gain status over another by labelling the other as weaker, less powerful, more feminine, and less masculine; fag/got implied these traits.

Participants also spoke of what they experienced when being called fag/got. When Michael, a 55 year-old, executive of French-Canadian descent, spoke of his father once calling him *une tapette* (French-Canadian equivalent of fag/got) he felt, “It’s like he put me back in the closet.” He went on to say that he felt great shame about his sexuality for many years because his father’s opinion of him was so important. Even after his father had died, Michael struggled to be the type of man he thought his father wanted him to be. John said, “Fag, faggot, it makes me feel dirty.” He felt that the categorizing of him as someone who was a fag/got, as opposed to simply someone who was gay, placed him into an undesirable, sexually unacceptable role. Adam, a 30 year-old social worker,

of South Asian descent, compared being called fag/got now relative to when he was in junior high school:

Well I don't cry over it now, right? I don't think I cried- well maybe I cried over it then, but it doesn't have the same sort of weight that it did before. It just sort of puts me back into that space in a way, of being bullied. So it just renders me small, in a way, I just feel a little bit smaller when I hear that word, and a little bit ugly, and a little bit unloved.

For Adam, feelings that he experienced by being called fag/got in his youth continue to have an impact on him in his adult life. Terrance, who has a positive relationship with fag/got distinguished uses of the term this way:

If someone says “Hey, faggot” to me, and there's anger in their voice, or they say it like it's a bad thing, I vacillate between angry and afraid (laughs). If someone in the community has a smile and greets me with, “Hey fag,” it's a badge of honour. It's recognition of we've gone through some of the same stuff. And so in that context it's perfectly acceptable.

For Terrance there was a camaraderie or a bonding related to using fag/got positively with other men in the gay/queer community; it recognizes a shared struggle. Dick also has a positive association with the terms. He grew up as part of a Mormon family that immigrated to a small Ontario town, and he felt that fag/got served a protective function for him in his youth:

I kind of took it as a compliment I think, as well, because I think there's a difference there ... It was always this feeling that I'm not really from here. So there was already a sense of other- and that there were no Mormons in town ... it kind of fuelled the “Don't worry about it. You're not going to be here.” It was a bit of a protection device if anything. Because ... I knew that I wasn't going to stay.

Dick used the categorizing of him as a fag/got as a reminder that he did not want to be part of that community in which he was raised. He aspired to a future that could not exist in the small town of his youth, and so he viewed fag/got as a reminder that he was different and that he was outside that community, and therefore not trapped by it.

Reclaiming fag/got

When asked what reclamation of the terms fag and faggot actually means for those in the LGBTQ community who do reclaim it, Nicholas had this to say:

Taking a word that was meant hurtfully and turning it into a positive thing. They're turning it into celebration. They're turning it into, sort of "you're going to call me faggot, well thank you," as a way of taking the sting out of it. Which makes it sound much more calculated than I think it is.

Participants were asked directly whether they felt that fag/got could or should be reclaimed, whether it is possible to make it a positive or at least neutral word. Generally there was a sense from participants that individuals could reclaim words but groups could not. Dick felt that reclaiming language was not something that could be imposed on others, "I don't think it's possible to do it for the people who are using it in a negative sense. You're not going to change their mind about it ... Reclamation ... is it possible? I think the short answer is no. It's not possible. Because you can't think for other people." This suggests that reclamation is an individual decision. Fay supported this by saying, "No. I don't think it's likely. But it'd be great if people could, but I don't think there are- I think there's an awareness that goes along with that. Unfortunately, you can't legislate awareness." Fay felt that the reclamation process involved a certain amount of political astuteness, an awareness of oppression and power imbalances that feed the desire to reclaim language that has been traditionally used as weapons to keep people down, to oppress. Without this awareness on the part of both the targets and the aggressors, it was unlikely that there would be motivation for a change in the perception of certain words.

Some participants wondered whether an individual's personal experience might affect their desire to reclaim fag/got. James said:

I guess certain people are reclaiming those words- people who haven't had that word used against them much are more likely to take that word and be like "Oh,

we can use this but as an empowering thing.” So for me, I’ve never really been called a fag before, so I’m more inclined to think of it as a word that we can use, depends on certain context.

However, several participants who each had experienced negativity by being called fag/got in their past had positive associations with it in the present. Dick, Fay, Terrance, and Ryan each spoke of having experienced the negative use of fag/got, but they each have found a way to use it in a positive way on an individual level. They talked about using fag/got in humorous ways, but they did not feel that this was necessarily indicative of a societal shift to a rebranding of the words, it was more of an individual experience. Ryan thought that to some extent his use of fag/got may help to change the meaning of the word in the future, “just the whole meaning of the word will change. And it will either fade out of existence and be replaced by something else, or it’ll just have a more positive meaning behind it.” His idea that fag/got would simply be replaced by something else spoke to the function of language reclamation. Sheldon spoke of this in terms of the “end game” of reclaiming fag/got:

I guess it would be useful if we buried the prejudice that motivates them. We haven’t always used the words faggot and fag to refer to gay men. There were other offensive words before, arguably cuter offensive words ... so I mean, sure it would be nice to bury those words if people are sick of hearing them, but unless you bury the prejudice with it, then someone’ll just come up with a new moniker.

This related back to legislating awareness (Fay) and controlling how others use language (Dick), which is a more difficult task than controlling one’s own perception and reception of fag/got. Dick, Fay, Terrance, and Ryan decided how they were going to experience the words in their own lives, though they have no doubt that the world they live in still has the same prejudices that motivate the use of fag/got as a slur.

Ryan, who likes fag/got, said that by using the term in a humorous way, “You’re pretty much stripping the old negative context of the word of any power it might have had.” He described a situation with a straight-identified friend and co-worker:

[Who] used to make gay jokes all the time. Then after I came out to him, he stopped altogether. And I actually asked like a week or two later, “why did you stop? I thought they were hilarious.” So he took the time on his lunch break to go find a box of homo milk for me (laughing), put it down in front of me and said, “There you go faggot, drink up.”

Ryan saw a possibility in transforming the context or negative association of fag/got to a positive one by continuing to use it in playful, humorous ways, and often encourages individuals who have negative associations with the terms to challenge their own perceptions. In challenging other gay/queer men on their negative associations with fag/got, Ryan also makes a statement about an individual’s power to decide how they will use and be affected by fag/got.

Jake touched on this as well saying, “what we can do is control our reaction to it ... we have to work at desensitizing ourselves to the hate, while keeping our feelings intact (laughs). Not an easy thing to do.” This implies that it might be possible to change from having a negative association with fag/got to having a positive or neutral association with it. Adam spoke about actively engaging in this process when speaking of trying to change his aversion to being playfully referred to in the feminine by other queer individuals:

It bothers me. I wish I was cooler with it. But I have an immediate reaction when, you know, a guy calls me girl or girlfriend or whatever. It’s taken me some time to chill out about that. I’d say in the past year, I’ve tried to put a lot more work into it, because I’ve noticed my reaction to it and I think it’s kind of stupid.

There may be a benefit in shifting away from trying to change social attitudes, which can be a long, slow process, to focusing on how one perceives fag/got at an individual level.

Carlino spoke of imagining a society in which homosexuality or queerness is not viewed negatively:

I actually dream that this society, that everybody's treated the same and there's no difference between women and men, and gay and straight and white and black. It's like a utopian society. But again- it will eventually arrive, this kind of society ... Maybe, you know, in Star Trek time ... Twenty-fourth, twenty-fifth century maybe.

Sheldon spoke as well of this slow cultural change process in terms of the change of the meaning of the word sodomy over time:

The original twelfth century use of the term “sodomy” meant being uncharitable to strangers. And that the original story about Sodom and Gomorrah was that the Sodomites were unkind to strangers and didn't help the poor and the needy in their own city ... But interesting as that may be, it seems totally irrelevant because that's not what sodomy means today. So if fag were changed, super, but if it takes 800 years, is it a worthwhile cultural project? I think not.

This suggests that the emphasis should not be placed on the word fag/got but instead change would be more practical at an individual level. This is not to say that it is necessary that individuals create a more positive or neutral association with fag/got, but if one wished to escape or control the negative impact of the term, it may prove more successful and more efficient to shape how that individual perceives fag/got.

Several times the idea of reclaiming fag/got was compared to the reclaiming of queer. There was general agreement that queer has largely been reclaimed, that it is used less as a slur. Nicholas spoke about how queer referred to a larger group, had a broader reference, which may have accounted for the likelihood of queer being reclaimed though fag/got has not:

You can take the name queer and apply it to a lot of different people. You can apply it to women, you can apply it to trans people, you can apply it to men, you can apply it to drag queens, you can apply it to people who are into kink and polyamory and stuff. It's a way of saying nonheterosexual, nonheteronormative. Whereas, I think faggot and fag are very directed to a specific group ... it's very much- it's pointing an arrow, right? Queer is sort of saying “all of that” [making

a large circular motion with his hands and arms]. Fag is very much “that” [making a small space with just his hands]. It’s a much narrower slice.

It is possible that people who do not belong to a particular group may never perceive a word used to negatively label a specific group as acceptable. It may also be that those within the fag/got group, for example, resist others using the word that has been applied to them. This relates back to the concept of ownership of language.

Queer was “owned” by a larger group in our society. Meanwhile, academic institutions, an even larger, more powerful group, arguably a predominantly heterosexual institution, took ownership of queer, accepting usages such as queer studies and queer theory. Permission had been given by the dominant group for this word to be used in a way that was dissociated from the negativity it had held. When asked whether queer can still be used as a slur or an insult, Ryan said, “I think you’d be laughed at if you did. Because the meaning of the word’s changed so much.” It may be that reclamation is possible, though reclamation of fag/got is not possible or likely according to these participants.

