

Development of Heterosexuals'
Attitudes Toward Lesbians

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Abstract

Societal attitudes toward homosexuals have contributed to stigmatization of this group as deviant and immoral. A deviant label of homosexual has been institutionalized in social mores, laws, judicial decisions, psychiatric and research practices and the workplace. In light of this negative sanction, it has been the purpose of this study to examine the relative importance of parental attitudes, respondent sex, authoritarianism, gender role attitudes, educational and media influences and contact with lesbians in the development of heterosexuals' attitudes toward lesbians. Three hundred seventy eight questionnaires were distributed to dormitory residents at the University of Pittsburgh in March, 1985 and respondents consisted of 114 male and 183 female undergraduates. A theoretical path analysis model hypothesized a temporal order of variables associated with positive and negative attitudes toward lesbians. It was found that liberal gender role attitudes (measured by Spence, Helmreich and Stapp's 1973 Attitudes Toward Women Scale) was the most important of five predictors to accepting attitudes toward lesbians (measured by a newly constructed Likert-type scale). Accepting parental attitudes toward lesbians were next most important, followed by low authoritarianism, sex of respondent and greater exposure to educational and media influences concerning homosexuality. It was concluded that policies which diminish stratification by sex and support equal treatment of men and women may contribute to advancement of civil and social rights for lesbians and homosexual men, and that disconfirmations of stereotypes about homosexuals through education and media sources may help eradicate erroneous images.

Societal attitudes toward homosexuality have been institutionalized in laws and policies which label homosexual behavior criminal and immoral, restrict occupational entry and deny custody of natural and adoptive children to visible homosexuals. Homosexuality is labeled deviant through social mores, legislation, judicial decisions, psychiatric and research practices and in the workplace. Such practices propagate prejudice by attempting to keep the three to twelve percent of the population who are homosexual from revealing sexual preference because of social punishments which accompany visibility. Although an association exists between self-disclosure of sexual preference and higher self-esteem, negative reactions by heterosexuals typically discourage homosexuals from revealing their sexual orientation. Thus, differential access to social and civil rights creates a negative status for the homosexual population.

One way to improve the status and treatment of lesbians and homosexual men is to create an understanding of the influences that contribute to individual attitudes toward homosexuals. Knowledge of the ways in which positive versus negative attitudes are developed might suggest strategies aimed at increasing the incidence of positive attitudes and decreasing societal stigmatization of homosexual men and women. Previous research suggests a number of variables which correlate with attitudes toward homosexuals.

Previous studies have shown that attitudes toward homosexuals are significantly correlated with sex of respondent (Glassner and Owen, 1976; Gurwitz and Marcus, 1978; Larsen, Cate and Reed, 1982; Milham and Weinberger, 1977; Minnegerode, 1976; Thompson and Fishburn, 1977; Weinberg, 1972), authoritarianism (Hood, 1973; Larsen, Cate and Reed, 1982; Larsen, Reed and Hoffman, 1980; Nyberg and Alston, 1974), religiosity (Irwin and Thompson, 1977; Larsen, Cate and Reed, 1982; Larsen, Reed and Hoffman, 1980; Nyberg and Alston, 1974), sex role attitudes (Dunbar, Brown and Amoroso, 1973; MacDonald and Games, 1974; Weinberger and Milham, 1979), contact with homosexuals (Glassner and Owen, 1976; San Miguel and Milham, 1979) and educational courses about human sexuality (Larsen, Cate and Reed, 1982). It is of interest to identify interrelationships among the central predictors as well as those variables which are associated with predictors to homosexual attitudes. It is the purpose of this research to test a path analysis model of the development of attitudes toward homosexuals.

Little research has been done regarding attitudes toward lesbians (Clinard, 1974; MacDonald and Games, 1974; Shiveley, Jones and DeCecco, 1984). Most studies have constructed scales measuring attitudes toward homosexuals in general. Attitude studies which have specified sex of homosexual (Goodyear, Abadie and Barquest, 1981; Glassner and Owen, 1976; Gross, Green, Storck and Vanyur, 1980; Gurwitz and Marcus, 1978; MacDonald and Games, 1974; Milham and Weinberger, 1977; Smith, Resick and Kilpatrick, 1980) have produced mixed results. Nyberg and Alston (1977) recommend that future attitudinal studies take into account sex of both respondent and homosexual. To better understand attitudes

toward female homosexuals, sex of attitude object was controlled for in this study. Hence, the dependent variable in the path model was attitudes toward lesbians.

