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Homophobic bullying among adolescents: The role of insecure-dismissing attachment and peer support

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ABSTRACT
The study aimed to investigate the relationship between attachment style and homophobic bullying in adolescence, focusing on the role of peer support. Participants were 334 adolescents and young-adults (141 boys and 193 girls) aged from 15–20 years (M = 16.50; SD = 0.87). Participants completed the Homophobic Bullying Scale, the Relationship Questionnaire, and the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment. The results demonstrated that boys manifested a higher level of homophobic bullying than girls and girls reported higher level of peer’s support than boys. Regression analyses displayed that insecure-dismissing attachment positively predicted homophobic bullying in adolescence. However, security and safety among peers are positive predictors of homophobic bullying and communication among peers is a negative predictor. Results also showed a moderator effect of peer support in the relationship between insecure-dismissing attachment and homophobic bullying, such that at higher levels of insecure-dismissing attachment, homophobic bullying tended to be higher when peer support (trust on peers) was low and to be lower when social support from peers was high. Theoretical and practical implications are provided.

Introduction
Homophobic bullying is a set of deliberate actions aimed at denigrating one or more people belonging to a sexual minority or attacking sexual identity, gender, body, behaviors and desires, with verbal (including spreading rumors that someone is gay or lesbian), physical violence/abuse and cyberbullying (e.g., using social media to spread rumors). In other words, bullying is a form of dehumanization that serves to attach importance to the bully at the expense of others (Rivers, 2011). Furthermore, homophobic bullying has its roots in the widespread homophobic and sexist culture, especially in the Western context. This culture sometimes aims at the affirmation of a strongly stereotyped society. In Western culture, we are...
witnessing the “preservation” of the heterosexist ideology (Butler, 2011), which leads us to consider everything that is not fully compliant with the norms and ideals of heterosexism (gays and lesbians) and all that which does not fully correspond to the “traditional” and dominant gender roles (transsexuals, queer, and questioning) subject to stigma and harassment. Indeed, international literature has underlined how homophobic bullying is a particular form of bullying, based on homophobic dynamics, not exclusively for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) population, but for all of those who are perceived as such and who, for various reasons, do not conform to the dominant models of masculinity and femininity (Espelage et al., 2018b; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Romeo & Horn, 2017; Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008). The literature underlined how bullying among adolescents may also be facilitated by social media (Smith et al., 2018). Adolescents on social networks may sometimes lose the boundary between what is real and what is virtual. This loss of boundaries, especially for adolescents, can result in online bullying appearing in the real world (Pace, Passanisi, & D’Urso, 2018c; Palermiti, Servidio, Bartolo, & Costabile, 2017; Palfrey & Urs, 2013;). However, adolescents are often unaware of the consequences their actions have for victims.