Model of how gay and queer men negotiate use of fag/got

Participants experienced fag/got from three main positions (see Figure 1). These positions or points of view are based on how individuals’ weighted their personal beliefs relative to heterosexual social norms: 1) *nonreclaimers* give more worth to heterosexual norms over their personal beliefs, 2) *fence-sitters* highly value of both personal beliefs and heterosexual social norms, and 3) *reclaimers* perceive personal beliefs as more important than heterosexual social norms.

Nonreclaimers reject the use of fag/got in most circumstances. These individuals often prefer passing, living their lives and expressing their gender and relationships in

ways that are predominantly in line with heterosexual norms. Individuals who are biased towards this position also emphasize the concept of equality, in terms of achieving equality with heterosexuals. Heterosexual norms are largely unquestioned except for instances of perceived inequality, such as same-sex marriage rights or harassment or discrimination based on sexual orientation. Carlino, Michael, John, and Jake fit into this position (Table 2).

In the case fence-sitters, individuals having a strong investment in mainstream society but also a critical stance on gay/queer positions in the dominant society. Individuals who approach this fence-sitter position recognize the oppression of gay/queer men, however, they also value many of the privileges afforded by not rejecting all heterosexual norms. Individuals who are drawn to this position tend to reject fag/got at a personal level but support it on an intellectual level, particularly at the community level. These individuals recognize the potential power in gay/queer men using fag/got themselves in positive or reaffirming ways, though they do not personally feel a sense of empowerment in using the terms themselves. They balance investment in their individual identity and being part of the dominant, heterosexual group. To this position I have assigned Adam, Sheldon, Nicholas and James (Table 2).

Finally, reclaimers focus more on their personal perception of fag/got rather than how others use the terms toward or about them. Individuals in this position feel largely outside of the mainstream and often critique and reject heterosexual social norms while celebrating their uniqueness. These individuals have less investment in social norms; often creating their own values either in reaction to pressure from the dominant group or by taking only what works for them and rejecting the rest. Individuals in this position

Table 2

Participants' positions on reclaiming fag/got

Pseudonym	Personal usage of fag/got	Other's usage of fag/got	Nigrescence stage	Cass stage	Position
Carlino	Reject	Reject	Pre-encounter	Identity tolerance	Nonreclaimer
Michael	Reject	Reject	Pre-encounter	Identity tolerance	Nonreclaimer
Jake	Reject	Reject	Immersion-Emersion	Identity acceptance	Nonreclaimer
John	Reject	Reject	Immersion-Emersion	Identity acceptance	Nonreclaimer
Adam	Reject	Support	Immersion-Emersion	Identity pride	Fence-sitter
Sheldon	Reject	Support	Internalization	Identity pride	Fence-sitter
James	Reject	Support	Internalization	Identity synthesis	Fence-sitter
Nicholas	Reject	Support	Internalization	Identity synthesis	Fence-sitter
Dick	Support	Support	Internalization-Commitment	Identity synthesis	Reclaimer
Fay	Support	Support	Internalization-Commitment	Identity synthesis	Reclaimer
Terrance	Support	Support	Internalization-Commitment	Identity synthesis	Reclaimer
Ryan	Support	Support	Internalization-Commitment	Identity synthesis	Reclaimer

transcend the negative association with fag/got and often use the words playfully, but are aware that others may find them offensive. They have no intent to offend but also often place responsibility on others to make their displeasure with fag/got known. I have assigned Dick, Fay, Terrance, and Ryan to this position (Table 2).

I have framed the division of these three positions in a way that highlights the fact that individuals may not fit neatly into one category but have a greater bias toward one of these three positions in how they experience and understand the reclamation of fag/got. As well, individuals can move between these positions, depending on circumstance, context, and experience.

Everyday Heterosexism

In addition to gay/queer men’s understanding of fag/got, I explored everyday hassles that were experienced by the participants. Participants were more familiar with the term homophobia than heterosexism, and loosely defined this as overt acts of negativity communicating hate and threat toward gay/queer men, inconsistently perceiving the negativity to be examples of prejudice or discrimination. Preference for the term homophobia was not unexpected, however I realized quickly that my concept of heterosexism was not the same as the participants’ concepts of negativity toward perceived homosexuals. Even James, who has held positions in LGBTQ support and rights organizations, had trouble with the term heterosexism:

I haven’t used heterosexist much. So I’m trying to remember if heterosexist is like against heterosexuals? But I think it’s the contrary so it would be against homosexuals. I guess I was totally confusing heteronormativity which is an awesome word.

Terrance was not familiar with heterosexism as a term at all. When asked if he'd heard of it, he replied, “No but I think I like it.” For the most part participants used homophobia as their preferred term when talking about negativity toward gay/queer men.

Carlino used the term when talking about his siblings, “And my brothers and my sister, well, they are very homophobic people ... They always say, ‘You know he’s a faggot, don’t talk to him,’ ‘Don’t be very close because he’s a faggot.’” Nicholas used it when talking about his experience attending an arts high school, “A very open-minded, very relaxed place where people were ostracized for being openly homophobic, not for being openly gay.” But how participants thought of homophobia, how they defined it for themselves was also interesting and different from my own concept of the term.

Homophobia (heterosexism), and discrimination and harassment of people perceived to be gay/queer, was usually discussed in terms of overt acts of verbal or physical aggression. Dick downplayed the discrimination he experienced in his youth, “Pretty low-key shit though. Like high school kind of, you know, “fag”. Nothing that really got in my way or affected me.” Adam had a similar experience, though he did not downplay it, “Primarily I would cite junior high experiences or high school experiences, just like getting called fag, pretty much every day through junior high and high school. I’ve never been physically assaulted.” John described an extreme experience of antigay hatred:

And I went to the door, it was this young guy, he says, “Come on out I want to talk to you.” ... I refused to go out. So they tried to break the door down. And there were three of them with baseball bats. So I escaped through the back door, called the police, the police came. Jake was in the house alone with them ... And they told him, “We don’t want to have anything to do with you, it’s him that we want. He’s running away and I will find him and we’re going to kill him.”

Michael was the only participant to really frame discrimination in terms of systemic barriers in describing coming out at work and having to ask for benefits for his same-sex partner. His experience was a positive one resulting in the vice-president of his organization telling him:

We're going to issue a memo to all the nonunion people telling them that from now on, if they want to have same-sex benefits, they're welcome to get it. And you'll probably be the first person to get it in the company.

Michael was a bit of a trailblazer, though he had not encountered much resistance. But it may be partly due to the fact that he is a corporate executive now himself that his thoughts of discrimination first took him to a workplace context. Most participants did not think of systemic barriers or of daily hassles when thinking about the concept of discrimination and harassment. Participants shared a common belief that homophobia (heterosexism) is usually overt. There was no real concept of *everyday* heterosexism.

Another common feature of how participants conceptualized heterosexism (homophobia) was intentionality. Ryan said, “I think homophobia there generally has to be intent behind it.” Dick thought along the same lines when asked whether someone needed to have the intention to harass someone, he said:

If I'm calling you a fag, and you say to me, “No I actually don't appreciate that word, and I find it hurtful,” and I continue, then I'm being an asshole. That's harassment. I'm being a prick then. For sure. I'm being a total fag (chuckles). But if I'm just using it casually and you're offended by it but I don't know that, I don't think that's harassment.

For Dick, harassing and discrimination existed with the intention to harass or discriminate. Even Michael, who deals with issues of harassment and discrimination in his work, felt that there was a necessary component of knowledge on the part of the perpetrator, “Like, if you don't know, it's not usually discrimination.” Generally,

homophobia or heterosexism was associated with overt acts that were perceived to be intentional and usually made the target feel threatened in some way.

Threat appraisal. Context was related to the process of threat appraisal and whether an individual perceived a situation to be negative and potentially dangerous.

James gave an example of fag/got being used in two different ways:

I was hanging out with my friends in front of the gay bar, and then a truck full of stupid douches drove by and yelled “fag” at us. Under that context it’s like, “You’re gay and I don’t like it,” or “You’re gay and that’s bad.” But if someone’s like, “Hey fags, let’s go to the bar,” it’s like, “You’re gay and let’s go have fun.” So it’s like, you’re a gay male is the underlying definition and then the context adds an interpretation to it.

James framed this example as a demonstration of how context was important in interpreting the fag/got. Sheldon agreed that the context or situation was important in how he perceived the use of the words:

Yeah, it is really situational. A lot of times when we talk about language ... I think about it being ideas-y ... But it’s obviously also something you use to do things in the world. And if people are going to use language to express an idea to me, that seems kosher, but if people are going to try and use language to, like, mess with my affairs, then I start to get a little leery.

Though most participants agreed that fag/got could be perceived differently in different situations, there were still individuals who felt that this did not mean that they necessarily liked hearing it in any circumstance. Carlino spoke of a desire to erase fag/got altogether:

I don’t think anybody should be allowed to use it in any case. I think it should be erased from the lexicon. That’s it. Because if a word can be interpreted in a different way, and one way is not a very good way, that means that the word is not a good word.

There was agreement among participants that fag/got was not to be used lightly. Even participants that spoke about having a more positive relationship with the word knew that it could be problematic in some circumstances. Dick recalled a situation in his past when the subtleties of using the word were not understood:

So I was sharing a house during university and one of my housemates was a German girl ... And I remember one day we had this conversation about the word fag, where she was like, “Well you use it all the time, is it okay to use it?” And I said, “Oh I think it’s fine to use it.” Well first time she used it in a sentence she got berated by twenty gay people.