In light of previous findings respondent sex, parental attitudes toward lesbians, authoritarianism, religiosity, sex role attitudes, contact with and education about homosexuals were temporally specified in a path analysis model as direct and indirect predictors to attitudes toward lesbians. These hypothesized associations are discussed in the following section.

Respondent Sex

Some researchers suggest that a "threat to image" (Glassner and Owen, 1976) or "ego defensive function" (Larsen, Reed and Hoffman, 1980) may result in men evaluating male homosexuals more negatively and women evaluating female homosexuals more negatively. Gross, Green, Storck and Vanyur (1980) suggest that "homosexuals are judged more stereotypically by members of their own sex perhaps because each sex is more aware of its own sex role boundaries" (p.312). Gurwitz and Marcus (1978) suggest that males may react most negatively to male homosexuals because they fear that the homosexual will try to initiate a sexual relationship with them; a same-sexed homosexual makes them anxious about their own sexuality; or if they express positive attitudes or willingness to interact, other people might infer that they too are homosexual.

In light of findings which suggest that respondent sex influences attitudes toward lesbians (Goodyear, Abadie, and Barquest, 1981; Gross, Green, Storck and Vanyur, 1980; Gurwitz and Marcus, 1978; Smith, Resick and Kilpatrick, 1980; Weinberger and Milham, 1979), this path model explored the direct effect of sex on attitudes toward female homosexuals. Given the mixed results of previous studies which have investigated the influence of sex of respondent on attitudes toward male and female homosexuals, a nondirectional hypothesis which predicted that sex differences would exist in attitudes toward lesbians was tested.

Sex Role Attitudes

MacDonald, Huggins, Young and Swanson (1972) tested two competitive explanations for negative attitudes toward homosexuality: a conservative sex morality and support for a double standard for the sexes. Their data offered support for the latter explanation. According to the authors, "preservation of the masculine-feminine dichotomy may be threatened by the homosexual who we believe to be feminine when male and masculine when female. Accordingly, [those with rigid sex role attitudes]...may condemn the homosexual in order to reduce sex role confusion" (MacDonald, et al., 1972, p.161). Homosexual behavior may be seen to violate traditional sex role standards so that those who hold these standards may view homosexuality negatively, while those who hold less fixed ideas of the roles of men and women may see homosexual behavior less negatively. Therefore, conservative sex role

attitudes were hypothesized to be inversely correlated with positive attitudes toward lesbians.

Sex of respondent has been shown to be associated with sex role attitudes in a number of studies. Spence and Helmreich (1972) reported significant differences on 47 of the 55 items between the sexes on their Attitudes Toward Women Scale (cited in Lunneborg, 1974). Studies concerning gender role attitudes have consistently shown women to be more permissive than men in their attitudes toward the roles and rights of women (Goodyear, Abadie, and Barquest, 1981; Der-Korabetian and Smith, cited in Goodyear, et al., 1984; Lunneborg, 1974; Smith, Resick and Kilpatrick, 1980; Spence, et al., 1972 cited in Spence, Helmreich and Stapp, 1973).

Gender of respondent, therefore, was hypothesized to have a direct effect on sex role attitudes. Given the hypothesis that women would express more profeminist attitudes than men, sex was also hypothesized to have an indirect effect on attitudes toward lesbians because profeminist sex role attitudes have been associated with more positive attitudes toward lesbians (Dunbar, Brown and Amoroso, 1973; MacDonald and Games, 1974; MacDonald, et al., 1973; Weinberger and Milham, 1972).

Parental Attitudes

Glassner and Owen (1976) and Milham, San Miguel and Kellog (1979) found a significant relationship between attitudes toward homosexuals and parental attitudes toward homosexuals. Parental attitudes were hypothesized to influence a respondent's beliefs and attitudes toward homosexuals. This path analysis tested for a direct effect of parental attitudes toward lesbians on respondent attitudes toward lesbians.