Recent and previous literature also highlighted that homophobic culture is widespread in group contexts during childhood and adolescence, which have been considered critical and determinative periods for the development and expression of prejudice. Therefore, this form of bullying, among peers, can manifest itself in various forms (including physical and verbal harassment, stigmatization, and isolation) during the school period (Espelage, Basile, Leemis, Hipp, & Davis, 2018a; Henning-Stout, James, & Macintosh, 2000; Lo Cascio, Guzzo, Pace, & Pace, 2013; Merrin et al., 2018; Nichols, 1999; Pilkington & D’Augelli, 1995; Poteat, 2008; Rivers, 2001). The study conducted by Costa and Davies (2012), involving a group of Portuguese adolescents, highlighted that negative attitudes shown by participants toward gays and lesbians tended to adhere to traditional and therefore stereotypical gender roles. Moreover, the study of Carrera-Fernández, Lameiras-Fernández, Rodríguez-Castro, and Vallejo-Medina (2014) underlined how Spanish adolescents showed more negative attitudes toward men who did not conform to gender compared to women who did not conform to gender. Several studies suggested how the use of homophobic epithets is more frequent among adolescent boys (e.g., Poteat & Espelage, 2005, 2007; Poteat & Rivers, 2010). According to some authors, factors linked to gender socialization also can justify why this behavior increased among boys. Many masculine norms and rules reflect homophobic attitudes and beliefs (Kimmel, 1997), and also masculine norms also are associated with homophobic behavior among adult men (e.g., Alden & Parker, 2005). Sometimes,
boys display negative attitudes toward sexual minorities to impose gender normative behavior among their peers (e.g., Poteat, O’Dwyer, & Mereish, 2012). Other studies underlined how homophobic bullying seems to be a relevant developmental issue for boys (Young & Sweeting, 2004). Phoenix, Frosh, and Pattman (2003, p. 188) highlighted how “boys had to be careful about what they did or said for fear of being called gay or effeminate—both of which they invariably found upsetting. In this sense, their identities were “policed” in that they were scrutinized for lack of conformity to a core, heterosexual notion of appropriate masculinity and “deviations” were punished through name-calling and/or ostracism.” However, girls who act on homophobic bullying choose different ways and forms (such as denigrate verbally and socially isolating) unlike males who prefer strategies to prevaricate and dominate through direct forms (hit, punch). This data also extends to every type of victim (Rivers, 2011). Furthermore, a recent work underlined how heterosexual girls witnessed the episodes of homophobic bullying assuming a neutral position or they were friends of the male victim and did not have the adequate cultural tools to struggle the phenomenon (D’Urso, Petruccelli, Schimmenti, & Pace, 2017). Another work highlighted, in this sense, how heterosexual girls seem less hostile towards gays, indeed more easily they choose them as friends (e.g., she considers gay men particularly sensitive and inclined to good taste). At the same time, lesbian girls are considered less attractive, less elegant, less popular, especially by heterosexual girls (Norman, Galvin, & McNamara, 2006).

In Italy a law against cyberbullying has been issued on 18 June 2017. However, many prejudices towards sexual minorities also exist among students (Prati, 2012a) and teachers (Scandurra, Picariello, Valerio, & Amodeo 2017). Therefore, it becomes very difficult in Italian social fabric to implement strategies that counter homophobic bullying, despite the Ministry of Education does not stop issuing documents that spread the social inclusion of sexual minorities.

In adolescence, an important variable involved in bullying is the style of attachment. According to Bowlby (1982), the attachment behavior is a forthright continuance of attachment behavior in childhood, disclosed by the circumstances that lead an adult’s attachment conduct to become more readily stimulated. In cases of danger and high risk, young adults and adults often become exacting of others. Indeed, in conditions of sudden danger, an individual will almost certainly seek proximity to another known and trusted person. In these cases, an increase of attachment behavior is recognized by all as natural. In other words, the attachment style can influence future relationships with others, for example, with peers during adolescence.

Previous evidence, indeed, has suggested that some attachment styles, such as the insecure style, predict bullying among peers or aggressive
behavior (Fagot & Kavanagh, 1990; Renken, Egeland, Marvinney, Mangelsdorf, & Sroufe, 1989). Recent research has shown how insecure attachment (in particular avoidant attachment) is connected with externalizing or behavioral problems, such as aggressiveness toward peers (Fearon, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van Ijzendoorn, Lapsley, & Roisman, 2010; Pace, D’Urso, & Zappulla, 2018a; Pace, Zappulla, & Di Maggio, 2016). In contrast, several studies have underlined how secure attachment is associated with the reduction of peer-to-peer behavior and therefore can be considered a protective factor against involvement in bullying (Murphy, Laible, & Augustine, 2017). Indeed, the study by Papadaki and Givazolias (2015) emphasized how a dysfunctional relationship with attachment figure is a factor related to bullying.

Rutter (1979, 1987) underlined that the attachment concept is still under debate and that empirical data are lacking. He pointed out unresolved questions (the psychobiological correlates, measurement problems, the role of temperament, how one attachment relation affects another, the boundaries of attachment, and the role of parenting and care). The author also emphasized how insecure attachment and adaptive factors (such as trust and safety among peers) may play a role in the genesis of general bulllish acts.