Dick’s housemate did not consider that context was important, not the least of which being that she, as a straight-identified woman might not be generally accepted as “allowed” to use the word.

Terrance also shared his personal feeling on who can use fag/got in the rainbow community:

Nobody’s allowed to say it with an angry voice, unless it has been used against them in an angry voice ... Pick random twinkie [cf. twink; slender, effeminate gay man, usually young]. Probably been called faggot. Probably got beat up in high school. In anger he’s allowed to say “get off me faggot!” ... In that context it’s interchangeable with fucktard or asshole. Whether it’s right to yell at people is a different conversation.

He gave permission, dependant on circumstances, under which fag/got may be used in anger by a man who identifies as gay/queer.

SDT would suggest that there would have been variations in participants’ perceptions of discriminatory events based on their experiences of prejudice and discrimination (P/D). There was a general, low sensitivity among participants for perceiving subtle or covert heterosexism or homophobia. Almost all participants spoke of possessing a heightened awareness of potential threats in their environments, though this as well was unrelated to their individual experiences with fag/got or their histories with harassment or discrimination; most participants spoke of being alert to potential threats of physical violence. When he was thinking about public displays of affection with John, Jake spoke about an automatic alertness:

Whenever I want to have a little bit of intimacy with John, I become aware of my surroundings before I do the action. So, okay, “can I do that here? Am I safe? Are we exposing ourselves?” But it’s very automatic, very fast.

John spoke about not being comfortable showing affection in public, “Well we like to go to [the local gay bar] so walking there, or we go to [the gay-positive coffee shop], the bears [stocky, hairy, gay men] go there on Sunday, for coffee. I’m more aware than that people that see us, they probably know.” Though he went on to talk about being proud of being gay and being in his relationship with Jake, he continued to have a preoccupation with how he and his relationship were being perceived.

James framed his level of comfort in public in terms of not wanting to feel like a spectacle:

I wouldn’t necessarily hold hands with a partner walking down the street because I get looks. Most people won’t do anything, but they look at me and I don’t really want to draw too much attention.

For James there was a degree of desiring to blend in. He spoke of enjoying the anonymity of larger cities where he felt freer to express affection without perceiving it being as much as an issue for those around him. Sheldon expressed some discomfort with standing out as well:

I live in downtown. And so a lot of the people I see on the street are the office crowd, and they’re dressed for work ... And then I take the dog out on the walk and you see a sea of khaki trousers and light blue shirts and it’s kinda nerve-racking. I feel a little judged maybe. So then I feel aware that sort of, like, flowers sprout in my footsteps or something sort of fruity. Then I feel a little insecure about my sexuality.

Even though Sheldon expressed a desire to express his personal aesthetic in dressing in what he referred to as “goofy” or less traditionally masculine clothes, he also had a consciousness regarding standing out. Adam expressed a similar experience, “Sometimes when I’m outside the downtown core I feel a little bit more self-conscious in my skinny

jeans.” Such awareness or self-consciousness, at times, had an effect on behaviour as well. Terrance spoke about distinguishing between being in a gay/queer-friendly space relative to predominantly straight spaces, “If I’m out in the [queer] community, then I don’t care, I throw it out there. If I’m out in the city, separate from the [queer] community, I tend to straighten out a little bit.”

Being a real man. There was a general promotion of sexism or sexist beliefs that was to be associated with negative connotations of fag/got. Adam felt that fag/got was used to enforce traditional gender expression “It’s rooted in misogyny, but it’s basically like sissy, or girly boy, or weak. It’s to demasculinize ... if that’s a word.” Fay also spoke of gender roles, “the worst slurs were connected, not necessarily sexually, but attacking the role of manhood.” This perception of others’ intent to attack using put-downs associated with femininity presented an awareness of the valuing of the masculine over feminine in the society in which the participants live. Carlino said:

I see how people refer to this kind of behaviour, like effeminated, you know, and these bad comments about this kind of person. So you try to hide this thing ... Like, sometimes, an effeminated person and I’m very macho, kind of, so he’s less than me because I’m macho.

He was referring, here, to needing to hide effeminacy or femininity, as they are perceived to be undesirable traits in a man. He was not the only participant to express a negative association with femininity. James spoke about attitudes many gay men express in their dating preferences:

[T]hey might be like ‘oh I don’t like sissy fags,’ or ‘I don’t want to date someone who’s fem,’ or ‘I want masculine guys.’ So you see a lot of that. And so you could argue that might be homophobic.

There was a preference for the idea of being a “real man” (Sheldon), a man who expressed his gender by displaying traits that are traditionally thought to be masculine.

Fay defined what being a man meant for him:

Chromosoidally I’m a man. Hormonally, I’m a man. Physiologically I am a man with my bones and physical structure and psychologically I am male. Although, physiology, as you can see, I’m a skinny fucker. And delicate is a word that gets used for me ... And sometimes psychologically I have a receptive feminine outlook as opposed to an aggressive, outgoing demeanour, which is regarded as being masculine.

For Fay being a man included a lot of physical traits that are traditionally accepted in our society with being of male sex. However, he also referred to masculine men as being expected to be aggressive and outgoing. James talked about the pressure to express traditional masculinity:

So society obviously says that I should play more sports or I should work out more, which I try to ... yeah, pressure to be masculine, pressure to be masculine presenting. And there’s pressure not to be feminine and I get that pressure from you know the quote-unquote straight, heteronormative community, and I also get that from the queer community as well.

For James, this pressure was not exclusively something that was imposed upon gay/queer men from heterosexual society. Sheldon said, “I don’t really like the way in the gay community fag and femininity have sort of retained a negative connotation, when gay men describe other gay men.” It appeared that traditional gender roles are so engrained in our society that even in the nonheterosexual communities these views on gender expression are either accepted or go unchallenged.

Jake and John were legally married; this was an important ritual for them. Both men were previously married to women and had children from these relationships before they met each other and fell in love. Jake said, “There was no question in my mind that I was gonna get married and have kids. I’ve always wanted kids. I always wanted to be a

father.” For him, especially in the French-Canadian, Roman Catholic, small town in which he was raised, this was an expectation of what being a man meant, as well, heterosexual marriage was not just about having a spouse, it was about creating a family.

John explained:

I didn't feel- well I didn't know that I was gay. I knew I was attracted to men. And I felt I was the only one in my town. So I got married. I felt I didn't have a choice. Because everybody does. I'm from a big family, I've got eight sisters, two brothers. Everybody gets married. Everybody has children.

The script of what a relationship is, what a family is, and how a man fits into these institutions were quite rigid for John and Jake. Even when they found each other, their relationship reflected some of the same norms. John described the commitment rituals that they chose to express:

We had a commitment ceremony in 2001. It was not legal back then so we could not- ah the picture's not here. Well we were dressed alike, we had the wedding cake, and everything. There was this United Church minister that was there as our witness. Both our parents were there, the four of them.

John and Jake valued the legitimacy of heteronormative institutions and this was reflected in how they expressed their relationship. These participants were not the only ones to express a valuing of traditional gender norms. For example, when asked about how he felt about being referred to as “she” or “her” by other gay/queer men, Michael stated, “I don't like that. I am not comfortable with that.” Even James expressed some negative reaction to being referred to in the feminine, “I don't really want to be called she, because I identify, gender-wise, as male. So I don't feel that's appropriate.”

Because fag/got implied effeminacy, and that this was perceived to be negative, it follows that a big factor in the negative perception of fag/got was that it was a term highlighting the negativity of the expression of traditionally feminine traits by persons

perceived to be men, and therefore expected to express traditional masculine traits and to perform manhood in socially normative ways.

Being a good fag. Besides pressure to present as a masculine man, participants also spoke of pressure within the gay/queer community to present as sufficiently gay or queer, to express what sometimes is viewed as stereotypical behaviours in order to identify with the group. Terrance spoke of not being accepted by some people in the rainbow community, “I got the impression that I just wasn’t gay enough for them” because he was married to a woman, and identified as heteroflexible. James said, “Sometimes the pressure is you should be more flaming or you should be more of a queen or something like that. So sometimes the pressure goes the other way.” This issue spoke to divisions within the gay/queer men’s community and perceived hierarchies therein. Just because a group is labelled a minority group, it does not necessarily mean that everyone is equal within that group. Nicholas, who identified as a transman, and had given a lot of thought to what it means to be a man and to be perceived as a man, gave a detailed description of how he saw status play out among gay/queer men:

The very, very good-looking, fairly straight seeming at the top, and then two columns that sort of come down from that of the gym body down to the slob I guess. And then along that there are different subcommunities as well, like the bear community, and the leather community ... I guess the mannerisms and stuff would be the other column ... So sort of really good looking, fairly straight acting down to not particularly very good looking, not particularly straight acting. And I think that’s sort of the two tracks that run in parallel.

Adam added an element of racialization to this hierarchy:

When I look at people who identify as gay, white males, or people that I would attribute that label to, in a lot of ways it’s about passing. In a lot of ways it’s about affluence. It’s about privilege. So obviously they have power there.

For Adam, this made for the most powerful position in the gay/queer men’s community the gay, white man who performed masculine gender in socially normative ways and who

could pass for straight. Fay referred to this type as, “The log-cabin republican gays, homosexual, good men, who seem to be oblivious that their existence is dependent upon those who break the edges years before them.”