Parental attitudes toward lesbians can be viewed partially as a consequence of more general parental sex role attitudes. Since sex role attitudes have been shown to be associated with homosexual attitudes (Dunbar, Brown and Amoroso, 1973; MacDonald and Games, 1974; MacDonald, et al., 1973; Weinberger and Milham, 1977), it was hypothesized that parental sex role attitudes would have developed prior to parental lesbian attitudes; that is, parents who hold conservative parental sex role attitudes would tend to develop more rejecting attitudes toward lesbians. Respondents would most likely have perceived their parents' sex role attitudes before they perceived attitudes which deal with sexual preference. Therefore, it was hypothesized that expressions of parental sex role attitudes would precede and positively influence expressions of parental attitudes toward lesbians. Thus, parents' sex role attitudes was expected to indirectly affect respondent's attitudes toward lesbians.

Myer (1980) and Rollin and White (1982) found that the development of girls' gender role attitudes is significantly correlated with their mothers' gender role attitudes. The path model tested the hypothesis that parental gender role attitudes would directly influence respondent's gender role attitudes. A positive indirect effect of

conservative parental gender role attitudes on rejecting respondent attitudes toward lesbians was anticipated as a function of this direct relationship between parents' and respondent's gender role attitudes. Additionally it was theorized that sex of respondent would be positively correlated with parents' gender role attitudes because parents may allow female children more freedom in cross sex-typed behavior and be more restrictive with male children given society's more negative sanction of male cross sex-typed behavior.

Authoritarianism

Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson and Sanford (1950) suggest that "the authoritarian personality tends to generalize strict divisions between groups" (p.971). They also attributed conventionalism (rigid adherence to conventional values), authoritarian submission (submissive, uncritical attitudes toward idealized moral authorities of the in-group) and authoritarian aggression (tendency to be on the lookout for, and to condemn, reject, and punish people who violate conventional values) to persons who scored high on their authoritarianism scale. Given the institutional restraints and societal mores which reject homosexuality, it was theorized that authoritarian persons would have a tendency to reject homosexuals.

Adorno et al. (1950) state that authoritarian persons also tend to dichotomize sex role. Previous work has shown authoritarianism to be significantly correlated with sex role traditionalism (Arnett, 1978; Fine-Davis, 1979; Redferring, 1979). It has also been argued that sex role traditionalism is positively associated with negative attitudes toward homosexuals. It was hypothesized that authoritarianism would have an indirect effect on the dependent variable through sex role attitudes. High authoritarianism was hypothesized to be positively correlated with conservative sex role attitudes which were, in turn, hypothesized to be negatively correlated with positive attitudes toward lesbians.

It was also hypothesized that conservative parental attitudes toward sex roles would positively influence the development of more authoritarian attitudes in respondents and, thus, also indirectly influence negative attitudes toward lesbians. Therefore, a positive relationship of conservative parental sex role attitudes with high authoritarianism in respondents was tested. An indirect effect of parental sex role attitudes on respondent attitudes toward lesbians through authoritarianism was expected.

Religiosity

"Considerable opposition to homosexuals derives from a religious basis" (Larsen, et al., 1980, p. 248). Adorno et al. suggests that "irreligious persons favor nonconformist sympathies which, in turn, go with opposition to prejudice" (p. 739). It was hypothesized that high religiosity would be inversely correlated with positive attitudes toward lesbians.

Adorno, et al. (1950) found that respondents with high religiosity scores tended to be most ethnocentric. Given the strong correlations between ethnocentrism and authoritarianism reported between .58 and .87 (Adorno, et al., 1950), a positive correlation between religiosity and authoritarianism was expected.

Past research has shown religiosity to be a significant predictor of gender role attitudes (Fine-Davis, 1979; Welch, 1975, cited in Fine-Davis, 1979). The hypothesis that religiosity has an indirect effect on attitudes toward lesbians through sex role attitudes was tested in this path model. An inverse direct relationship between religiosity and liberal sex role attitudes was expected.

Contact with Lesbians

Gray and Thompson's (1953) study (cited in Allport, 1958) found that "there was a tendency for students to rate higher in the scale of acceptability all groups in which they have five or more acquaintances" (p.252). When Glassner and Owen (1976) asked respondents to report the number of homosexuals they knew in college and high school, the data revealed that females were slightly more ($p < .10$) likely to report that they knew more homosexuals in college and that females were more accepting of homosexuals (Glassner and Owen, 1976). It is unclear, however, whether those who have contact with lesbians are initially less prejudiced or whether prejudice is reduced through contact.