Recent literature, indeed, is consistent in underlining how, together with insecure attachment, even inadequate social support predicts and preserves bullying attitudes (Di Maggio, Zappulla, & Pace, 2016; Nikiforou, Georgiou, & Stavrinides, 2013). In this sense, as highlighted by the primary socialization theory (PST), adolescent problematic behaviors (such as bullying) can be explained by understanding their social context (Higgins, Ricketts, Marcum, & Mahoney, 2010; Zappulla, Pace, Cascio, Guzzo, & Huebner 2014). Norms for many problematic behaviors are principally developed in the context of interaction with peers (e.g., Francis & Thorpe, 2010). In particular, this theory suggests that deviant conduct is socially learned and, specifically, that peers play a primary role as socialization agents during adolescence. The peer group represents a variable that may influence both prosocial and deviant behavior, and the strength of the bond between peers is a main determinant of the efficacy of norm transmission among peers (Kendrick, Jutengren, & Stattin, 2012, p. 1070).

Bradshaw (2015), indeed, suggested that peer support counteracts and prevents episodes of bullying among comrades. Trust among peers, as well as adequate relationships between peers, can therefore generate positive strategies that counteract bullying (e.g., Cowie, 2014; Coyle, Demaray, Malecki, Tennant, & Klossing, 2017; Yin et al., 2017; ). In other words, peers represent—especially during adolescence, which is the period of socialization—an emotional resource that can help adolescents to take
positive development paths. Therefore, peer support, made of trust and safety, is an important protective factor during development and particularly during adolescence. The work by Hong and Garbarino (2012) highlighted that adequate relationships with peers can be a factor of protection against homophobic bullying.

Some studies have analyzed the phenomenon of homophobic bullying starting from the social-ecological framework (e.g., D’Urso, Petruccelli, Schimmenti, & Pace, 2017; D’Urso, Petruccelli, & Pace, 2018a; Hong & Garbarino, 2012). It is relevant to investigate the social-relational variables (e.g., trust on peers) as well as the attachment styles because these variables are little explored in relation to homophobic bullying. In the present study, we examined gender difference on homophobic bullying, specifically is expected that boys reported higher level of homophobic bullying than girls (H1). Furthermore, we examined the relationship between attachment style, trust on peers, and homophobic bullying, focusing on the moderating role that trust on peers may play in the relationship between dysfunctional attachment style and homophobic bullying. We examined the following hypotheses. H2: insecure-dismissing attachment is expected to be positively associated with homophobic bullying. H3: trust on peers is expected to be negatively associated with homophobic bullying. H4: trust on peers is expected to moderate the relationship between insecure-dismissing attachment and homophobic bullying, so that at higher levels of insecure-dismissing attachment, homophobic bullying is expected to be lower when trust on peers is high.

Method

Participants and procedure

Participants in this study are 334 adolescents and young-adults (141 boys – (42.1%) and 193 girls (57.6%) aged from 15–20 years (M = 16.50; SD = 0.87; 15–17 years: 80.4%; 18–20 years: 19.6%), attending the third and fourth classes of some public high schools situated in six Italian cities and towns. Specifically, we have selected representative schools in order to consider the principal and different aspects of the Italian context: geographic position, socio-economic level, characteristics of social fabric (urban vs. rural). With regard sexual orientation of participants, 94.6% define themselves as heterosexual, 2.7% as predominantly heterosexual but in some circumstances homosexual, 0.9% as predominantly heterosexual with a strong homosexual component, 0.9% as bisexual, and 0.9% as homosexual (gay or lesbian). A written informed consent was obtained for all by sending letters to their parents in order to inform them of the study. No parents objected to their child’s involvement in the study. We also obtained assent from all
the adolescents involved in the study. The questionnaires were adminis-
tered during the school hours, with the consent of the headmaster and the
teachers, in the presence of the researchers themselves, who monitored col-
lection of the questionnaires at a later point. The collecting lasted approxi-
mately 25 min. Data were collected between 2017 and 2018. This research
was approved by the ethics committee of "Kore" University of Enna.
Therefore, all procedures which involved human participants were per-
formed in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or
national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its
later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Measures

