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The Effects of Education on Homophobic Attitudes in College Students

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether attitudes towards homosexuals could be modified by education from a biological or moral/religious perspective. Sixty-eight male and fifty-seven female volunteers from a mid-sized Catholic liberal arts university were randomly assigned to two groups. The first group viewed a video discussing homosexuality from a biological perspective. The second group viewed a video discussing homosexuality from a moral/religious perspective. The subject's attitudes towards homosexuality were measured with a modified version of Smith's "Homophobic Scale" (Lumby, 1976) immediately after viewing the video. A two-way (video x gender) ANOVA revealed significant main effects of video for three items on the questionnaire. Subjects viewing the biological video were less likely to be homophobic than subjects viewing the moral religious video on one of the questions. Significant main effects for gender revealed that males were more likely than females to be homophobic on most of the items.

INTRODUCTION

The subject of homosexuality has been a topic for health care professionals for a long time. However, the controversy over its cause and how homosexuals should be treated is a very heated debate for people from all walks of life. Many psychologists have invested time and effort into the experimental study of people's attitudes towards homosexuality. There is a growing amount of violence and hate crimes in our society towards minorities,

or anyone who happens to be different from the norm (Wilson, 1992). Thus, it is becoming more imperative that professionals try to understand what can be done to change these socially damaging attitudes. Therefore, it would follow that there is a need for studies on homophobia. Although there is little professional consensus on an appropriate definition, we chose to operationally define homophobia as "explicit hostility or prejudice toward gay men and lesbian women..." (Herek, 1986).

Many studies have been conducted on how heterosexuals perceive homosexuals. In one study it was shown that people believe they can tell a person's sexual orientation just by looking at them (Dunkle & Francis, 1990). Subjects in this study assigned higher homosexuality ratings to feminine male and masculine female faces. The researchers also discovered that females were judged much more harshly in terms of how much they looked like homosexuals than were the males.

Another study which was done centered on respondents' beliefs concerning the origins of homosexual orientation (Ernulf, Innala, & Whitam, 1989). The research found respondents who believed that homosexuals are "born that way" had more positive attitudes towards homosexuals than subjects who believed, homosexuals "choose to be that way." Ernulf and his colleagues (Ernulf et al., 1989) therefore hypothesized that viewing a video explaining the biological origins of homosexuality would result in lower levels of homophobia than viewing a video from a moral/religious perspective. The results supported their hypothesis.

Bernard Whitley conducted a study using the attribution theory as a basis for his hypothesis (1990) which dealt with the attitudes of heterosexuals and whether they view homosexuality as being controllable or uncontrollable. His study revealed that heterosexuals' attitudes toward persons bearing the social stigma of homosexual were more negative when homosexuality was attributed to controllable rather than uncontrollable causes. Also, heterosexuals' attitudes toward same-sex gay people were

more negative than those toward other-sex gay people, and heterosexuals who personally knew a gay person had more positive attitudes than those who did not. These findings suggest that personal experience such as having a friend or a family member who is gay will reduce homophobia.

There is strong evidence to support the theory that sexual orientation has a biological basis. One study which shows a very strong correlation was done by Dr. Simon Levay (1991). His research focused on differences in the hypothalamic structure between heterosexual and homosexual men, and found that the brain tissue INAH 3 is dimorphic with sexual orientation in men.

Upon discussing Pillard and Weinrich's findings, Burr suggested that homosexuals were fully masculinized in utero, but failed to undergo another important process: defeminization (Burr, 1993). In this manner homosexuals went through only a partial form of sexual and psychosexual differentiation. The result, according to Pillard and Weinrich (cited in Burr, 1993), is that the homosexual brain is not fully defeminized, therefore, creating what he calls "psychosexual androgyny". In other words, these researchers proposed that gay-men are basically masculine males with female characteristics, and lesbians are women with masculine characteristics.

We hypothesized that if students are educated about the biological hypothesis of homosexuality, suggesting uncontrollability of sexual orientation, then their negative attitudes may be lowered, resulting in a greater acceptance of homosexuality.