Recent and current contact with lesbians was hypothesized in this study to have a positive direct path to more accepting attitudes toward lesbians because knowing lesbian acquaintances, family members and friends may provide heterosexuals with information about women who are lesbians that contradicts societal stereotypes. Gurwitz and Marcus (1978) stipulate that,

Implicit in the contact hypothesis is the notion that people's negative expectations will be disconfirmed during the contact. If, however, people ignore or misinterpret the disconfirmations of their stereotype-based expectations, and if they are particularly sensitive to confirmations of these expectations, then we would not expect the contact to be successful in terms of creating positive 'sentiment relations' (p. 48).

Personal friendships with lesbians and contact of some duration and equal status may disconfirm stereotypes and reduce prejudice because of shared experiences, emotional attachment and identification with a specific person who is a lesbian. Casual contact, however, may not have any effect on attitudes.

Allport (1954) suggests that children of accepting parents may be more tolerant overall (quoted in Larsen, et al., 1980). The path model tested the hypothesis that parental attitudes toward lesbians would influence the extent of lesbian contact which respondents report. It

was hypothesized that students who perceived their parents as expressing negative attitudes toward lesbians would report less contact and those with less contact would themselves hold more negative attitudes toward lesbians. Therefore, an indirect effect of parental attitudes toward lesbians through contact was tested in this model.

Persons who hold authoritarian attitudes and express endorsement of restrictive roles for men and women may avoid contact with lesbians and homosexual men because they view homosexuality as violating moral authorities and normative standards. It was hypothesized that conservative sex role attitudes would be inversely correlated with self-report of contact with homosexuals and thus have a negative indirect effect on accepting attitudes toward lesbians. It was also expected that female respondents would report more contact with lesbians because of women's close friendships which might result in women who are lesbians being more likely to self-disclose to other women.

Exposure to Educational and Media Influences

The influence of an educational course in human sexuality has been shown to increase positive attitudes toward homosexuals (Larsen, Cate and Reed, 1982). Other possible educational and media influences include additional educational courses, books, articles, movies, television shows and public events which present information about homosexuality, particularly information that disconfirms stereotypes. It was hypothesized that greater exposure to educational and media influences about homosexuality would be associated with more positive attitudes toward lesbians.

Exposure to information about homosexuals was also expected to have a direct path to contact with lesbians, since persons who allow stereotypes to be disconfirmed by educational and media influences may then be more willing to associate with lesbians. Persons who express authoritarian submission, conventionalism and who hold more fixed ideas about gender roles may be less willing to experience education and media exposures which disconfirm established beliefs and stereotypes about homosexuals. Thus, authoritarianism and sex role attitudes were expected to influence the amount of exposure to educational and media influences reported by respondents and therefore have indirect effects on attitudes toward lesbians through the educational and media exposure variable.