Related to divisions, the concept of separate spaces was a reality for most participants. There was a delimiting of gay/queer versus straight spaces. For some this meant community, often defined by visible LGBTQ villages within larger cities. John spoke about feeling more comfortable to be himself in such areas, “I think it’s easier in [a major Canadian city] because of the village, because there’s more [LGBTQ] people, and you see them so you might as well join.” Often participants who grew up in smaller centres spoke of having somewhat unrealistic expectations or hopes of what such villages or gay/queer communities would be. Sheldon spoke about his expectations of an LGBTQ community before actually moving to a larger centre to experience it first-hand:

Well I mean there’s something called a gay community. They have these web sites and they have cruises and travel lines, and things like that. And I’ll be able to hook up with this community of like-minded people, who’ll sort of insulate me against shocks and be my friends ... and so I kind of had, sort of a dreamy perspective of what gay community would mean.

Adam expressed a similar ideal that was jarred by the reality of his first experience in a gay bar, “I imagined that everybody would be holding hands when I got inside. Like, brotherhood, you know, and instead it was like people bitching about drag queens.”

Though the realities of LGBTQ communities did not necessarily match the idealized expectation, most participants did express a separation from the dominant, heterosexual community.

While there was a general sense that gay/queer people were outside of mainstream society, Michael spoke of flamboyant people who provoke negative stereotypes as, “not helping the cause. I know that’s not their purpose but they’re not helping gay people to

be accepted by society,” as though society would welcome gay/queer men, if they played by heterosexual rules. Fay, who identified as queer, expressed that being queer meant, “not belonging to the majority.” This could be interpreted as not subject to the norms, the rules of the straight majority, which places power and agency with those in the queer community, or it could mean being excluded from the majority, which places power with the straight majority, who has the ability to decide who has access to certain privileges.

Intra-group distinctions and gay heterosexism. Participants also expressed divisions within the LGBTQ community that could sometimes lead to conflict or misunderstandings. The larger LGBTQ community was often described as having different cliques or subcultures. Ryan pointed out that the different groups do not always co-exist harmoniously:

Within the gay scene you have all your little cliques too. So you have your butch guys, you have your more feminine guys, your twinks, you have your jocks, and generally, some people see other groups as averse to themselves.

Michael spoke about the variation within queer culture as a positive thing, “That’s why the rainbow flag, for me, is very well descriptive of what we are in a way because we come from all types of- like the gender issue, the culture issue, all of that,” but at the same time he did not celebrate all aspects of gay/queer cultural expression, “I’d say I don’t like the guys with all the feathers, and the drag queens and everything ... seeing it in the [Pride] parade and everything, there’s something inside that does not see that as- it’s uncomfortable.” These different groups were seen to sometimes disagree on which traits should be expressed and valued. As James clarified:

Sometimes there might be a group of guys that are very effeminate ... that are very into drag for example. Apparently the gays that are very queeny or really effeminate are sort of the ones that are more in power, more in charge or have more social status ... from the bear community, you got to be very masculine and

muscular and butch, whatever that means, and then you seem more attractive and more interesting and more powerful.

Conflict can arise within the greater LGBTQ community, particularly between members who identify with different cliques or subcultures, as Terrance discussed:

The leather boys, may or may not have an issue with twinkies. I mean, obviously some are attracted to- but if you find the flamboyant, over-the-top behaviour, if you just find that annoying, then yeah, it's like “Bitch, couldn't you butch it up a little bit?” I don't know if it fits the actual definition, but that would be on the verge of heterosexist, or homosexist.

Terrance, like most participants, believed that it was possible for gay/queer men to be heterosexist towards each other, and that these circumstances were usually due to identifying with different subcultures. However, as there was confusion as to the definition of heterosexism or homophobia, this was often interpreted as general disrespect and hostility based on perceived gender expression and subculture membership.

Though James spoke about more effeminate groups of men valuing the expression of femininity, this type of clique would have less privilege in the larger gay/queer men's community than groups that valued the expression of traditionally masculine traits, men who could pass for straight, men who are more conventionally attractive (Nicholas), and men who look as though they are of European descent (Adam). Groups of “effete” (Sheldon) guys within the broader gay/queer men's community are often those who are prone to being labelled fag/gots by men who identify with more masculine-expressive groups. As femininity was devalued by the majority, or at least by the dominant groups within the gay/queer men's communities, to put another gay/queer man down—calling him a fag/got—would categorize him as part of the less powerful group; again a status positioning.

Identity development models

Participants discussed identifying with different groups within the gay/queer community, and they also discussed their identity as gay/queer men, and what that means for them. They talked about what their individual journey has been like getting to where they each currently identify as gay/queer. I have used the descriptors of the stages of each model to categorize participants through the language they used to discuss experiencing life as a gay/queer man (see Table 2).

The nigrescence model consists of five stages: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment. I have labelled Carlino and Michael as in the pre-encounter stage of development, at least at the time of the interviews. In this stage, Cross' model suggests individuals may have little identification with a particular group (gay/queer). Carlino often expressed his preference for thinking himself as a person as opposed to a sexualized person:

I don't know- let's put it this way, I don't know why I have to be referred as someone different. I'm just a person that likes men. It's not that I like men, because I don't like all men (laughs), it's just like sexually, I feel more- I have more fulfilment if I have sex with a man than with a woman. That's the only difference.

Michael also put a strong emphasis on not being different, particularly after talking about flamboyant and fringy gay/queer men who push the envelope in terms of expressing their sexuality as not helping the cause:

Just to be out. Just to live our life as part of being mainstream ... Do we want to be a segregated culture from the rest? Or do we want to be part of- and if we want to be contributing group in the mainstream society ... like everybody else?

Michael had a strong desire to be like everybody else. And everybody else, to him, lived a life that was in line with heterosexual norms. Assimilation and integration are values of

individuals in the pre-encounter stage, as well as social stigma attitudes; both Carlino and Michael demonstrated such features.

The second stage, encounter, was defined as a point at which one questions one's identity and looks at a new identity in a positive way. I did not actually have a participant who would have been categorized in this stage at the time of their interview. This was not surprising as Cross defined encounter as the moment of change, an event (or a series of events) that caused the individual to look at their pre-encounter self as insufficient. It would be difficult to capture a participant during this brief moment of change. However, Adam did refer to a period of his life in which this shift may have occurred. When I asked him if there was a point when he started to embrace his queerness, he said:

I would say that the [LGBTQ awareness and education] job, so in 2007. I think that when I started the job it really pushed me in a lot of ways, really, really good and important ways ... I've gone through, "I don't identify," ... I felt like a lot of other things followed.

This seems to be the type of moment that Cross was referring to in terms of an encounter that leads to perceiving oneself differently. None of the other participants spoke of this type of change moment in their lives.

John and Jake both fit the immersion-emersion stage at the time of their interviews. This stage was described in terms of individuals trying on a new identity, and, for many, time of inner turmoil and questioning. John said, "I'm kind of proud and I'm proud of my man and I would like to have more occasion to be myself." He spoke of not being completely comfortable with publicly expressing his affection for his partner of 15 years, but that he felt he had a right to express his affection in public. Jake, his spouse, expressed a similar point-of-view, saying, "I will never hide the fact that I'm

married to a man,” on the one hand but at the same time he said, “At one point I’m going to have to decide do I tell that person, or don’t I?” For Jake, there is a constant question of whether or not to come out. These participants had adopted a new identity from their pre-encounter selves. They had begun to think more politically and have been involved with several LGBTQ organizations since coming out as gay and to identify more closely with the gay/queer community.

Adam fit the description of the immersion-emersion stage as well. His job, speaking about LGBTQ rights and issues certainly allowed him to be immersed in his new identity. He said that he attends “[queer] activist events in the city ... I post about queer things on Facebook and Twitter ... I have a queer job.” Adam’s work life, political life, and social life all seem to revolve around his identity as a queer man. He has also published a book and has written music dealing with his experience as a queer man of South Asian descent; Cross believed that creativity was also important for some individuals in the immersion-emersion stage.

The fourth stage, internalization, included three participants: Sheldon, James, and Nicholas. It was defined as a time during which individuals were often more at ease with their group (gay/queer) identity, and that it actually provides somewhat of a protection for them, as they are able to more clearly see the oppressive institutions and systems and not feel as though they are personally attacked by these, in contrast to someone in the pre-encounter stage who might feel much shame and blame for not being heterosexual.

At times Sheldon seemed to be somewhere between immersion-emersion and internalization. This may reflect his tendency to intellectualize as opposed to merely relating his personal experience. I included him here as he talked about being

comfortable with being “faggy” (in his words), “I enjoy art and culture. I like singing. I wear shorts, real men wear long trousers, in any weather. I’m comfortable acting feminine and think it’s kind of fun.” Sheldon celebrated his uniqueness, but still felt the pressure to conform.

Nicholas was a graduate student, at the time of the interview, but had also worked in an advocacy and activist type role. Overall, Nicholas identified as queer, and a trans man, but he was hesitant to label his sexual orientation, “I don’t need a name for it, I don’t need a label for it.” He spent much of his life questioning the social norms of sexuality and gender, and rejected many of those norms now. However he still had a desire to pass, to be perceived as a man, and to no longer be perceived as “the girl”, a label that was used before he began his transition, and one that he hated. He also said that he was hyper aware of potential prejudice and discrimination when he was younger, “much less so now.” He had reached a fairly laid back concept of sexual and gender identity at the point of the interview.

Finally, James, another participant with experience in the post-secondary environment advocating for LGTBQ students, identified as both gay and queer, “Sometimes I feel like using the word queer. Sometimes I feel like using the word gay.” He also exhibited the confidence associated with this stage of identity, not necessarily needing to be all that involved in the gay/queer community:

I can do my own thing and I can be independent ... Sometimes I’m really engaged and at other times I ... but I’ve never felt awkwardness around “Oh, I’m not included.” I’ve never felt like that.

He went on to say that he tries to keep up with the issues but he was not as active as he used to be in the LGBTQ community.

