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The Discourses of Homosexuality in the Police.

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The present study examined the discourses of homosexuality in the police, using the discourse analytic method developed by Potter and Wetherell (1987). The study asked how police officers constructed gay men using their discourses and why gay men should or should not be employed by the police. Eight police officers were interviewed. Analysis revealed officers drew on three distinct discourses to construct gay men. The effeminate discourse associated homosexuals with effeminate behaviours. The deviant discourse associated homosexuals with behaviours that are morally and legally proscribed, and the discourse of conditional acceptance was used by officers to positively present, while voicing reservations about homosexuals. These discourses formed the linguistic resources officers used to construct types of homosexuals that were subsequently rejected as potential police officers. Several arguments were used to justify the conclusion that homosexuals were unsuited to the police. These related to the internal and external pressures impinging on the department, with regard to the employment of homosexuals. The implications of the discourses are discussed with reference to gay men, the police and the ideologies of heterosexism and gender.

Foreword

Since the early 1960's gay men and lesbians have been active in their pursuit of civil rights in New Zealand. My interest in issues relating to homosexuality stems from a broader concern with the areas of social justice and sexuality, and a curiosity regarding the heterosexual response to homosexuality. This response was a much published phenomenon during the production of my thesis, a result of the proposed amendment to the Human Rights Act of 1977, which sought to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The police were chosen as the focus of the research, partly because of the vociferous opposition to the proposed law changes registered by the Minister of Police, and partly because the traditional stereotypes of the police and gay men stand in direct contrast to each other. How were officers making sense of the very public debate regarding the employment of homosexuals by the police, and other issues connected to homosexuality?

Discourse analysis offered an alternative to the traditional social psychological approaches to the study of attitudes and prejudice. In exploring police responses to homosexuality, discourse analysis allowed a detailed examination of the complex accounts officers constructed in explanation of a variety of issues related to homosexuality. At times it was difficult to embrace the discursive framework, which largely stands in opposition to the quantitative methodologies in which I was firmly entrenched, however, the experience has been a positive one.

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I. INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

The homosexual community has long been the object of institutional, moral and social castigation and discrimination. With the demedicalisation of homosexuality in psychology and psychiatry in the early 1970's (Conger, 1975), research in this area has increasingly centred on the study of attitudes towards gay men and lesbians. The present study takes a new look at this area, investigating how the language used by a small number of police officers describes and evaluates homosexuals. The emphasis is on a fine-grained analysis of language use in a specific social and political context, rather than the production of analytic conclusions that may be generalised to an entire population.

This chapter provides an overview of the empirical research and theory relating to attitudes toward homosexuals. The assumptions inherent in traditional attitudinal and cognitive research are challenged using arguments from discursive perspectives, and two studies sharing similar methodological and theoretical qualities with the present study are discussed. Finally, the social and legal backgrounds of the current study are presented.

Previous research has focused on attitudes toward homosexuals. Researchers have concentrated on attaining a numerical index of the degree of 'homophobia', and have correlated this index with a range of psychological, demographic and social variables hypothesised to be significant in explaining the differences in opinion regarding homosexuals. There are several problems and discrepancies within this body of research and these will be discussed following a brief review of the literature.

Attitudinal Research

Psychological Variables

A traditional sex role orientation has consistently been associated with negative attitudes toward homosexuality (Hansen, 1982; Kurdek, 1988; Liebllich & Friedman, 1985; McDonald & Games, 1974; McDonald, Huggins, Young & Swanson, 1972; Stark, 1991; Whitley, 1987). A common explanation of this finding is the negative attitudes are a response to behaviour that is seen to threaten the traditional sex role structure. The negative response stems from the belief that gay men are feminine and lesbians are masculine and therefore challenge traditional sex roles (McDonald, Huggins, Young & Swanson, 1972). Condemnation of homosexuality is thus used as a tool to maintain gender conformity.

Related to sex role orientation is the concept of psychological androgyny, which refers to a person's self-definition as masculine, feminine or androgynous. Researchers report mixed results regarding the relationship between psychological androgyny and attitudes toward homosexuality. Hansen (1982) and Kurdek (1988) found no relationship between psychological androgyny in men and attitudes toward homosexuals, while self-defined feminine women exhibited more negative attitudes toward homosexuals than other women. In contrast, Whitley (1987) found less masculine men and less masculine women had less negative attitudes toward homosexuals than their study counterparts. It seems that beliefs about sex roles (sex role orientation) are a better indicator of negative attitudes toward homosexuality than personal adherence to a specific gender role (psychological androgyny).

Less negative attitudes toward homosexuality have also been associated with a liberal attitude to sexual behaviours (Levitt & Klassen, 1974; Nyberg & Alston, 1976/77; Smith, 1971). Negativity toward homosexuality has been seen as part of a generally conservative attitude to sexuality (Church, 1967 in Ficarroto, 1990; Nyberg & Alston, 1976/77). Finally, a negative correlation has been found to exist between an

authoritarian personality and homosexuality (Larsen, Reed & Hoffman, 1980; McDonald & Games, 1974; Smith, 1971).