Summary of Path Analysis

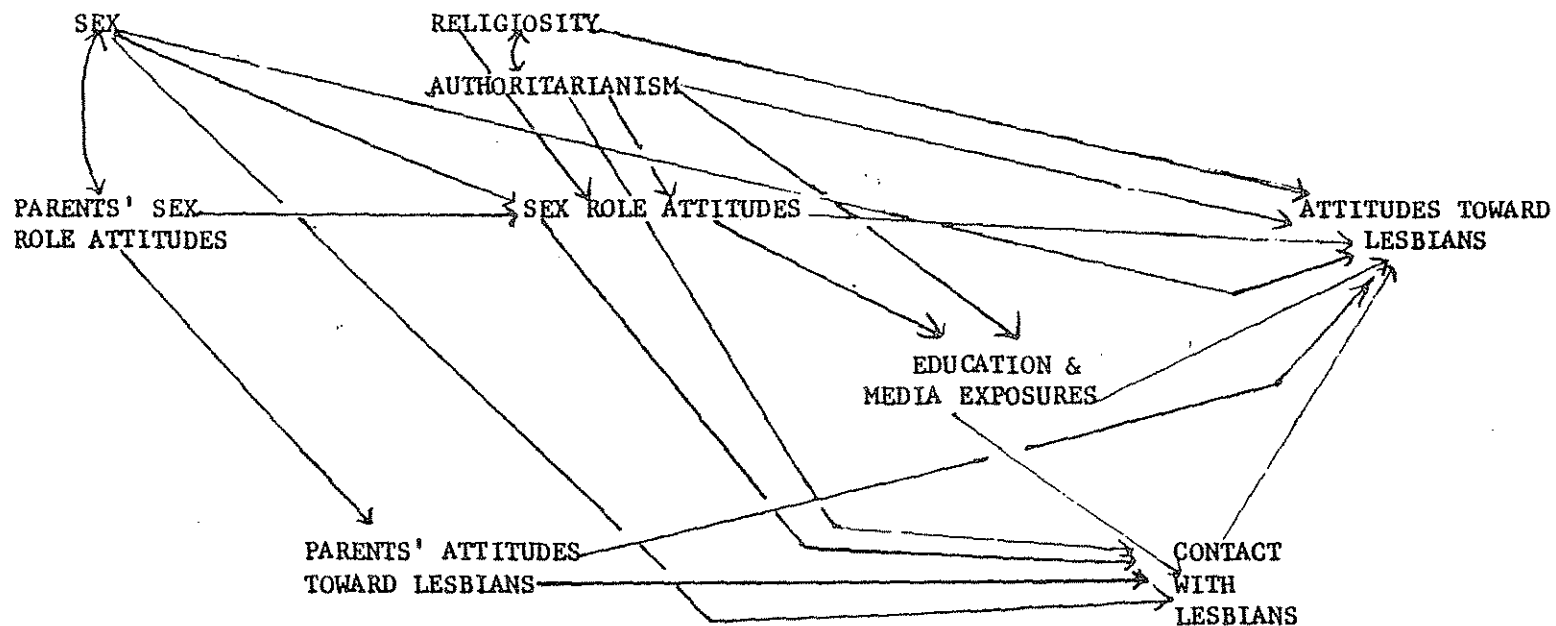
In light of theoretical and empirical arguments presented above, seven predictors were expected to have a direct path to attitudes toward lesbians. Accepting parental attitudes toward lesbians were predicted to be positively correlated with accepting respondent attitudes toward lesbians. High religiosity and authoritarianism were predicted to be inversely correlated with positive attitudes toward lesbians. Liberal sex role attitudes, exposure to media and educational information about lesbians and more frequent contact with lesbians were predicted to be

associated with positive attitudes toward lesbians. Sex of respondent was expected to influence attitudes toward lesbians in an exploratory hypothesis.

Additionally, sex was expected to influence sex role attitudes, with women expressing more liberal sex role attitudes than men. Authoritarianism and religiosity were expected to be inversely correlated with sex role attitudes. Liberal parental sex role attitudes were expected to be positively associated with accepting parental attitudes toward lesbians and liberal respondent sex role attitudes. Being female, reporting accepting parental attitudes toward lesbians, low authoritarianism and liberal sex role attitudes were predicted to positively correlate with more frequent contact with lesbians. Low authoritarian scores and liberal sex role attitudes were hypothesized to be correlated with greater exposure to educational media information about homosexuality. The full path analysis model is presented in Figure 1. Direct effects of all independent variables have been specified in the preceding discussion. Important indirect effects have also been discussed. Multiple indirect effects (through two or more intervening variables) are implied in the path model, but are too cumbersome for discussion in the preceding section.

Figure 1

Theoretical Path Analysis Model of Development of Heterosexuals' Attitudes Toward Lesbians



METHOD

Respondents

Six hundred seventy-eight questionnaires (678) were delivered to University of Pittsburgh undergraduate dormitory residents. Two hundred ninety-seven usable questionnaires (297) were returned (response rate = 43.8%). Excluded from the sample were eleven incomplete questionnaires, four respondents who rated themselves as bisexual or homosexual and one graduate student.

The nonrandom sample of respondents consisted of 114 (38%) male undergraduates and 183 (62%) female undergraduates. This distribution shows a somewhat different breakdown than the dormitory population, which consisted of 304 (45%) males and 374 (55%) females.