The final, stage of the nigrescence model is internalization-commitment. This stage included individuals who had become so comfortable with their own identity that they were no longer threatened by interacting with people who do not identify as they do, people from the dominant group. In this stage I have categorized Dick, Fay, Terrance and Ryan. Dick spoke of always having a strong sense of individuality and had a clear sense of his own identity, that of being an outsider and a sense of otherness, as evidenced in his quote earlier that expressed how being called fag/got had a protective factor for him. He embraced this, and never had to push away members of the dominant group to protect his own identity. Fay, too, was quite comfortable in his queer identity, not feeling as though he needed to belong to a gay community at all. He said, “I think the fight, if there’s going to be a fight for anything is on an individual basis.” He went on to talk about being an “observer, looking in”. Like Dick, he was content to define himself in his own terms, as opposed to defining himself by identifying with a particular group, other than identifying as queer, which to him meant not part of the mainstream.

Terrance identified as heteroflexible, which for him meant, “Gay in my head, straight in my heart, bi in my pants, kinda.” He worked and played in the rainbow community, but talked about being equally comfortable in straight scenes though his behaviour does change:

When I’m planning to go out, how I dress varies directly on where I’m going. I mean it does for everybody. But, you know, I’d be going to a bar. Well which bar I’m going to whether it’s a gay pub or strait pub, is going to define the clothes I wear. Not so much with the tank tops and kilts going to the [straight pub].

Terrance spoke of strong connections to his “rainbow people” but did not discuss any negativity associated with interacting with the straight world.

Finally, Ryan was very confident in his identity as a gay man and did not feel the need to limit his interactions to other people who identify as gay. Ryan's sexual orientation did not tend to be that salient for him on a daily basis. When asked if there were times that he was more aware of his sexuality than others, Ryan said, "So it generally doesn't come up unless I'm actually in a gay bar with straight friends. Actually I think they feel more awkward than I would." The biggest common theme for these four men who I have categorized in the internalization-commitment stage was a level of comfort; their strong sense of individual identity allowing them to interact with people of different groups without discomfort about their sexual orientation.

In Cass' model of homosexual identity development, there are six stages: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. I have also categorized each of the participants into these six stages, in order to look for relationships with positions on fag/got.

I did not have any participants that I felt were in the identity confusion stage. Nicholas did, however, describe a period in his life when he did not feel he knew how he identified, either in terms of sexual desire or his gender:

My first serious crush, I was in grade seven and it was on a girl, at the time I was a girl. I love telling stories "when I was a lesbian ..." (laughs). And then through high school I thought I was bisexual and I thought I was a lesbian. And I dated a few women and never really quite felt right. And then when I was nineteen or twenty, I guess, I realized maybe the problem isn't the women I'm dating, maybe the problem is dating them as a woman. And then I thought, okay, I'm a guy, I'm a straight guy. And I found myself still attracted to men. I was like, okay, maybe I'm a bi guy. And then by the time I was in my mid-twenties I was like "fuck this it's too confusing (laughs)."

Nicholas would probably have been thought, by Cass, to be at identity confusion at each of the realizations recounted by this participant. This stage was thought to be the beginning of the process of homosexual identity development. It is the moment when the

possibility of a homosexual identity is consciously entertained. Some participants spoke about having never been confused about their sexual attractions. For example Sheldon talked about never having come out, “And I don’t really have a coming out story because ... I just ... I guess everybody knew anyway, so- it’s just not that discrete.”

Cass’ second stage, identity comparison, was not a reality for any of the participants either, at the time of the interviews. This stage is associated with feelings of isolation and difference. Jake briefly mentioned a time in his youth when he felt this way, “Well there was nobody like that around me. And if there were they were not well perceived.” He was talking about his earliest memories of having attractions for other males, and that he felt very different and that he had to work to hide this difference because it was a negative thing. This seemed to be an example of Cass’ identity comparison, looking for others who were like him.

The third stage of this model, identity tolerance, was described as when an individual put up with this awareness of nonheterosexual identity but it was still largely viewed as negative. There was also a need to seek out other homosexuals in order to combat the isolation of the second stage. I have placed Carlino and Michael in this category, because they seem to see themselves in terms of heterosexual norms, simply replacing women with men in their relationships. Carlino spoke of being just as good as someone who is straight:

You’re just- the difference is between- it’s just that you have a different taste, let’s say, sexually. But it doesn’t make you less or more than anybody else. You have the same rights like everybody. You have the same feelings like everybody.

Heterosexuality was the measuring stick to which Carlino compared himself. Michael had an emphasis on passing. Like Carlino, he seems to put value on the heterosexual norm. He talked about gay men acting in stereotypical ways as “not helping gay people

to be accepted by society.” Michael felt that it was the responsibility of gay/queer men to strive to be accepted on the terms laid out by the dominant group in our society. But at the same time both men spent time with other members of the LGBTQ community, including attending Gay Pride parades and occasional parties within the community.

Cass’ fourth stage was identity acceptance, which focused on further involvement in the gay community, and attempting to integrate one’s public and private self; to be a little more open about one’s homosexuality and to feel validated and normalized in this new identity. In this stage I have categorized Jake and John. Both participants have reached a point where they have come to terms with who they are as gay men, and have become increasingly comfortable with coming out to others. When asked what it meant to be gay, Jake said, “That I have sex with men. And that is my identity as a man, as a person.” He felt that being gay was very much a part of who he is. John spoke about the need to be open about his sexuality and to not simply let people assume that he was straight. He told me about an acquaintance who noticed a difference in his (John’s) behaviour shortly after he had met Jake and she had assumed that he was in a new relationship:

“Ah, she must be special.” “She’s not a she, he’s a man.” I could not pretend anymore. So even though people I didn’t know, complete strangers, I just couldn’t let them think- I don’t know if that was okay, but anyway. I got some strange looks.

Though both Jake and John expressed almost a defiance in declaring their sexual orientation, there was also a discomfort. Both men spoke about being wary of displaying affection with each other in public. Jake said, “I become aware of my surroundings before I do the action.” There is still a self-consciousness, and a concern about safety that is part of their daily lives. Meanwhile they have been involved in several LGBTQ

organizations, and spoke of working hard at becoming more comfortable displaying their relationship in public and with family and friends.

Identity pride is Cass' fifth stage of homosexual identity development, and is a time when individuals separate straight spaces and people from gay/queer spaces and people, and that there develops a negative and positive association, respectively. I have placed Sheldon and Adam in this stage. Sheldon as I stated earlier, tended to speak about his ideas and opinions of language and society, but did not get into a lot of detail about his personal experience. But he did talk about his positive reaction to gay villages:

And I would walk my dog down from where we lived to the village, just 'cuz I like to see other gay people. You know, just to know that there are others, I guess, sort of is a community, sort of an optical community.

Generally, Sheldon spoke about not having large circles of friends and relating to the world as an anthropologist (his first Master's degree), so a little removed at times, but his desire for an optical community placed value on gayness as a distinct identity and he celebrated this. He definitely had strong positions on what a real man was, but he was comfortable, overall, with his “faggy” identity.

Adam spoke of being very involved in the queer community, both in his work and in his leisure time. He was very focused on his place in the queer community and was working on valuing his own queerness. He did not have much time for the straight world, other than dealing with members of the heterosexual majority on a daily basis in mundane ways. He spoke of being aware of his queerness when he was in geographical areas that he perceived to be more conservative or less diverse. There were definite clear divisions for Adam between straight and gay/queer spaces.

The sixth stage of Cass' development model is identity synthesis, in which I have categorized the remaining six participants: Nicholas, James, Dick, Fay, Terrance, and

Ryan. At this stage, sexual orientation becomes just another part of self-identity. This was the case for each of these participants, though not necessarily in the same way.

Nicholas was content to label himself as just sexual. He put less emphasis on his sexual orientation, particularly since, “I’m not sexually active. I’m not dating, I don’t feel like I should be dating. I don’t feel like I’m missing anything in not dating.” He was more focused on his identity as a graduate student.

James also was less focused on his sexual orientation; it was a part of his identity but not a predominant focus. He did not feel the need to always be inside the gay/queer community, “Sometimes I feel like I don’t need to be involved in the community. I can do my own thing, and I can be independent.” Dick has always celebrated being different, and identified as an outsider in many ways, from childhood through adulthood. In terms of identifying with the gay/queer community, “I only identify myself as part of the community because of my interest in certain areas that would probably horrify (laughing) people from other communities.” He was referring to sex interests that include more fringe activities such as fisting. For Fay, as well, sexual identity was just a part of his overall identity. For instance, he did not really identify with the gay/queer community at all, “I don’t really get a sense of- I know there is a community here, but I guess I’m part of the arts community.” His identity as a theatre artist and writer had more importance for him than his identity as a queer man.

Terrance worked and lived in queer spaces, but he was quite comfortable dealing with nonqueer people as well. In fact his work also takes him into the straight world, and that was not a problem for him. He did not seem to need the gay community as much as he chose it, which is a difference from those in the identity pride stage. He referred to a

joke that summed up his identity as heteroflexible, “I’ve designed many houses, nobody calls me a house designer, cooked many meals, nobody calls me a meal cooker, suck one cock ...” This demonstrated that having sex with other men did not define him.

Finally, Ryan also fit clearly into this stage. When asked if there were times that he was more aware of his sexuality on a daily basis, he replied, “Generally no. I wonder if straight people go around all the time thinking, ‘I’m straight.’” He also spoke of using fag/got in a joking way, and that he felt this helped to remove the negative connotations of the words. Ryan was very comfortable with his sexual identity and very comfortable maintaining that identity while living in a straight-dominant world.