Gay-themed films have also been the subject of research efforts in order to examine their effect on homophobia. In one study the findings suggest that viewing a film that portrays homosexuality as a normal sexual preference will reduce homophobia in the viewers (Duncan, 1988a). In contrast, exposure to sexually explicit homosexual films appears to be related to greater homophobia (Duncan, 1988b). These findings would suggest that education through viewing homosexuals in

films can either increase or decrease the amount of fear in the viewers.

It has also been shown that men are typically more homophobic than women. One study that lent support to this assertion not only found men to be more homophobic, but also less same-sex intimate, more sexist, and behaving more in traditional gender roles than women (Stark, 1991). Overall, both men and women who strongly supported traditional male/female roles in regards to gender and family were found to be more homophobic than men and women who held more lax views. The reasons for men typically being more homophobic are still unclear. However research suggests that part of the answer may be that men's and women's responses to homosexuality have different origins (Reiter, 1991). Reiter suggested that men may see homosexuality as a threat to their core gender identity, while women view lesbians as less threatening to their femininity. Homosexuality has also shown to be somewhat of a deterrent for men who engage in sexually indiscriminate behavior (Cochran & Peplars, 1991). Factors such as perceptions of personal vulnerability, and homophobia produced high levels of worry in men which then elicited a change in behavior.

Finally it is important to note that many studies on homophobia are now starting to revolve around the AIDS issue. With the spread of AIDS comes further fear of the people who are more likely to carry the disease. In one study it was discovered that homophobia is an important factor associated with negative attitudes about AIDS (Tessier, Dupras, Levy, & Samson, 1989). They suggest that homophobia and fear of AIDS be treated as separate issues.

We hypothesized that individuals who are exposed to a biological video which suggests the possible biological cause for homosexuality will have lower homophobia scores than subjects who are exposed to a moral/religious video which depicts homosexuality as an immoral activity which individuals freely choose to partake in. It is further predicted that men will rate higher in homophobia than women.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects for the study were 125 men and women from a mid-sized, Catholic liberal arts university whose ages ranged from seventeen to twenty-four. Sixty-eight men and fifty-seven women were randomly selected from the subject pool population. These individuals were given class credit for their participation. Subjects were randomly assigned to the two treatment groups, viewing either the biological or moral/religious video. Subjects were asked to report their sexual orientation and other important information in a demographics questionnaire. One subject reported that he was a homosexual. Thirty-eight subjects reported having close friends or family members—who were self-reported homosexuals, and one subject chose not to respond to these questions. The data from these individuals were excluded from the analysis leaving a total of ninety-one subjects (fifty-three males and thirty-eight females).

Materials

The materials used in the experiment included two videos. One film which presented a biological basis to homosexuality, suggesting the possibility that sexual orientation is not something that a person can control, but it may be predetermined from birth (Bettag, 1991). The second video took a moral/religious perspective and stated that homosexuality is abnormal, and a way of life that individuals should refrain from (Beeson, Beeson & Zapalik, 1991). These videos were shown in quiet classrooms on a standard television and V.C.R. Finally, a twenty-item modified version of Smith's "Homophobic Scale" was used to test the subjects' attitudes after exposure to one of the two treatments (Lumby, 1976). It was modified by limiting the number of items to twenty, and randomly ordering the items. Ten of the items were directly related to homophobia; the other ten items concerned sexuality in general.

Procedure

The initial step of gathering subjects was done by posting sign-up sheets on the subject pool bulletin board in the psychology department. These sign-up sheets entitled "Sexuality," contained the date, time and a brief summary of what the study was to include. Subjects were tested in a large classroom, and seated in every other seat in every other row. Males and females were tested in separate groups.

Obtaining each individual subject's consent was the first step in conducting the experiment. These forms were handed out, read, and signed while the experimenter explained the rights of each subject as a volunteer in the research study. Both the consent form and the experimenter explained that all of the individual results were completely anonymous and confidential. To ensure this a random number was placed at the top of each subject's test to enable the experimenter to establish which group the subject was in. A letter system of "M" and "F" was also used to indicate the subjects' gender. Thus, there was no possibility of connecting the number to the subject's name.