Sample distribution according to academic year in college was 67 (23%) freshman, 121 (41%) sophomore, 58 (19%) junior and 51 (17%) senior University of Pittsburgh students. The higher representation of freshman and sophomore students may be a reflection of the greater number of underclass members who live in dormitories. The University of Pittsburgh is located in an urban setting in southwestern Pennsylvania. One hundred sixty-one respondents (55%) were from an urban or suburban background and 131 (45%) were from a small town or rural background.

Measures

The survey was a 15 page questionnaire which included five Likert-type attitude scales and two behavioral inventories. Gender role attitudes were measured by the short version of the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (Spence, Helmreich and Stapp, 1973). Reliability on the sample data based on an alpha coefficient was .89.

The Potentiality for Fascism (F-) Scale (Form 40, Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson and Sanford, 1950, pp. 255-256) measured authoritarianism (i.e., expression of attitudes associated with political conservatism, moral rejection of the unconventional and prejudice toward out-groups). The F-Scale version adapted for this study has 27 items which indicate the degree of authoritarian attitudes. Sample reliability for this F-Scale version was .80 (alpha coefficient).

Religiosity was measured by Faulkner and Dejong's (1966) eight item religiosity composite Guttman scale. Sample questions are: "Do you believe the world will come to an end according to the will of God?"; "What is your view of the following statement?: Religious truth is higher than any other form of truth." Responses were multiple choice statements which were scored as a two for the traditional religious response(s) and as a one for nontraditional responses. The coefficient of reproducibility in this sample was .88.

Parents' sex role attitudes, parental attitudes toward lesbians, respondent contact with lesbians and exposure to information about homosexuality were measured by self-report.

The dependent variable, attitudes toward lesbians, was measured by a 23 item scale. Twenty items were developed by the author, two items were derived from Smith's (1971) homophobia scale and one item was chosen from Larsen, Reed and Hoffman's (1980) Heterosexual Attitudes Toward Homosexuals Scale. These three derived items were changed from asking about homosexuals in general to asking specifically about lesbians. A Likert-type scale of agreement comprised the response alternatives. The mean inter-item correlation coefficient was .32, the range, -.01 to .69. Sample reliability for this 23 item scale was .92 (alpha coefficient).

Procedure

Data collection took place the week of March 21, 1985 when resident student advisors delivered questionnaires to 678 dormitory residents by placing them under the door of each resident room. An attached letter asked students to complete the questionnaire, seal it in a manila envelope and return to to any resident advisor within four days. A second letter attached to the questionnaire explained that the study concerned college students' opinions about the roles of men and women in society.

