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## Sexual Attitudes as Predictors of Homonegativity in College Women

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### Abstract

*Rancorous attitudes toward lesbian women and gay men are widespread in the United States (Morrison, Parriag, & Morrison, 1999). Homonegativity is any prejudicial attitude or discriminatory behavior directed toward an individual because of his or her homosexual orientation (Morrison, McLeod, Morrison, Anderson, & O'Connor, 1997). A small amount of research has been done regarding women's attitudes towards lesbians. The purpose of this study is to investigate the potential relationship between sexual attitude expression and homonegativity. It was hypothesized that females with conservative sexual attitudes would show higher levels of homonegativity, and females with liberal sexual attitudes should show more non-homonegative expression towards lesbians. A correlation analysis supported the hypothesis ( $r = .73$ ,  $p < .01$ ) indicating a positive correlation.*

## Sexual Attitudes as Predictors of Homonegativity in College Women

Although researchers have investigated predictors of homonegativity in males, little attention has been given to the predictors of homonegativity in females (Kite, & Whitley, 1998). Predictors such as self-esteem, religiosity, and contact with lesbians and gay men have been widely investigated in men but rarely in women (Basow & Johnson, 2000). It has been widely found that males have more negative attitudes towards gays and lesbians than females (Herek & Capitano, 1999). Negative attitudes towards gays and lesbians are often referred to as homophobia or homonegativity. Homonegativity is a prejudicial attitude or discriminatory behavior directed toward an individual because of his or her homosexual orientation (Morrison, McLeod, Morrison, Anderson, & O'Connor, 1997). The term "homophobia" is often a misnomer because it frequently is used to refer to nonphobic negative reactions toward homosexuals (Haaga, 1991). Negative reactions toward homosexuals and prejudicial beliefs about homosexuals are defined as homonegativity. Homonegativity can be expressed by means of physical violence, verbal assault, or discriminatory actions.

### Consequences of Homonegativity

**Anti-gay Violence.** Research suggests that men are less accepting of homosexuality than women, and that men account for the majority of anti-gay violence on college campuses (Perez, DeBord, & Bieschke, 2000). Anti-gay hate crimes are usually based on actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity of the victim. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2005), a hate crime is a criminal offense committed against a person or society in which the crime is motivated by the offender's bias against a religion, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or national origin. Hate crime victims show more fear of crime and increased feelings of vulnerability. People who experience same-sex or both-sex romantic attraction are more likely to experience extreme forms of violence than people who have a heterosexual attraction (Perez, DeBord, & Bieschke, 2000). According to Parrot, Adams, & Zeichner (2002), 94% of surveyed

gay and lesbian persons reported some form of victimization during their lifetime. Nearly 50% of the respondents had been physically threatened (Parrot, Adams, & Zeichner, 2002).

Anti-gay violence can prove to be fatal. The case of Matthew Shepard is a prime example of the dangers of homonegativity. Two men pretended to be gay to deceive Matthew Shepard. Matthew Shepard was then taken to a remote area where he was robbed, severely beaten with a handheld gun, tied to a fence, and left to die (Savin-Williams, 1999). Leonard "Lynn" Vinnes was a drag queen that lived in Baltimore, Maryland (Savin-Williams, 1999). Leonard was shot six times by a group who felt gay men did not belong in their neighborhood (Savin-Williams, 1999). Barry Winchell was a soldier in the United States Army dating a transgender performer at a nightclub not far from the army base (France, 2000). Despite the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, Barry Winchell experienced severe harassment from the other soldiers because of his perceived homosexuality (France, 2000). On July 9, 1999, Barry Winchell died of internal injuries after in a beating with a baseball bat by a homonegative soldier (France, 2000). These three men perceived to be gay were deceived, beaten, harassed, and ultimately killed due to strong homonegative behaviors exhibited by others. While seemingly extreme, it is disturbing to consider the attacks to the physical and mental wellness of the homosexual population due to the those who act upon their homonegativity.

**Sexual Orientation Discrimination.** Verbal harassment and intimidation are the most common forms of victimization of lesbians (Herek & Berrill, 1992). Parrot, Adams, & Zeichner (2002) report that 90% of gay and lesbian persons are targets of verbal abuse. Although researchers, practitioners, and policymakers may be tempted to downplay verbal harassment in comparison to physical harassment, verbal harassment can be viewed as being equally detrimental. It has been suggested that slurs such as "faggot," "dyke," and "queer" are used to remind the oppressed of their subordinate status. Such anti-gay verbal abuse represents a form of violence and a reminder of the ever present threat of a physical assault (Herek & Berrill, 1992). The psychological effects of verbal abuse may be as brutal as physical assaults. There is always the possibility that victims of verbal abuse may become psychologically scarred. A psychological scar affects how one feels about oneself and expressions of feelings (Herek & Berrill, 1992). Verbal harassment and intimidation of the lesbian population is not to be ignored given its prevalence and potential for negative psychological effects on the individual being targeted.