General information
Demographic questionnaire that investigates information related to gender,
age, religious orientation (with particular attention to the importance of
religion and precepts), current relationship situation, country of birth, city
and school of origin. In addition, the Kinsey Scale (Kinsey, Pomeroy,
Martin, & Sloan, 1948) was included in the same questionnaire for the clas-
sification of the sexual orientation of the participants using a seven points
scale (1 = exclusively heterosexual to 7 = exclusively homosexual).

Homophobic bullying
Homophobic bullying scale (Prati, 2012b) is a questionnaire aimed to
measuring homophobic bullying behaviors by students, through three per-
spectives: witness (e.g., “think about a student who is perceived to be les-
bian. Because of this, during the past 30 days, how often did you hear
insulting remarks about her” ), bully (e.g., “think about a student who is
perceived to be lesbian. Because of this, during the past 30 days, how often
did you isolate or marginalize her”), and victim (in this section we asked to
adolescents how often did a serious of events (e.g., being marginalized or
tezed), during the past 30 days, happen because you are perceived to be
gay or lesbian). Participants were asked to report if they observed or were
involved in different homophobic behaviors (isolation/exclusion, spread of
lies, homophobic skirmishes, theft or damage of property, physical assault,
and sexual/electronic harassment) in their schools, in the last 30 days.
Response options are on four-point Likert scale (1: never, 2: only once or
twice, 3: about once a week, and 4: more than once a week). In the present
study we used the scale of bullying acted towards sexual minorities and/or
alleged sexual minorities (e.g., bullying toward gay or allegedly gay; bullying
toward lesbian or allegedly lesbian, and general homophobic bullying). The
subscales show the Cronbach’s alpha ranges from 0.78 to 0.88.
**Attachment style**

Relationship questionnaire (RQ; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), a short self-report measure, where participants have to select one of four prototypes based on brief paragraphs which contain multi-sentence descriptions of attachment patterns. The prototypes, along with sample sentences, are: (a) secure (“It is easy for me to become emotionally close to others. I am comfortable depending on them and having them depending on me. I don’t worry about being alone or having others not accept me”); (b) fearful (“I am uncomfortable getting close to others. I want emotionally close relationships, but I find it difficult to trust others completely, or to depend on them. I worry that I will be hurt if I allow myself to become too close to others”); (c) preoccupied (“I want to be completely emotionally intimate with others, but I often find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I am uncomfortable being without close relationships, but I sometimes worry that others don’t value me as much as I value them”); and (d) dismissing (“I am comfortable without close emotional relationships. It is very important to me to feel independent and self-sufficient, and I prefer not to depend on others or have others depend on me”). Participants are asked to indicate on a seven-point scale how well each paragraph describes them (1 = it does not describe me at all to 7 = it very much describes me). Higher scores on each item indicate more endorsement of that particular attachment style level. This tool has demonstrated good validity and reliability as a measure of adult attachment (Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998), it has also been used with adolescents (e.g., Pace, Schimmenti, Zappulla, & Di Maggio, 2013). Prototype rating reliabilities (α) in this study ranged from 0.85 to 0.92.