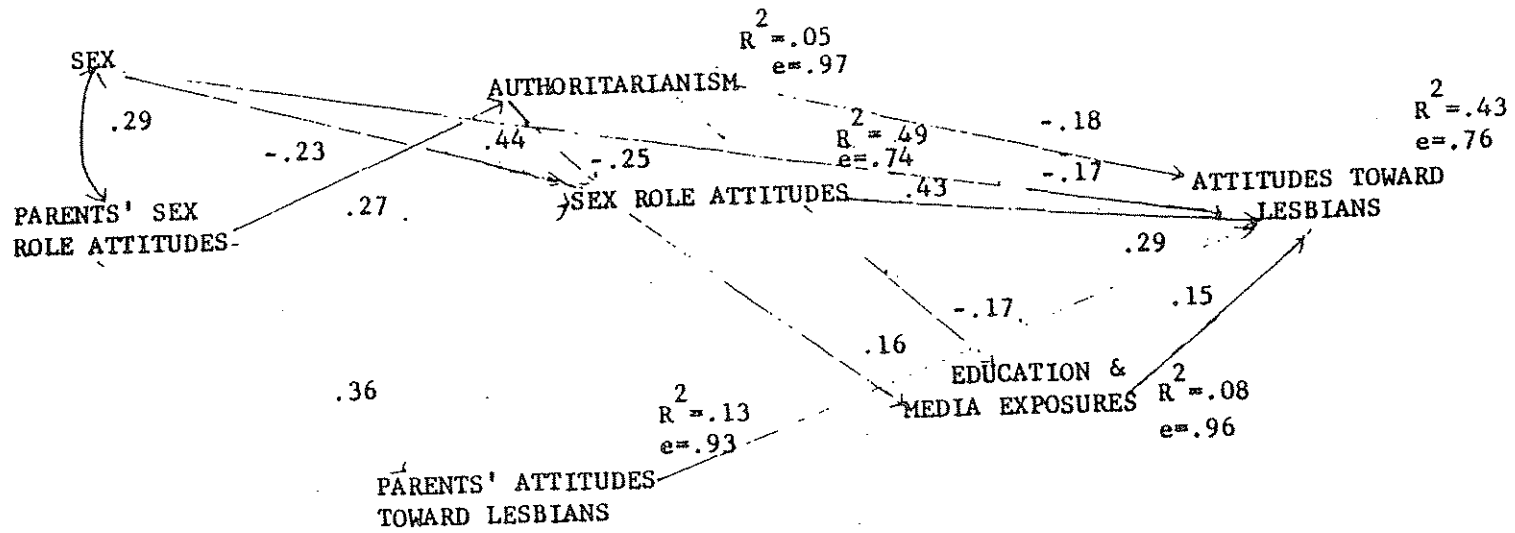
RESULTS OF PATH ANALYSIS

Figure 2 represents the reduced path analysis with significant path coefficients and error terms to describe the empirical outcome of this model. Four multiple linear and two simple linear regression analyses were computed to obtain the standardized beta coefficients that represent direct paths as specified in the theoretical model. Two variables which were hypothesized to have direct paths to attitudes toward lesbians produced nonsignificant path coefficients, while the other five specified variables produced significant path coefficients ($p < .01$) to attitudes toward lesbians. Forty-three percent of the variance in attitudes toward lesbians was accounted for by these predictors. As can be seen in Figure 2, parents' attitudes toward lesbians, respondent sex, authoritarianism, gender role attitudes and educational and media influences represented significant paths to attitudes toward lesbians. Thus, males with liberal sex role attitudes, accepting parents, little authoritarianism and more information about homosexuality were more likely to express accepting attitudes toward lesbians.

Self-report of overall contact with lesbians (which included known and probable lesbian family members, current and recent friends and acquaintances) did not account for a significant amount of variance in attitudes toward lesbians (Beta = .04). Additionally, the five variables which were hypothesized to be associated with contact (parents' attitudes toward lesbians, sex of respondent, gender role

Figure 2

Reduced Path Analysis Model of Development of Heterosexuals' Attitudes Toward Lesbians



attitudes, authoritarianism and educational and media influences) produced nonsignificant path coefficients to contact, with the exceptions of educational and media influences and respondent sex. It was concluded that the measure of contact with lesbians as indicated by self-report of overall recent and current contact was not associated with attitudes toward lesbians in the sample data. A possible explanation for this failure of expected association may be that the measure of contact only tapped absolute amount of contact rather than more specific information about the nature of contact. Additionally, the skewed distribution (toward no contact) may have attenuated a possible relationship with the dependent variable.

Religiosity was the other variable which produced a nonsignificant path coefficient to attitudes toward lesbians. Although religiosity produced a significant path coefficient ($Beta = .11, p = .05$) to gender role attitudes in the model, when a partial correlation of religiosity with sex role attitudes partialling out authoritarian was computed, the association between gender role attitudes and religiosity dropped to zero. It was decided that the variable religiosity added nothing to the model and it was also removed.

As hypothesized, respondent sex, parents' sex role attitudes authoritarian attitudes and sex role attitudes also had indirect effects. Sex of respondent had an indirect effect on attitudes toward lesbians because female respondents tended to express liberal sex role attitudes which were, in turn, predictive of more accepting attitudes toward lesbians. Parents' sex role attitudes were also indirect predictors of attitudes toward lesbians. Liberal parental sex role attitudes predicted accepting parental attitudes toward lesbians, liberal respondent sex role attitudes and little authoritarianism expressed by respondents. These dependent variables for parental sex role attitudes then serve as independent variables for attitudes toward lesbians. In addition, authoritarian and sex role attitudes are not only direct predictors of attitudes toward lesbians, but they are also indirect predictors through their effect on educational and media exposure. Those with high authoritarianism tended to have fewer educational and media exposures and thus more negative attitudes toward lesbians. Those with liberal sex role attitudes tended to have more educational and media exposures and thus more accepting attitudes toward lesbians.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

It can be concluded that sex role attitudes are a central variable in relation to attitudes toward lesbians. It appears to be the most important variable in the multiple regression analysis on attitudes toward lesbians for the total sample. Perceived parents' sex role attitudes were another indicator of the association between sex role attitudes and attitudes toward lesbians. Respondents' expression of their parents' sex role attitudes were an important variable in relation to respondents' expression of their own sex role attitudes, and thus contributed strongly to respondents' attitudes toward lesbians.