Discussion

In Canada and the United States, we have an inclination to label and categorize, a tendency promoted by medicine and psychology and other institutions that prefer that our society be divided up into measurable quantities; these divisions promote inequalities. There are value systems that prize some traits and groups and devalue others. Groups that possess highly valued traits access more power than groups that possess fewer highly valued traits. Hill (2008) asserts that the power to assign meaning lies with the dominant group in society. It is uncertain as to whether the gay/queer men’s community would have the power to change the meaning of fag/got, particularly for persons outside of this group. There is an ownership of language, by those with the strongest voice. But as Kulik (2009) stated:

[The] view that “authentic” [*sic*] Gay English is somehow the property of gay men blocks all inquiry into the ways in which the linguistic features that comprise it are resources that are available to anyone for any purpose, regardless of their sexuality ... But what language is not available to be appropriated by just anybody? (p. 265)

I argue that only the dominant social group could successfully accomplish language appropriation (reclamation), as they seem to have the power to assign meaning.

There is some evidence that in-group use of slurs can sometimes function to bring members of the group closer, in a type of bonding (Croom, 2001). There is little research on the process of language reclamation by members of minority groups. There is no clear reason why some individuals use slurs in a positive or empowering way, while other members of the same group reject the slurs completely. There is no evidence that any nondominant group has achieved language reclamation. Nigger or nigga seems to be just as controversial in Black communities as fag/got is in gay/queer men’s communities (Hill, 2008). Feminists have not reached an agreement on reclaiming cunt or bitch (Muscio, 2002), and perhaps these agreements will not come.

In the early part of the 20th century, gay men were using words like queer and faggot to identify with each other. Queers in New York styled themselves as not unlike straight men or “normals” (Chauncey, 1994) other than they had sex with men. Faggots were the effeminate gay men who expressed the stereotypical traits associated with homosexuality. The queers did not like to be identified with the faggots. It is not a new phenomenon that there are disagreements within groups regarding terms and labels. Instead of waiting for the dominant, heterosexual group to mandate change, or instead of waiting for members of the gay/queer men’s community to reach an agreement, it would make sense to teach individuals how to be less affected by fag/got and other slurs. There continue to be media reports of teen suicides related to heterosexist bullying; I wonder whether programs to increase individuals’ psychological resilience could be developed to

help prevent such tragedies. On the basis of my study, understanding reclaimers may hold some clues for developing such programs.

Brontsema (2004) proposed three main positions on the reclamation of queer. However, my study of the reclamation of fag/got did not support the reason for the divisions that Brontsema suggested, such as the belief in the permanence of the meaning of words. The three positions on reclamation suggested by the 12 participants in my study were based in the acceptance or rejection of heterosexual social norms and how the dominant group defined and used fag/got.

Of the few anthropological studies of language in the gay/queer men’s community, diversity within the community seems to be overlooked. Kulik (2009) referred to Rodgers—an author of an anthology of gay speak—as having said, “that [fag and faggot and similar terms] “enrich...our language immensely,” they promote group cohesion, and they constitute a form of “social protest” (p. 252). This is an argument in favour of language reclamation, though it also promote that fags or faggots exist as one, unified group, are of like-mind, and would share a common language with a goal of self-preservation and self-empowerment. Participants in my study, however, described divisions or subcultures within the gay/queer men’s community that experience disagreements and conflicts like other interacting groups.

To get all gay/queer men to agree on the labels that apply to themselves seems just as unlikely a project as agreement on labels that members of the dominant, heterosexual majority should use in reference to them. Kulik (2009) says, “Rodgers observes that “[s]lang flourishes in the ghetto” and that “[t]hose who struggle to leave the ghetto shake off its language first and then decry its message” (p. 252). This suggests

that those most strongly associated with the gay/queer community would embrace fag/got. This was not the case with the participants in my study. To the contrary, it was those who have transcended the need to identify with the community who embraced and reclaimed fag/got.

There were various functions of fag/got for the gay/queer men interviewed in my study. Sheldon presented the idea of language as action, that language does something in the world, and other participants supported this idea. They perceived fag/got as a tool in policing gender performance (specifically enforcing gender norms regarding traditional masculinity), establishing social status relationships (by labelling someone fag/got is to label them undesirably feminine and therefore on a lower status level), distinguishing and defining separations of groups (creating and maintaining a gay/queer men’s community separate from the heterosexual norm), and promoting and maintaining masculinity’s dominance over femininity. Fag/got *does* several things in the world, including occasionally highlighting the issue of heterosexism.

Heterosexism

The nature of heterosexism in the psychological literature has been framed in various ways, including as a clinical phobia (Smith, 1971), as an intense dislike of nonheterosexual people (Mosher, 1979), and as negativity towards homosexual acts versus homosexuals (SOAP scale; Bassett, Kirnan, Hill, & Schultz, 2008). My conversations with 12 gay/queer men led me to believe that the essence of heterosexism is rooted in traditional concepts of gender and gender performance and the dominant sexist discourse that masculinity is more highly valued than femininity.

Gay/queer men seem to conflate sexual orientation and gender; often promoting the same stereotypes that are unwanted when used by nongay/nonqueer individuals (Richardson, 2009) and these stereotypes go unchallenged. The stereotypical effeminacy that is often rejected—as even gay/queer men largely seem to have a preference for the masculine—was also promoted, perhaps so that we can identify with one another more easily as members of the same group (Chauncey, 1990). Only those who placed more importance on their own personal beliefs than social norms (reclaimers) transcended the pressures of stereotypes and labels. Fag/got rendered the gay/queer man effeminate, and participants who placed high importance on heterosexual social norms (nonreclaimers) saw this as negative. This suggested that gay/queer men who support heterosexual norms are just as restricted in their concepts of gender expression and gender role as the heterosexist heterosexuals whom they often fear or criticize.

It is important to recognize the intersection of sexism and heterosexism rather than viewing these issues as two separate problems. This is consistent with some recent research on attitudes toward gay men, “It seems, therefore, that negative attitudes toward gay men are part of a larger construct than just negative attitudes toward homosexuality and that endorsing all of these attitudes demonstrates a general belief in traditional gender roles” (Davies, 2004, p.259). Davies’ study explored the attitudes of men and women who identified as heterosexual, though the accounts of the participants’ in this study suggest that similar attitudes exist within the gay/queer men’s community. Devaluation of the feminine is important in how gay/queer men self-identify and how they understand acts of heterosexism, discrimination, and prejudice.

Studies have shown high correlations between heterosexism and sexism (Black, Oles, & Moore, 1998; Britton, 1990; Stark, 1991). These negative attitudes are shared by gay/queer group members, which indicates that it is not necessarily attitudes toward gayness that are key, as much as it is attitudes toward maintaining the gender binary and traditional conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity. Further research is needed in how gay/queer men support and promote the same heterosexual norms that have been used to oppress them.

Limitations of Identity Development Models

Both Cross' nigrescence theory and Cass' homosexual development model grew out of the developers' clinical experiences (Cass, 1979; Cross, 1990), which can affect the applicability to nonclinical samples. There is little empirical evidence for Cass' theory of homosexual identity development. More research has been done on Cross' nigrescence theory and a scale has been created for determining an individual's developmental stage, the Cross Racial Identification Scale (CRIS; Worrell & Watson, 2008). However, these models were used as references for the purposes of this study, not as literal measures.

The nigrescence model was used in this research project to help explore how men identify as part of a gay/queer culture, separate from the dominant, heterosexual culture. Cross himself suggested that nigrescence theory had parallels to the coming out process of gays and lesbians (Cross & Strauss, 1998). Though, herein lies a problem of whether the concept of coming out is the endgame of identifying as gay/queer. Cass received some criticism of her developmental theory because it seemed to suggest that coming out was the major task of gay/queer identification, when identity disclosure can be seen as

behavioural while homosexual identity itself can be viewed as cognitive (Troiden, 1988a).

All of the participants in this study were out as gay/queer men, though they often spoke of multiple coming out processes. This leads me to believe Cass' and Cross' assumption that coming out is a singular event that marks the completion or near completion of identifying as gay/queer is too simplistic to capture the identity development of these participants. Michael and Carlino, for example, had coming out experiences, friends and family had been told that they were gay, but they still seem to be in a stage of pre-encounter or identity tolerance, which are stages that seem to be proposed to come before coming out events. Likewise, Sheldon reported that he had never had a coming out experience; he felt everyone always just knew he was “homo,” but he seemed to be at the internalization stage of the nigrescence model, and the identity pride stage of Cass' model. This may be related to the notion that identity is not linear, but recycles or can move between various stages at various times (Cross, 1991; Troiden, 1988b).

There is also some concern with the concept of “confusion” in the developmental models. Personally, I never experienced confusion about my sexual desires and neither did most of the participants in this study. Most participants spoke of knowing they were attracted to males from a very early age, and the issue with identifying as gay/queer was not about being certain of their desires as much as it was being certain about living openly as a gay/queer man. The Cross and Cass models were useful in that they helped show distinctions in how participants identified, however, they did not fully capture the process of these participants' identity development. This may be due in part to the

historical nature of these models, that they were created in specific periods of scientific knowledge and social perception. It may be that currently there is more nuanced understandings of being gay/queer in a society that is a somewhat more open than it was thirty or forty years ago.

I chose to use Cross' nigrescence model and Cass' model of homosexual identity development as a way to see if participants' gay/queer self-concepts were related to their positions on fag/got. In this regard, there did not seem to be a clear relationship between participants' gay/queer identities and their attitudes toward the reclamation of these terms. Instead, gay/queer men's attitudes toward the reclamation of fag/got appeared to be related to how individuals identified with social norms, particularly the importance they placed on heterosexual and male-dominance norms. I have attempted to represent this in the model of how gay/queer men negotiate the reclamation of fag/got.