**Peer attachment**

The inventory of parent and peer attachment (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). This scale contains a three-part self-report questionnaire that assesses adolescent attachment to mother, father, and peers. It is composed of 25 items for each significant figure. Each individual’s attachment to a specific person (e.g., mother, father, and peers) is assessed via three principal subscales (trust, communication, and safety). For example, the scale of trust measures the agreement of mutual understanding and respect to significant figure (e.g., peers, mother and father) and relationship with him/her (e.g., My friends understand me; an I feel my friends are good friends), the scale of communication investigates the quality of communication (e.g., My friends encourage me to talk about my difficulties; When we discuss things, my friends care about my point of view); the scale of safety investigates whether the peer group can be considered a “secure base” (e.g., My friends accept me as I am; My friends don’t understand what I’m going
through these days). Participants must reply to the questionnaire through a five-point Likert scale (range 1–5), which ranges from 1 = never true to 5 = always true. For this study we used the part related to peer attachment (e.g., “My friends can understand when I’m upset for something”; “When we discuss things, my friends care about my point of view”; trust: α = 0.90; communication: α = 0.89; and safety: α = 0.80).

Data analysis

Preliminary analysis

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for all the variables in the analysis.

The variance analysis (ANOVA) was computed to check for any gender differences on homophobic bullying attitudes, insecure-dismissing attachment and dimensions of peer support. No statistically significant gender differences emerged on homophobic bullying towards gay and lesbian or the allegedly gay and lesbian. Significant gender differences emerged on the bullying towards gay or allegedly gay, and on bullying against effeminate boys. No statistically significant gender differences emerged on insecure-dismissing attachment style. Significant gender differences also emerged on communication with peers, on safety on peers, and trust on peers. The results are shown in Table 2. Furthermore, we conducted a correlation analysis in order to verify the effect of age on all forms of homophobic bullying. No significant correlations emerged, in fact the correlations are almost close to zero.

Relationships among attachment styles, peer support, and homophobic bullying

A multiple regression analysis performed to verify if insecure-dismissing attachment and the aspects of peer relationships were related to homophobic bullying. For all analyses, age, gender, and sexual orientation were entered as covariates. No differences were found regarding age, gender, and sexual orientation of participants.
The analyzes suggest a significant model ($R^2 = 0.10; F(3,329) = 7.88; p < 0.001$) with trust on peers ($t = -2.34; \beta = -0.18; p = 0.02$) and safety on peers ($t = 2.41; \beta = -0.15; p = 0.001$) as negative predictors of general homophobic bullying, as well as communication with peers as positive predictors ($t = 2.97; \beta = 0.20; p = 0.001$). However, the analyzes highlight how insecure-dismissing attachment predicts general homophobic bullying ($t = 3.2; \beta = 0.20; p = 0.002$). Table 3 shows models with all variables. These regression models have been performed adding the participants school as a weighting variable. The standard error of the estimate is 0.33; the value of power is 0.00; and the log-likelihood function is $-90.8$.

**Moderator role of trust on peers in the relationship between attachment and homophobic bullying**

According to the results of regression and to test the moderation effect trust on peers on the relation between insecure-dismissing attachment and general homophobic bullying, we included the interactions between trust on and peers and insecure-dismissing attachment (the only interaction that was significant). Since no differences were found regarding gender of participants, we conducted a moderation model that includes both girls and boys. After we centered all continuous variables by standardizing to a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one (Aiken & West, 1991), we created interaction terms by multiplying the standardized scores. Finally, we probed the significant interactions using the procedure recommended by Aiken and West (1991) and Holmbeck (2002). We restructured the significant regression equation to express the regressions homophobic bullying on insecure-dismissing attachment at levels of the moderator variable (trust on peers; **Figure 1**). These equations are plotted in **Figure 1**. The simple slope for the high level of trust on peers was significantly different from zero ($\beta = -0.25, p < 0.000$), and the simple slope for the low level of trust on peers was significantly different from zero ($\beta = 0.27, p < 0.000$). As
indicated, the simple slope of homophobic bullying tended to differ from one another as a function of the value of trust on peers. Thus, at higher levels of dismissing attachment, homophobic bullying tended to be higher when trust on peers was low and to be lower when trust on peers was high.

### Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this research was to verify whether attachment style was related to bullying acts towards sexual minorities by adolescents and whether social support derived from peers plays a protective role in this relationship. Preliminary analyses suggest, in line with the literature (Antônio & Moleiro, 2015; Callahan & Zukowski, 2017; Passanisi & Pace, 2017;
Petruccelli, Baiocco, Ioverno, Pistella, & D’Urso, 2015;), that boys show more homophobic bullying toward alleged gays and effeminate men. Especially in school settings, the fact that boys are more likely to insult the supposed gay and effeminate people (through verbal epithets, writing on the walls, etc.) is a sign of strong adherence to the stereotypes linked to masculinity (Romeo & Horn, 2017). According to the present result, gender socialization could be considered as a variable linked to the tendency to display homophobic bullying among boys. Indeed, as Arnot (1984), more than thirty years ago, suggested, “that it is boys who are more prone to construct and use gender categories. Not only do they have more at stake in such a system of classification (i.e., male power) but they have to try and achieve manhood through a process of distancing women and femininity from themselves and maintaining a hierarchy of social superiority of masculinity by devaluing the female word” (p. 145). Therefore, if a person does not adhere perfectly to the canons shared by the majority of society, he or she is easily labeled as different, inferior, and therefore the ideal scapegoat for acts of vexation (Poteat, O’Dwyer, & Mereish, 2012).

However, it is possible how girls show more sensitivity and appreciation towards their gay peers (Norman et al., 2006). Furthermore, the literature emphasizes how males are more prone to gender and role stereotypes than girls, who are more open and sensitive (e.g., Brown, 2011).

Therefore, this result suggests how homophobic bullying should be integrated as a matter of concern in pre-service and in-service teacher training and should be explicitly considered in school anti-bullying policy. In this sense, it should be appropriate to create interventions aimed at deconstructing the rigid gender roles imposed by society, as well as investigating the teacher’s role in promoting positive attitudes among peers. Indeed, sometimes teachers do not identify the significance of this phenomenon, because of which the message that the victim receives is: “you do not exist” - “the problem does not exist” (Dettore, Antonelli & Ristori, 2014). Therefore, teachers, that do not properly intervene, consolidate the dominant idea of the bully or bullies (O’Donoghue & Guerin, 2017).

From analysis also emerges how girl adolescents reported higher level of peer support than boys. Specifically, this data suggests how girls are more able to take advantage of the social network, they feel feelings of safety and trust on their peers, as well as having more communication skills and asserting their point of view.

Subsequently, the results suggest how insecure-dismissing attachment predicts the general attitudes of homophobic bullying toward gay and lesbian people or the alleged such and specifically toward gay people and/or alleged such. Individuals, particularly adolescents, with a style of insecure-dismissing attachment are characterized by devaluation of relationships,
avoidance of intimacy, high self-confidence, and compulsive self-confidence (Bartholomew, 1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). In light of these characteristics due to this style of attachment, it can be deduced that it is probable that these people, who are not very attentive to the other in relationships, do not hesitate to manifest vexatious, aggressive attitudes toward those who are labeled as different, as victims, or as scapegoats in the episodes of bullying (e.g., Hansen, Steenberg, Palic, & Elklit, 2012).

Moreover, the analyses suggest that high levels of communication between peers can be considered a risk factor, for both boys and girls, in the genesis of homophobic bullying. This result, although it may seem controversial and paradoxical, can indeed denote how the ways of affirming one's point of view within communication can increase, almost by way of social contagion, acts of bullying among adolescents. This result is undoubtedly in line with the theory of the pragmatics of human communication (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 2011). In other words, homophobic bullying can be the result of rigid and dysfunctional communication among peers, especially for those who experience acts of bullying, made of prevarication and strong tendencies to assert their point of view (Olweus, 1994). This result also suggests how the bully seems to show high levels of socio-communicative competence that he/she uses unintended for his/her immediate advantage, without considering the long-term deactivated consequences of his/her behaviors. Moreover, if the adolescents point of view that one wants to affirm is made up of homophobic plots, attitudes that support homophobic bullying are more likely to spread. In this sense, dysfunctional communication among peers can be configured as proactive aggressiveness, which, in line with the literature, is a characteristic of those who implement bullying acts (D’Urso, Petruccelli, & Pace, 2018b; Pace, D’Urso, & Zappulla, 2018b; Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002).