## **Predictors of Homonegativity**

**Attitudes toward Gays & Lesbians.** According to Herek (2000), sexual prejudice refers to negative attitudes toward an individual because of her or his sexual orientation. Individuals considered to have a sexual prejudice include heterosexuals with negative attitudes toward homosexual behavior, people of homosexual or bisexual orientation, or communities that are predominantly homosexual or bisexual. Higher levels of sexual prejudice were found among individuals who are older, less educated, and persons living in rural areas. Heterosexual males generally display higher levels of sexual prejudice than heterosexual females (Herek, 2000). Among heterosexual males, high levels of sexual prejudice are strongly related to whether a person knows a homosexual or not. Most of the empirical research in this area is limited due to the fact that its focus has been on heterosexuals' attitudes toward gay men and not lesbians (Herek 2000).

In a study conducted by Schellenberg, Hirt, & Sears (1999), researchers investigated attitudes toward homosexuals among a broad selection of undergraduate students. It was

hypothesized that students who majored in the Arts and Social Sciences would have more liberal views than students who majored in Business and the Natural Sciences (Schellenberg, Hirt, & Sears, 1999). The researchers tested a finding by Kite & Whitley (1998) which stated the following: although males' attitudes toward homosexuals tend to be more negative than females; acceptance of homosexuality varies as a function of the gender of the homosexual. It was found that attitudes toward gay men are more negative than attitudes toward lesbians. Approximately 199 undergraduate students participated in this study. The participants' ages ranged from 18-35. The researchers administered the Attitudes toward Gay Men and Lesbians (ATGL) scale developed by Herek. The scale consisted of 10 items that measured attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. The results indicated that students majoring in Arts and Social Science had more positive attitudes toward homosexuals than students majoring in Business and Natural Science. Although there were no differences between Business majors and Natural Science majors, the Arts majors had more positive attitudes than Social Science majors. The results supported previous findings that female students had more positive attitudes than male students. Attitudes toward lesbians were more positive than attitudes toward gay men. Limitations of this study included generalizations based on one instrument, Attitudes toward Gay Men and Lesbians scale, and use of a participants samples consisting of less than 8% of non-European descent participants (Schellenberg, Hirt, & Sears, 1999).

Negy & Eisenman (2005) did a comparative study of African-American and Caucasian-American college students' affective and attitudinal reactions to lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. Seventy African-Americans and 143 Caucasian-Americans participated in this study. Eighty nine percent of African-Americans indicated that their religious affiliation was Christianity, and 76% of Caucasian-Americans indicated Christianity as their religion. All participants completed the Index of Attitudes toward Homosexuals (IAH) and the Heterosexual Attitudes toward Homosexuality questionnaire. To determine if African-Americans and Caucasian-Americans differed on demographic variables, an ANOVA was used with ethnicity serving as the independent variable. Age, class standing, socioeconomic status, frequency of church attendance, religious commitment, and socially desirable responding served as the dependent variables. The results indicated that African-Americans had modestly higher homophobia and homonegativity scores than Caucasian-Americans (Negy & Eisenman, 2005). For both ethnic groups, gender and religiosity variables significantly predicted homophobia and homonegativity. Males in both ethnic groups had significantly higher homophobia and homonegativity scores than females (Negy & Eisenman, 2005).

**Gender & Gender Roles as Predictors.** In a study conducted by D'Augelli & Rose (1990), the researchers hypothesized that college freshman would have negative attitudes towards gay men and lesbians and would report making homonegative statements regarding homosexuality. One hundred and eight heterosexual females and 110 heterosexual males participated in this study. The age range of the participants was 17 to 19 years old. The participants were asked to fill out a background information questionnaire and complete the Attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men Scale. The background questionnaire inquired about the participants' religious affiliation, living environment, and family upbringing. In regards to the Attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men Scale, 29% of the participants believed that their university would be a better place if only heterosexuals attended. It was found that 98% had heard homonegative statements about gay men and lesbian. It was also found that 85% of the participants had made recent homonegative comments and that it occurs often. However, it was reported that 24% of the female participants had never made homonegative statements about gay

men and lesbians. Thirty-six percent of the female participants did not care about problems concerning gay men and lesbians, and 60% of the male participants did not care about problems concerning gay men and lesbians. The results indicated that males had more homonegative attitudes toward gay men and lesbian than females (D'Augelli & Rose, 1990).