Though participants in the earlier stages of development expressed more negative feelings about reclaiming fag/got, a parallel process of development was not associated with more positive attitudes toward the terms. Being more strongly identified with a gay/queer community did not seem to mean that one would be more likely to reclaim fag/got. The identity-developmental aspect of the theories I included was not key to how gay/queer men understood and experienced the terms. However, the process of categorizing participants into different developmental stages helped shed light on participants' positions on reclamation, such as the relationship with heterosexual norms, which led to the elucidation of the three general positions on reclamation proposed in this paper.

Limitations and future directions

My experience in human rights work and familiarity with human rights law may have led to some assumptions coming into this project that created a difficulty in fully exploring the concept of everyday heterosexism. First, I assumed that the distinction I made, as an academic, between heterosexism and homophobia was in line with what members of the gay/queer community thought and believed. I did not realize at the time I was planning this study that my focus on the nuanced meanings of heterosexism and homophobia was likely on a deeper level than that of the average member of the gay/queer community. This is not to slight the participants but to critique of my own approach to the problem, as I should have either planned to use terminology that was most prevalent in the community (homophobia) and explore what this meant to the individual participants, or I should have incorporated this with a clearer explanation of my concept (heterosexism) so that we would have been on the same page.

This may also have affected my methodological approach. For example, in literature on everyday prejudice and discrimination, diary studies were commonly used and participants were taught what to look for in terms of identifying examples of everyday hassles (Swim, Cohen, Hyers, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001; Swim, Johnston, & Pearson, 2009). My expectation that participants would a) be of like mind regarding the meaning of heterosexism and b) that they would easily be able to discuss this in terms of everyday heterosexism—a concept that has barely made an appearance in the psychology literature let alone be a common concept within the nonacademic community—may have hampered my exploration of these concepts as clearly as they deserved.

My second assumption was that participants would believe that intent is not a consideration in the legal definition of harassment based on sexual orientation (i.e. heterosexism or homophobia) and that it is the impact on the target that is important:

[H]uman rights law has established that the intention of the harasser does not matter when deciding if sexual harassment has occurred. The Supreme Court of Canada has held that a lack of intention is no defence to an allegation of discrimination. It is enough if the conduct has a discriminatory effect, and the focus should be on the impact of the questionable behaviour. (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2011, p.40)

This is in contrast with the definition of bullying, which the psychological literature defines as, “repeatedly aggressive acts in which one or more persons *intend* [emphasis added] to harm or disturb another person physically, verbally, or psychologically” (Sijtsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, & Salmivalli, 2009, p. 57). Participants believed that intention was key to defining an act as homophobic. Participants did not feel that acts, such as telling a gay joke just because they think it is funny and not intending to hurt someone who is gay, were necessarily homophobic. This was somewhat different for participants who had more experience with human rights laws, such as Adam, James, and Nicholas, but even these participants had a tendency to overlook unintentional hurts and label them as merely ignorance or rudeness.

With these assumptions violated as early as my first interview, I was left unsure of how to frame the concept of everyday heterosexism (which I believed to often be unintentional events) in a way that related to the reclamation of *fag/got* within the LGBTQ community. I originally wanted to see whether gay/queer men who have not reclaimed *fag/got* perceived the use of the terms by some individuals as a positive or political statement to be heterosexist. Though participants felt that it was possible for gay men to be homophobic toward each other, it seemed to be limited to intentional verbal

attacks, rather than unintentionally offending another member of the gay/queer men’s community, which was usually seen to be rude at the worst or thoughtless at the least. These issues, however, led me to believe that there is a disconnection between the academic study of heterosexism and the everyday experience of heterosexism in the gay/queer community.

For applied research, it seems unwise for a researcher, such as myself, to focus on the academics and semantics of the meaning of heterosexism versus homophobia if it does not match what gay/queer men are experiencing and understanding in the real world. This is particularly important in relation to tests that intend to measure constructs such as homophobia or heterosexism, including the usefulness of SDT or program development that is intended to affect positive change in our society. It does not seem to be worthwhile for social or community psychologists to develop, label and debate constructs that have little or no practical use in the communities to which they are applied. There needs to be a return to the gay/queer community in order to understand, more clearly, the nuances of what is being experienced as opposed to academically constructing and deconstructing negativity toward gay/queer men.

This study included a group of 12 gay- and queer-identified men who were mostly men of European descent and well-educated, however, I feel that the findings in this paper regarding positions on language reclamation are transferable to more diverse populations, especially as these findings seem consistent with the existing literature. It would be interesting to see whether more men of colour, for example, would broaden our understanding of the concept of heterosexism, and whether there might be a higher sensitivity for prejudice and discrimination in men who likely have dealt with differential

treatment based on the colour of their skin. Adam, the participant who identified as a man of colour in this study referred to racism within the LGBTQ community as being different than in straight spaces, and the intersectionality of skin colour, gender, and sexual orientation would be worth exploring in future research.

Finally, the research on the experience and issues of gay/queer men must be better communicated to the general public. Currently, it seems to remain within the walls of academic institutions. This may be an example of the systemic heterosexism that is present in the field of psychology; priority may not be placed on issues related to the gay/queer experience. Academic research that is promoted for general public consumption is likely the research for which there is the biggest market, research in line with heterosexual norms, while research on gay/queer issues is effectively silenced. However, until stronger bidirectional communication can be established between the community and the academy, much research that is produced will have a diminished influence in addressing negativity towards gay/queer men or promoting the psychological wellbeing and the individual rights of persons who do not necessarily identify within heterosexual norms and the gender binary.

There is critical work that needs to be done in reshaping how psychologists explore and understand gay/queer men’s experience, the concepts of negativity and oppression experienced by members of the LGBTQ community, and our society’s conceptualization of gender roles and gender expression that challenge the status quo. However, participants in this study indicated that this dialogue with the community regarding language was important. They expressed that it was a positive indication that a discipline that had so recently—and for so long—labelled gay/queer individuals as

abnormal and deviant was now willing to work collaboratively to understand the gay/queer experience. More of this type of dialogue with groups within the LGBTQ community will improve the exchange of ideas, build trust, develop greater understanding of negativity towards gay/queer individuals, and help develop more effective methods combat oppression.

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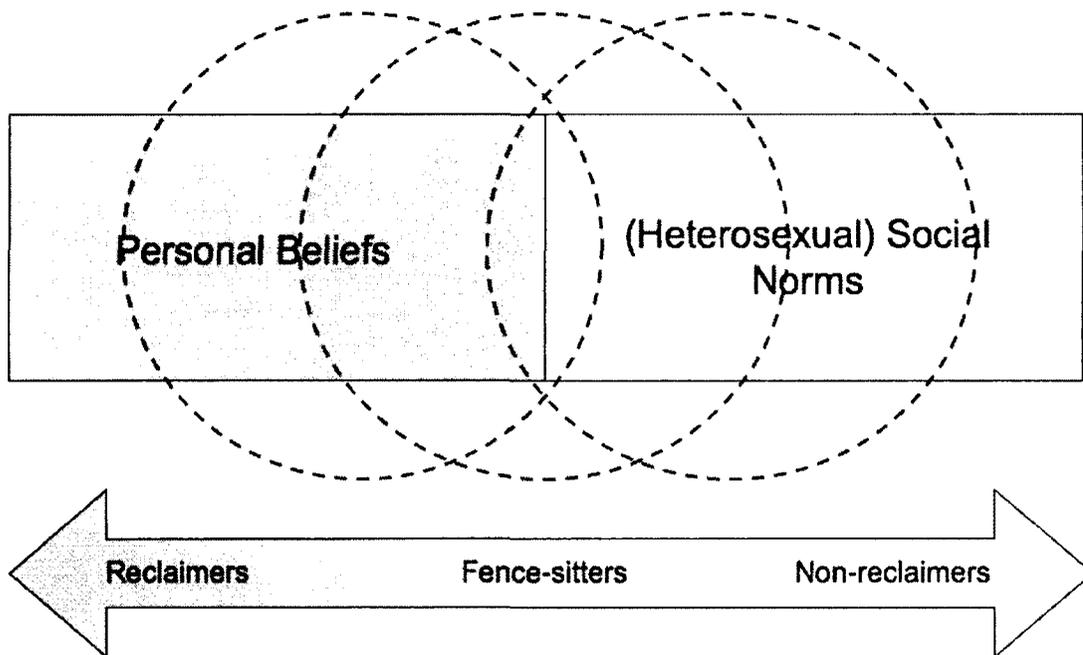
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Figure 1. Model of how gay/queer men negotiate the reclamation of fag/got. Reclaimers transcend heterosexual social norms. Nonreclaimers prefer passing in the dominant group and adopt norms as their own. Fence-sitters ascribe importance to both their personal beliefs and social norms, and may not use fag/got themselves but understand that others may find the terms empowering.



Appendix A

Informed Consent: (Not) Mincing Words: Linguistic Reclamation and Everyday Heterosexism as Experienced by Gay-, Bi- and Queer-Identified Men

This study has received clearance by the Carleton University Psychology Research Ethics Board (Ethics File Number: 11-091).

The purpose of this informed consent is to make sure that you, the participant, understand all aspects of this study. It will enable you to make an informed decision as to whether or not you wish to participate in this study. The form contains information about both the purpose of the study and your role in the study, if you choose to participate.

Principal investigator: Glenn Walsh, M.A. candidate, Psychology Dept., Carleton University (gwalsh@connect.carleton.ca;)

Faculty advisor: Dr. Frances Cherry, Professor, Psychology Dept., Carleton University (fcherry@connect.carleton.ca; 613-520-2600, ext. 2702).