Therefore, in line with literature (e.g., Hong & Garbarino, 2012), the results support the positive contribution of trust among peers to reduce homophobic bullying perpetrated toward gay and lesbian people, or those who are presumed to be such. In particular, from moderation models emerged how this variable is a protective factor in the relationship between insecure-dismissing attachment and homophobic bullying. Therefore, if an adolescent has an insecure-dismissing attachment style and has not been able to create a proper relationship with his or her caregiver, probably thanks to peer support, he or she will reduce his or her bullying attitudes toward gays and lesbians. In other words, relationships with peers that involve trust can therefore be a new and secure basis that can lead an individual to reevaluate the importance of fruitful peer relationships. Indeed, it can be deduced that trust among peers can instill prosocial instincts, as well as promote reevaluation of the care of the other and therefore a
reduction of bullying attitudes toward gay and lesbian people. Furthermore, the results show that having inappropriate relationships with one’s caregiver during childhood, and therefore possessing an insecure attachment style, is not the only factor in the genesis of homophobic bullying because other variables, such as social support from peers, can intervene, providing new patterns of relationships and new scripts that positively influence social action. In light of the present data, in line with the theoretical frameworks (e.g., Kendrick et al., 2012), it can be affirmed that social influences may be an important protective factor in adolescents development. Therefore, establishing positive relationships among peers can contravene the classic attachment model (e.g., Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1982), according to which those who have experienced negative prototypical relationships in childhood are more likely to perpetrate relationships during adolescence and later stages of development. Trust among peers can be considered a new working model promoting positive internal states.

Although the present research provides valuable new insights about relationships in terms of attachment style and profitable relationships among peers toward homophobic bullying in adolescence, a few important limitations should be noted. First, the use of self-report questionnaires permits a partial assessment of the complexity of the psychological variables studied. However, self-report questionnaires can lead participants to be influenced by social desirability. It would be useful to design and validate a new scale of sexual orientation, especially for adolescents. Moreover, future studies could verify if the bullying behaviors in boys may be related to individual (e.g., temperamental, cognitive), social (e.g., sexism), and/or family factors (Pace, Madonia, Passanisi, Iacolino, & Di Maggio, 2015).

Second, although the present investigation provides valuable information on the importance of increasing welfare interventions in the classroom, the number of participants and their geographical position do not allow for generalization of the results obtained to the entire school population. Third, although the current design is appropriate for testing the moderation model, in particular with the variables studied, a more comprehensive analysis of the causal directions may require longitudinal data. In light of these limitations, the data of the present study only partly allow for an understanding of the complex dynamics of the variables related to homophobic bullying. Therefore, further research should investigate the other possible variables that intervene in the relationship between attachment styles and homophobic bullying.

Despite these considerations, the findings of the present study have a number of theoretical and practical implications. On a theoretical level, the data add empirical confirmation to the insecure-dismissing attachment style and the extent to which this style is influenced by background factors and moderating processes. The practical implications of this study concern the
importance of monitoring communication exchanges among peers, promoting an assertive style of communication. Furthermore, another relevant practical suggestion of this research regards what can be considered a sort of negative development of the insecure-dismissing attachment that can drive adolescents to not take particular care of interpersonal relationships. This means that in cases where adolescents exhibit homophobic bullying, it is crucial to monitor the ways in which adolescents explore the world derived from meaningful relationships with the caregiver. In cases where adolescents cannot rely on peer support based on feelings of trust, which favors opportunities to self-monitor, as well as to incite pro-sociality, the potential iatrogenic role of the insecure-dismissing attachment would be considered an important risk factor by psychologists.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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