### **Sexual Attitudes as Predictors**

Human sexuality and sexual attitudes are very complex and varies widely. Unlike human sexuality, the concept of sexual attitudes has been described as being on a bipolar continuum ranging from a liberal attitude to a conservative attitude regarding sexual orientation (Hudson, Murphy, & Nurius, 1983). At the liberal end of the continuum, people tend to feel that the expression of human sexuality should be open, free, and unrestrained. At the conservative end of the continuum, people tend to feel that the expression of human sexuality should be considerably constrained and closely self-regulated. Although there are people who adhere to extreme forms of a liberal or conservative orientation concerning human sexual expression, most people fall somewhere in between the extreme position (Hudson, Murphy, & Nurius, 1983). According to Leiblum, Wiegel, & Brickel (2003), gender has a significant impact on sexual attitudes. Research suggests that females are more sexually conservative than males. Although women report that they tend to not be frequent engagers of masturbation, pornography, and extra-relationship sex in comparison to men, they tend to be more tolerant towards homosexuality.

In a study conducted by Olatunji, Lohr, & Meunier (2002), the researchers investigated emotional correlates and predictors of homophobic tendencies. Approximately, 138 participants completed this study. The following instruments were used in this study: the Index of Attitudes toward Homosexuals, the Sexual Attitude Scale, the Medical Fears Survey, the Disgust Emotions Scale, Padua Inventory, and the Fear Survey Schedule (Olatunji, Lohr, & Meunier, 2002). The Padua Inventory was used to assess obsessive and compulsive symptoms. The statistical analysis of this study consisted of multiple correlations between the measures, Pearson correlations (Olatunji, Lohr, & Meunier, 2002). The results indicated that the scores from the Index of Attitudes toward Homosexuals were positively correlated with results from the Sexual Attitude Scale, the Disgust Emotion Scale, and the Padua Inventory (Olatunji, Lohr, & Meunier, 2002). The researchers concluded that participants who showed homophobic tendencies or homonegative attitudes on the Index of Attitudes toward Homosexuals tend to have conservative sexual attitudes and high levels of disgust (Olatunji, Lohr, & Meunier, 2002).

After surveying the literature, gender has been found to be a correlate of heterosexual attitudes toward gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals (Liang & Alimo, 2005). The literature also supports the notion that heterosexual males tend have more negative attitudes toward homosexuals than females. However, the literature is lacking specific attention to women's attitudes towards homosexuals. As attitudes are an important predictor of behavior, it is particularly important that an increased understanding of negative attitudes toward gay and lesbians be sought (Herek, 2000). This paper presents the findings of a study investigating a hypothesized relationship between sexual attitude expression and homonegativity. This study investigated the following hypothesis: females with conservative sexual attitudes should show higher levels of homonegativity, and females with liberal sexual attitudes should show less homonegative expression.

## Method

### Participants

Seventy-five female undergraduate and graduate students at a university in the Southern region of the United States participated in this study. Twenty-nine percent ( $n=22$ ) of the sample were graduate students, 26% ( $n=20$ ) were college seniors, 22.7% ( $n=17$ ) were college sophomores, 12% ( $n=9$ ) were college juniors, and 9% ( $n=7$ ) were college freshman. Ethnically, the vast majority were Caucasian with 70.7% ( $n=53$ ), 18.7% ( $n=14$ ) were African-American, 6.7% ( $n=5$ ) were Asian, and 4% ( $n=3$ ) were biracial. The participant's ages ranged from 18-26 years old.

### Instruments

The Sexual Attitude Scale (SAS) (Hudson, Murphy, & Nurius, 1983) is a 25-item summated category partition scale that was designed to measure the extent to which an individual adheres to a liberal or a conservative orientation concerning sexual expression. Each item is scored on a 5-point "agree-disagree" continuum, and all but two items are worded and scored so that a higher score represents a more conservative orientation. The SAS is scored as bipolar agree-disagree continuum, and the total score ranges from 0 to 100 with a midpoint score of 50. A score below 50 indicates a more liberal sexual attitude, and a score above 50 indicates a more conservative sexual attitude. With respect to reliability, the scale has been investigated to have an alpha coefficient of .90 or larger. With respect to validity, the scale has been investigated to have validity coefficients of .60 or greater (Hudson, Murphy, & Nurius, 1983). The following are examples of the items on the scale: "sex education should be restricted to the home;" "I think sex should be reserved for marriage;" and "there is too much sex on television." Additionally, the Homonegativity Scale-*Lesbian Version* (Morrison, Parriag, & Morrison, 1999) was used. This scale measures negative attitudes toward lesbians. The scale contains six items and is set up for response on a Likert-type scale with 1 indicating strongly disagree and 5 indicating strongly agree. Scores can range from 6 to 30. A score of 6-17 indicates a nonhomonegative attitude, and a score of 18-30 indicating greater homonegativity. With respect to reliability, the scale has been investigated to have an alpha coefficient of .84. With respect to validity, the scale has been investigated to have an alpha coefficient of .56 or greater (Morrison, Parriag, & Morrison, 1999). The following are examples of items on the scale: "lesbians are immoral" and "lesbians should not be allowed to work with children."