Purpose: This study is being done to fulfill a requirement in the Master of Arts in Psychology at Carleton University and will provide more information about gay-, bi- and queer-identified men’s experiences with prejudice and discrimination, and their views on reclaiming oppressive language, such as heterosexist slurs.

Task Requirements: In this study, you will be asked to take part in a 60 - 90 minute audio-recorded interview in which you will be asked about your experiences with prejudice and discrimination based on your sexual orientation and your understanding of the words faggot and fag as used by heterosexuals and members of the lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer (LGBTQ) communities.

Potential Risk/Discomfort: Some participants may experience discomfort or distress discussing their experiences with prejudice and discrimination. If you experience any distress or discomfort as a result of your participation, you may wish to contact the Ottawa & Region Distress Centre at 613-238-1089 or the Ottawa Mental Health Crisis Line at 613-722-6914 (24-hour toll-free line: 1-866-996-0991). If you are a student at

Carleton University, you can also contact the Carleton University Health and Counselling Services at 613-520-6674. A written copy of this resource information will be provided to you after the interview.

Right to withdraw: You have the right to refuse to answer any question and to withdraw from this study at any time for any reason without explanation. You also have the right to remove your data at any time after the interview has been conducted.

Anonymity/confidentiality: You will be asked to provide a pseudonym that can be used to protect your identity in any presentation of the findings based on this interview. In addition, the tape recording of the interview will be destroyed immediately following transcription and the typed interview and other research materials will not contain your name or the name of anyone you mention. At no time will there be information linking your name to the research materials, and any contact information will be stored separately in a locked filing cabinet accessible to only those associated with the project and will be destroyed immediately after any necessary follow-up inquiries have been completed. If no follow-up contact is required, all contact information will be destroyed by August 31, 2011.

If you have any ethical concerns about how this study was conducted, please contact: Dr. Monique Sénéchal, Chair of the Carleton University Ethics Committee for Psychological Research, at 613-520-2600, ext. 1155.

If you have any other concerns about this study, please contact: Dr. Janet Mantler, Chair of the Department of Psychology, Carleton University, at 613-520-2600, ext. 4173.

Signature

My signature indicates that I understand the above description of the study and agree to participate in this study.

Date: _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Witness Signature: _____

Consent to Audiotape

My signature indicates that I grant my permission for the interview to be tape-recorded for the purposes of accuracy and that I realize that the recording will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

Date: _____

Participant’s Signature: _____

Witness Signature: _____

Consent to Re-Contact

My signature indicates that I grant my permission for the researcher to re-contact me for the purpose of verifying information in the interview, allowing me to add, rephrase or omit information from the original interview, or to answer any additional questions that may arise during analysis. As with the original interview, I understand that I may refuse to answer any question, and to refuse to continue at any time.

I understand that the researcher will only use his name when contacting me and no mention of the actual study itself, that my anonymity and confidentiality will be protected at all times, and that this contact will occur no later than August 31, 2011.

Date: _____

Participant’s Signature: _____

Witness Signature: _____

Appendix B

Debriefing form: (Not) Mincing Words: Linguistic Reclamation and Everyday Heterosexism as Experienced by Gay-, Bi- and Queer-Identified Men

What are you trying to learn in this research? I am doing this study as a thesis requirement for my Master of Arts program in Social Psychology. I am interested in learning more about how gay-, bi- and queer-identified men experience prejudice and discrimination and to learn more about their experience with and meaning of the words faggot and fag, specifically.

Why is this important to scientists or the general public? There is a lot of research in psychology on negative attitudes toward people who are perceived to be gay, bi or queer, but very little from the point of view of the targets of this negativity. This study should help begin to fill a gap in the research literature, as well as give voice to a community that is often silenced by the psychological field.

Where can I learn more? If you are a Carleton University student, the University Library is a great place to start if you are looking for more information. Online, through the Carleton Library website, you can also link to PsycInfo which is a database containing many articles on prejudice and discrimination toward individuals who identify as gay, bi or queer, although most of this research focuses on the perpetrators and not the experience of the targets. In addition, an interesting related article on language reclamation can be found at http://www.colorado.edu/ling/CRIL/Volume17_Issue1/paper_BRONTSEMA.pdf and more information on sexual prejudice can be found at http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/rainbow/html/sexual_prejudice.html or by searching for heterosexism at your public library or online.

What if I have questions later? If you have any questions or comments about this research, please feel free to contact me, Glenn Walsh (gwalsh@connect.carleton.ca;) or my faculty sponsor, Dr. Frances Cherry (fcherry@connect.carleton.ca; 613-520-2600, ext. 2702).

Should you have any ethical concerns about this study please contact Dr. Dr. Monique Sénéchal (Chair, Carleton University Ethics Committee for Psychological Research, 613-520-2600, ext. 1155). For other concerns, please contact Dr. Janet Mantler (Chair, Carleton University Department of Psychology, 613-520-2600, ext. 4173).

Is there anything that I can do if I found this study emotionally draining? Some people may feel some discomfort or distress answering questions about experiences with prejudice and discrimination. If you would like discuss any distress or discomfort that may have resulted from participating in this study, you may wish to contact the Ottawa & Region Distress Centre: at 613-238-1089 (Web Site: www.dcottawa.on.ca) or the Ottawa Mental Health Crisis Line at 613-722-6914 (24-hour toll-free line: 1-866-996-0991; Web Site: <http://www.crisisline.ca/home.htm>). If you are a student at Carleton University, you might also contact the Carleton University Health and Counselling Services at 613-520-6674.

Thank you for your participation. Your time and effort are greatly appreciated.

Appendix C

Interview Face Sheet: (Not) Mincing Words: Linguistic Reclamation and Everyday
Heterosexism as Experienced by Gay-, Bi- and Queer-Identified Men

Participant Pseudonym: _____

Sexual Orientation: _____

Gender: _____

Age: _____

Ethnic Identity: _____

Socioeconomic Status _____

Education _____

Summary of results: YES / NO

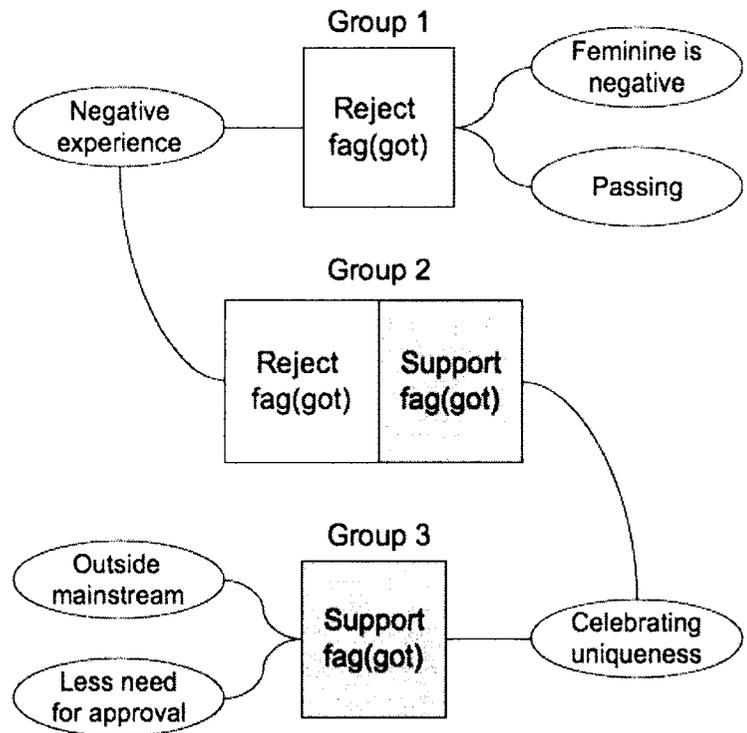
If yes, email address: _____

Willing to provide feedback: YES / NO

If yes, preferred contact information: _____

Appendix D

Early model that was sent to participants for feedback.



Appendix E

Interview Guide: (Not) Mincing Words: Linguistic Reclamation and Everyday

Heterosexism as Experienced by Gay-, Bi- and Queer-Identified Men

Sexual orientation/sexual identity

- How do you identify, sexually?
- If you are out, can you tell me a bit about what that process was like?
- What is your involvement in the gay/bi/queer community, if any?
- Have you experienced gay/bi/queer men putting each other down? If so, how?

Experience with heterosexism

- Have you ever been discriminated against or harassed based on your sexual orientation?
 - o If so, what was that like?
- Are there times, on a day-to-day basis that you are more aware of your sexuality than usual?
 - o Can you describe one of those times? What was it that made you think more about your sexuality at that time?

The words faggot and fag

- What is your reaction to the radio ban of the Dire Straits song “Money for Nothing”?
 - o Offer brief description of the song and the banning of it if the participants are unfamiliar with this issue
- How would you feel if a non-gay/bi/queer person called you a fag or a faggot?
- How do you hear the words faggot and fag used by other gay/bi/queer men?

- What would it mean for a gay/bi/queer man to call another gay/bi/queer man a faggot or fag?
- Do the words faggot and fag mean the same thing?
 - o How might they be different, if at all?

Language reclamation

- Why do you think gay/bi/queer men sometimes use derogatory words to refer to themselves and other gay/bi/queer men?
- Do you use the words faggot and fag? How?
- Who should be allowed to use words faggot and fag, if anyone? Why?

Appendix F

Post-Interview Comment Sheet: (Not) Mincing Words: Linguistic Reclamation and Everyday Heterosexism as Experienced by Gay-, Bi- and Queer-Identified Men

Mood of the Interview

Emotional reaction of participant throughout interview

My emotional reactions to the participant

My reactions to what the participant said

Strengths of the interview

Weaknesses of the interview

Additional comments