Each participant was then exposed to one of the two treatments. After viewing the film the participants each took the twenty-item modified "Homophobic Scale" (Lumby, 1976) to assess their attitudes of homosexuals and the homosexual orientation. Each group of subjects were then thoroughly debriefed, and given referral sources to local homosexual organizations. The subjects were then thanked for their participation.

RESULTS

A separate two-way (video x gender) ANOVA was conducted for each of the relevant questionnaire items. These relevant items, one, six, seven, nine, twelve, thirteen, fifteen, seventeen, nineteen and twenty, were specifically designed to assess subjects' attitudes toward homosexuality (see Appendix).

Significant main effects of video were obtained for question six, $F(1,89)=5.622$, $p<.05$. For this item,

subjects who viewed the biological video exhibited lower levels of homophobia than subjects who viewed the moral/religious video (see Table 1).

Table 1
Mean Scores for Item 6 by Video Group

Biological	Moral/Religious	
M	3.337	2.68
SD	1.207	1.196

The two-way ANOVA revealed significant main effects of gender on eight of the items. These were questions one, $F(1,89) = 18.382, p < .001$, six, $F(1,89) = 4.175, p < .05$, nine, $F(1,89) = 5.412, p < .05$, twelve, $F(1,89) = 26.469, p < .001$, thirteen, $F(1,89) = 4.255, p < .05$, fifteen, $F(1,89) = 6.049, p < .05$, seventeen, $F(1,89) = 12.008, p < .001$, and nineteen, $F(1,89) = 6.859, p < .05$ (see Table 2). Males scored higher than females in homophobia on all of these items.

Table 2
Mean Scores for Gender on Selected Homophobic Scale Items

	Item	1	6	9	12
Male	M	2.796	2.836	4.004	2.542
	SD	1.181	1.242	1.143	1.196
Female	M	3.832	3.352	4.511	3.868
	SD	1.163	1.185	0.817	1.155
Male	Item 13	13	15	17	19
	M	3.192	3.668	3.172	3.411
Female	SD	1.456	1.185	1.388	1.456
	M	2.621	4.213	4.061	4.142
	SD	1.220	0.964	1.026	1.054

DISCUSSION

The hypothesis that attitudes towards homosexuals could be changed by education from a biological or moral/religious perspective was confirmed. As expected, both male and female subjects exhibited higher levels of homophobia when viewing the moral/religious video, while those subjects viewing the biological video showed a reduced level of homophobia. Although reaching the significant level for only one item, item

six, this further supports the findings of Whitley (1990) and Ernulf et al (1989). The biological video highlighted the possible genetic, and therefore uncontrollable determinant of homosexuality. Thus, subjects educated on this uncontrollable, genetic element exhibited lower levels of homophobia than those subjects who viewed a video portraying homosexuality as an abnormal, sexual orientation choice.

The analysis according to gender revealed that males were more homophobic on all eight of the statistically significant items. This offers further support to findings of Stark (1991) who found men to be more homophobic than women.

However, one should note that the videos used in this experiment dealt predominantly with male homosexuality. Whitley (1990) found that subjects have higher levels of homophobia towards same sex than opposite sex individuals. Since we used more male than female subjects, our results may simply reflect the gender bias in the sample. Educational materials that contain an equal ratio of male-to-female homosexual content may further reduce the level of homophobia in male subjects.

In summary, this study confirmed the hypothesis that education about homophobia can change a person's attitudes about homosexuality. Educating individuals on the possible genetic, uncontrollable component of homosexuality may reduce levels of homophobia. However, further research is needed to examine the exact nature and content of the most advantageous forms of the education.

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Appendix

Homophobic Scale Items Relating to Homophobia

1. I won't associate with known homosexuals if I can help it.
6. I would be afraid for my child to have a homosexual teacher.
7. I find the thought of homosexual acts disgusting.
9. Homosexuals should be locked up to protect society.
12. It would be upsetting to find out that I was alone with a homosexual.
13. A homosexual could make as good a president as a