What parents communicate to their children about the general roles of men and women may be an important influence in how children (and adults) perceive homosexuals. The strong positive association between sex role attitudes and attitudes toward lesbians reveals the underlying theme of sex differentiation which results in restriction on vocational, educational and sexual roles for men and women. Societal attitudes which are less restrictive toward sex roles of men and women would most likely decrease prejudiced attitudes toward homosexuals. Advancement of women's rights may result in advancement of rights for homosexual men and women. Policies which diminish stratification by sex and support equal treatment of men and women such as an equal rights amendment, affirmative action, equal pay for equal work, maternity and paternity leave and more accessible quality childcare could decrease unjustified differentiations between the sexes and increase opportunities for more diverse roles for women and men. If the expectations for roles and behavior of men and women were determined by individual preferences and abilities rather than on the basis of social definitions of male and female, attitudes toward gender roles could be liberalized. Socialization in schools and families could reduce sex role stereotyping by encouraging children to develop according to their own abilities and inclinations rather than according to sex role stereotypes. A society which encourages individuals to develop according to their own abilities and preferences would not socialize its members to discriminate on the basis of sex or sexual preference.

In addition, positive effects of educational and media exposure to information about homosexuality on attitudes toward lesbians suggest another way to increase the incidence of accepting attitudes toward homosexuals. Disconfirmations of stereotypes and societal myths about homosexuals through educational courses and a variety of sources of media may prove effective in helping to eradicate erroneous images of homosexuals as abnormal, threatening or cross-sex stereotyped and may lead to more accepting attitudes toward lesbians and homosexual men. Presenting information about homosexuals which dispels myths and offers realistic portrayals of lesbians and homosexual men in the media may help to cast off the societal taboo against homosexuality. As portrayals of minorities and women became less stereotyped in movies and television and the contribution of minorities and women were included in

history courses, a reduction of sexist and racist stereotypes have taken place. Prejudice toward homosexuals could be decreased through removing the taboo which keeps homosexual men and women invisible. Positive models of homosexual men and women exist throughout history, but their contributions have either been excluded or their sexual preference has been kept secret. Acknowledgement of the contributions of homosexual men and women in history and current society through education and the media could provide realistic portrayals of this group. The label of homosexual is most often highlighted as a derogatory attribute and is seldom applied in a positive way. Homosexual men and women who contribute to such fields as childcare, education, science, law, medicine, art and literature are seldom associated with their sexual preference because of the stereotypes which erroneously associate homosexuality with uncontrollable sexual impulses, immorality and a pathological abnormality. These associations could be reduced by presenting more accurate portrayals of homosexuals through media and education sources.

Societal stigmatization and discrimination of homosexuals make this group of concern to social work professionals, whose values and ethics mandate their responsibility toward maltreated populations. Social work educators can disconfirm stereotypes and help eliminate taboos on homosexuality by including informed discussions of this population in social work curriculum. In light of research which consistently demonstrates a mentally healthy status of homosexuals, social work practitioners have a professional responsibility to accept homosexuality as a healthy sexuality. Social work professionals can contribute to decreasing societal prejudice by developing and supporting policies which decrease discrimination of this group and by accepting homosexual colleagues and clients.

Footnotes

¹ Liberal items on all Likert-type scales were reverse coded so that high scores indicate more liberal responses. One exception to this is the F-scale which is an unbalanced scale where high scores indicate more authoritarian attitudes. Similarly, higher scores on the religiosity scale indicate more religious attitudes. Higher scores on contact and educational or media exposures indicate more exposures to lesbians.

² Parents' gender role attitudes were measured by a derived scale using items developed by Burt (1980); Gerken and Gove (1983); and Scott and Brantley (1983). Parental attitudes toward lesbians were based on items developed by Glassner and Owen (1976). Respondent contact with lesbians and exposure to information about homosexuality were newly constructed indexes.

For more detailed information about these measures, please contact the author at Southern Illinois University School of Social Work.

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