### Design & Procedure

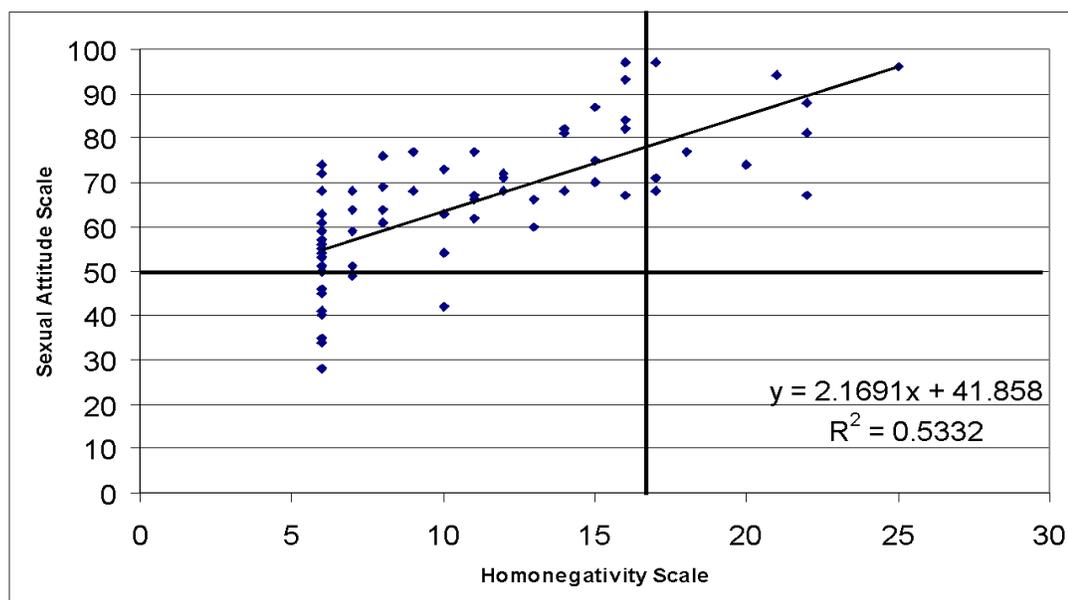
Participants for this study were recruited in undergraduate and graduate courses by the principal investigator and first author. A written announcement was posted on a research information board indicating the nature of the study, the location of where the study was being conducted, and the investigator's contact information. Participants also had the option to schedule appointments for participation in the study. A time sheet for scheduling was made available in the departmental office and was managed by the administrative assistant. A demographic sheet was developed to assist in describing the sample population. Information concerning the participant's age, ethnicity, and class classification was obtained through the use of the demographic sheet.

Participants individually completed the inventories and a demographic sheet in private testing units. All inventories and demographic sheets were coded with a number to indicate which inventories were completed by each participant prior to administration. Upon completion, participants were thanked for their participation. An incentive was not offered for participation in this study.

## Results

Scores on the Sexual Attitudes Scale showed that 66 females endorsed conservative sexual attitudes, and 9 females endorsed liberal sexual attitudes. The average score on the Sexual Attitudes Scale was 65. The standard deviation was 15. The statistical mode for Sexual Attitudes Scale was 68. Scores on the Homonegativity Scale-*Lesbian Version* indicated that 68 females had more non-homonegative attitudes, and 7 females had more homonegative attitudes. The average score on the Homonegativity Scale-*Lesbian Version* was 10. The standard deviation was 5. The statistical mode for the Homonegativity Scale-*Lesbian Version* was 6. A Pearson correlation analysis indicated a significant positive correlation between sexual attitudes and homonegativity ( $r = .73, p < .01$ , see Figure 1). College women who had higher homonegativity scores had higher conservative sexual attitude scores.