Demographic Variables

Findings have been mixed regarding age and homosexuality. Some researchers report that younger people are more tolerant of homosexuals (Bowman, 1983; Hong, 1984; Irwin & Thompson, 1978; Jensen, Gambles & Olsen, 1988) while others report that younger people are more intolerant (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980; Kurdek, 1988; Whitley, 1987). Levitt and Klassen (1974) found age was not a significant factor in attitudes toward homosexuals. These findings become less anomalous when one considers the range of subjects' ages in these studies. Those researchers reporting greater tolerance among young people, have typically used a public survey encompassing a wide age range on which to base their conclusions, while those reporting older subjects as more tolerant have used a college population where the spread of ages lies between 18 to 24 years. In the latter case the difference in attitudes may be better attributed to time spent in college where exposure to liberal ideas and the chance to meet homosexual people may be greater (Whitley, 1987).

Level of education obtained and tolerance for homosexuals have shown a consistent positive correlation in a number of studies (Bowman, 1983; Hong, 1983, 1984; Hudson & Ricketts, 1980; Irwin & Thompson, 1978; Jensen, Gambles & Olsen, 1988; Nyberg & Alston 1976/77). Irwin and Thompson (1978) explain this finding with reference to research that points to the importance of education for the development of liberal attitudes.

People who come from or live in small towns or rural areas exhibit less tolerance of homosexuals than do people coming from larger centres (Irwin & Thompson, 1978; Levitt & Klassen, 1974; Nyberg & Alston, 1976/77; Stephan & McMullin, 1982). This finding is consistent with research demonstrating that people who live in large urban areas, hold generally more liberal attitudes to behaviour that may be considered as deviating from the norm (Stephan & McMullin, 1982). In examining the evidence

regarding education, city size and attitudes toward homosexuals, Nyberg and Alston (1976/76) suggest that liberal attitudes are a function of one's social environment, rather than a function of one's generation or age. The influence of social environment is further demonstrated in the finding that people who believe their peers hold positive attitudes to homosexuality are also likely to espouse positive attitudes (Larsen et al, 1980).

Several studies have shown men to be more negative in their attitudes toward homosexuals than women (Hansen, 1982; Hong, 1983,1984; Kite, 1984; Kurdek, 1988; Larsen, Reed & Hoffman, 1980; Lieblich & Friedman, 1985; Maret, 1984; Stark, 1991). This finding maybe explained in terms of the way society puts more pressure on men than women to conform to established sex role norms. Thus men are more likely to rebuke non-heterosexual behaviour because it is seen as an aberration of traditional sex roles (Lieblich & Amia, 1985; Stark, 1991). Other studies have found no sex differences in relation to attitudes toward homosexuals (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980; Irwin & Thompson, 1978; Jensen, Gambles & Olsen, 1988; Levitt & Klassen, 1974; Nyberg & Alston, 1976/77). In a meta-analytic review of the literature regarding sex differences, Kite (1984) found that the observed sex difference decreased as sample size increased indicating that obtained sex differences may be biased by sampling error.

Social Variables

Having contact with or knowing a homosexual has been consistently positively correlated with tolerance of homosexuals (Bowman, 1983; Duncan, 1988; Gentry, 1987; Hansen, 1982; Lance, 1987; Pagtolun-An & Clair, 1986). In explanation of this finding, Lance (1987) and Herek (1984a) suggest that contact with homosexuals breaks down the previously held negative cultural stereotypes of homosexuals, leading to a more positive evaluation of, and increased comfort with homosexuals.

Another consistent finding is the influence of religiosity on attitudes towards homosexuals. Generally, people who have some degree of religious affiliation are more likely to hold negative attitudes towards homosexuals. This is seen as a result of

Christianity's proscriptiveness regarding homosexuality, based on interpretation of various Bible passages (Bowman, 1983; Gentry, 1987; Hong, 1983,1984; Jensen et al, 1988; Levitt & Klassen, 1974; Maret, 1984; Nyberg & Alston, 1976/77)

Problems

Although the research does allow some general conclusions to be drawn about attitudes toward homosexuality and homosexuals, this area is not without problems. From a quantitative perspective, the study of prejudice against homosexuals has been criticised on both methodological and definitional levels. Kite (1984) and Kite and Deaux (1986) assert the advancement of research into attitudes towards homosexuals and homosexuality has been hindered by the absence of an adequately developed measuring instrument with demonstrated validity. Specifically, they note some authors have used only one item to obtain a subjects response to homosexuality while others have used scales including a number of items. It seems unlikely that these authors are measuring the same constructs given this variation. An examination of the literature discussed above bears out this criticism. Six studies of the twenty three examined used one item to assess a subjects approval or agreement with homosexuality. This was the most common form of assessment followed by the use of the index of homophobia (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980), a multi-item scale developed to measure affective responses to homosexuals. Kite & Deaux (1986) assert that instruments have been used with little regard for their validity or establishing continuity within the field.