Figure 1. Pearson Correlation of Homonegativity Scale and Sexual Attitude Scale



The results supported the hypothesis that there is a relationship between sexual attitudes and homonegativity in females. Although there is a strong positive correlation, this is mostly reflecting a relationship between conservative attitudes and homonegativity, since only 9 of the participants endorsed liberal sexual attitudes. There appears to be a biased sample effect in that there were not enough participants who endorsed liberal sexual attitudes to distinctly demonstrate a relationship between the measures. A score above 50 indicates a conservative sexual attitude. There is a cluster of scores that are well above the midpoint (50) of the Sexual

Attitudes Scale. Many of the participants showed low levels of the homonegativity on the Homonegativity Scale-*Lesbian Version*. Nevertheless, the findings are consistent with Leiblum, Wiegel, & Brickel (2003) indicating that females have more sexually conservative attitudes. The results are consistent with Herek & Capitanio (1999) that females have lower levels of homophobia or rather homonegativity.

## Limitations

The Sexual Attitude Scale and the Homonegativity Scale-*Lesbian Version* are self-report measures. Therefore, threats to validity are possible when using these types of measurements. The purpose of the study may have been readily apparent given the nature of the items. There is a possibility participants could make themselves appear more liberal or conservative on the Sexual Attitude Scale, and less homonegative on the Homonegativity Scale-*Lesbian Version*. The number of participants was relatively small, with the majority identifying their ethnic background as White/Caucasian. A more diverse sample population would be needed to generalize the results to the larger population. Since there was no method of controlling for sexuality other than self-identification, there is a possibility that lesbians participated in the study. A potential for biased responding is present with any participants who chose to self-identify as lesbians.

This study was conducted in what is known as the “Bible Belt” of the United States. The “Bible Belt” refers to the midwest and southern regions of the United States which have a strong Christian Protestant influence, and tend to be morally and socially conservative (Ginn, Walker, Poulson, Singletary, Cyrus, & Picarelli, 1998). Should this be the case, there may have been a predisposition to have an unbalanced sample of females with conservative sexual attitudes. Although religiosity is a known predictor of homonegativity, it was not measured in this study. Future studies should include an examination of the potential role of this variable as it relates to homonegativity.

The level of contact with gay and lesbian persons is also a variable that should be investigated. The amount of contact and familiarity a person has with gay or lesbian people has also been shown to be predictors of the comfort level with gays and lesbians (Mohipp & Morry, 2004). More research should be done in the area of homonegativity in order to find ways to promote positive attitudinal change in society towards persons who identify as gay and lesbian. Finding the most significant predictor of homonegativity has important implications for the reduction of negative attitudes toward lesbian and gay individuals (Basow, 2000).

## Conclusion

It is important for student affairs professionals to be aware of any biases, prejudices, or discriminations they might have against LGBT students. Interactions with LGBT persons has helped reduce homonegativity in heterosexuals (Walters, 1994). Student affairs professionals can be active in combating the violence and bullying perpetuated by homonegative persons. They can support penalties for discrimination based on sexual orientation. They can also support organizations that work to stop violence against the LGBT community, and provide access to or creation of groups that advocate for awareness and authentication of all sexual orientations. Student affairs professionals should be ready and able to support LGBT support groups or “safe space” networks. If a student has experienced an act of bullying or violence that has been committed against her or him, student affairs professionals should encourage the student to

report the action and offer any assistance and support throughout the process. By assisting students in reporting harassment to student conduct officers or authorities can help the student cope with the situation.

It is important for college counselors to be aware of any biases, prejudices, or discriminations they might have against gay and lesbian students. The American Counseling Association has adopted a resolution that states that it: “opposes portrayals of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth and adults as mentally ill due to their sexual orientation; and supports the dissemination of accurate information about sexual orientation, mental health, and appropriate interventions in order to counteract bias that is based on ignorance or unfounded beliefs about same-gender sexual orientation (ACA, 1998, p. 1-2).” College counselors should never assume a student’s sexual orientation is heterosexual or homosexual as sexuality is described on a continuum with range wide. It is suggested that not only college counselors but other student affairs professionals as well identify support groups and centers in the local and regional areas in which they can refer students who may benefit from these services.

With respect to hate crime victims, student affairs professionals and administrators can be active in combating the violence perpetuated by homonegative persons. For example, by supporting penalties for discrimination and hate crimes based on sexual orientation this can send a message that homonegativity will not be tolerated. They can also support student organizations that work to bring awareness of hate crimes, and provide support groups for victims of hate crimes.

Graduate programs in college student personnel, student affairs, or higher education leadership should consider developing courses that involve working with LGBT students. Graduate faculty and educators should challenge their students to confront their own heterosexism. The more exposure aspiring student affairs professionals have with working with LGBT issues, the more prepared they will be in becoming advocates and allies.

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