Further criticisms relate to the content of the measurement scales. Different scales tap one or more of the affective, cognitive and attitudinal responses to homosexuality. This is seen by some authors to reduce conceptual clarity (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980; Kite & Deaux, 1986) and lead to faulty conclusions about the nature of attitudes toward homosexuals (Herek, 1984b).

In part these problems may be a reflection of the definitional crises evident in this research area. Several terms have been applied to research regarding prejudice against homosexuals, the most popular of these has been 'homophobia' first coined by Weinberg

(1972, cited in Hudson and Ricketts, 1980). He defined homophobia as a dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals. However several authors have recommended that homophobia be dropped as a term defining prejudice against homosexuals for two reasons. Firstly, over time homophobia has been used to refer to any kind of negative response or action directed at homosexuals, and thus its precision has been compromised (Herek, 1984a; Hudson & Ricketts 1980; Fyfe, 1983; Neisen, 1990). Secondly, the 'phobia' part of the word connotes a fear of homosexuals akin to a phobic reaction, that is considered inappropriate as a description of the subject area. Few if any responses to homosexuals may be characterised as phobic in the clinical sense of the word. Responses may be better understood in terms of a social prejudice like that of racism. Thus some authors have introduced the concept of 'heterosexism' to emphasise the social nature of responses to homosexuals (Neisen, 1990; Herek, 1992).

Attitudes and Discourse

In their discussion of attitudes in traditional social psychology, Potter and Wetherell (1987) note the lack of an adequate definition of attitude in the literature. They draw on Mc Guire's (1985: p. 239, cited in Potter and Wetherell, 1987) basic definition: that when people are expressing attitudes they are giving responses which "locate objects of thought on dimensions of judgement". Thus defined Potter and Wetherell (1987) note three major difficulties plaguing traditional attitudinal research. The first relates to the object of thought, or the object of the attitude research. The basic problem lies in the way that people interpret a given definition of a category that they are required to assess. Here Potter and Wetherell are saying that people may have different understandings of the object of research. Thus the attitude analyst, can not be sure that the participants definition of the object, is consistent with his or her own definition, or that participants share a common definition of the object. This inconsistency raises the question- what is being studied and can any reliable conclusions be drawn from such research?

The second difficulty is the way in which data gathered from research participants is transformed into the categories of the analyst. Potter and Wetherell give an example from Marsh's (1976) study of attitudes to immigrants in Britain. Marsh relabelled a dimension running from 'completely sympathetic' to 'completely unsympathetic' to 'very positive' through to 'very hostile'. Potter and Wetherell state that there is no reason to make such a transformation and that the words 'hostile' connote an active disposition to the group, while 'lacks sympathy' connotes a person without an active disposition. The third problematic area is that participants responses are taken by the researcher to indicate the underlying attitude of the participant. The assumption is, that people carry around immutable and enduring categories and evaluations of those categories in their heads. If this was the case one would expect a person to espouse very similar if not the same attitude over a number of occasions. Discourse analysts have found this not to be the case, and explain the variation within a person's account with reference to the functions that the individual is trying to perform. Thus an individual's attitude may vary according to whether he or she is responding to the researchers expectations, or convincing the researcher that he or she is a liberal person for example. Potter and Wetherell (1987) propose that discourse analysis is able to avoid the pitfalls associated with traditional attitudinal research by approaching the study of "attitudes" using a different set of assumptions.

Discourse analysts avoid making the assumption that people share the same understanding of the 'object of thought' or category under evaluation, by focusing on the way individuals actively construct the "object" they are speaking about. Potter and Wetherell (1987) argue that the object of thought and evaluation of the object are virtually impossible to separate meaningfully. This is because in the course of expressing an evaluation, individuals are typically creating the nature of the object. For example, the following was in response to a question asking Carl what he thought about having homosexuals in the police.

Carl: ...I categorise homosexuals as being, as falling into four categories. One your overt, overtly um dressing up as females ah types. Two the effeminate males... now I'm opposed to homosexuals who perform dressing up as women being part of the police service because I'm quite convinced, that the vast majority of the public will not accept that person...

In this extract, Carl tells us he is opposed to certain types of homosexual being in the police. His evaluation is they are not suited. In the course of giving us his evaluation, Carl has also constructed a certain type of homosexual, built around the suggestion that some homosexuals are cross-dressers and effeminate. Carl has thus constructed the object 'homosexual', in the process of giving his opinion on having them in the police.

Through examining the context in which evaluations are couched, the discourse analyst can avoid making simplistic interpretations, and can focus instead on the action orientation of the individual's speech. From this perspective variation in the account of the individual is expected as she or he constructs a version of reality according to the function of her or his account. The analyst is provided with more information with which to make sense of, and reveal the organisation and function of an individual's account.

The preceding section has described social and demographic variables related to heterosexuals who have participated in empirical studies of attitudes toward homosexuals. The question remains, what are the psychological processes involved in the evaluation of homosexuality and gay people?

I would now like to turn your attention to the theories used to account for prejudice against homosexuals. Cognitive theories will be addressed first followed by two theories based on a functional approach to the study of prejudice which are akin to the model of analysis employed in the present study.