

# Alberta High School Counsellors' Knowledge of Homosexuality and Their Attitudes Toward Gay Males

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In this study we investigated Alberta high school counsellors' knowledge about homosexuality and their attitudes toward gay males. Three questionnaires were mailed to 648 high school counselling centres; 223 individuals returned the completed questionnaires. Most counsellors attained low scores in measured homo-negativity and high scores regarding knowledge of homosexuality. Results from a Pearson correlational analysis indicated a negative significant relationship between the level of knowledge about homosexuality and homo-negativity, supporting other researchers' findings that higher levels of knowledge may be accompanied by more positive attitudes.

Key words: homosexual males, beliefs, mental health professionals

Les auteurs ont analysé les connaissances de conseillers d'orientation scolaire du secondaire au sujet de l'homosexualité et leurs attitudes vis-à-vis des gais. Trois questionnaires ont été postés à 648 centres d'orientation ; 223 personnes ont retourné les questionnaires dûment remplis. La plupart des conseillers d'orientation ont obtenu des scores faibles pour l'homonégativité et des scores élevés pour les connaissances au sujet de l'homosexualité. Les résultats d'une analyse corrélationnelle indiquent un net lien négatif entre le niveau de connaissances sur l'homosexualité et l'homonégativité, ce qui corrobore les conclusions d'autres chercheurs selon lesquelles de meilleures connaissances peuvent s'accompagner d'attitudes plus positives.

Mots clés : homosexuels, croyances, professionnels de la santé mentale

At national, provincial, and school district levels, commitments are in place for the safety and quality of life for sexual minorities. Historically, gay males have been at increased risk for suicide, social isolation, self-abusive behaviour, and victimization by bullying and violence. Because of the nature of safety and quality of life issues for gay males, high school counsellors could be expected to be an important resource for gay male students.

In Alberta, graduate programs in counselling include little training regarding gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) individuals, although effective counselling with minorities depends upon counsellors having affirming attitudes, adequate knowledge, and specific skills pertinent to the minority group. At the provincial level, Alberta's reluctance to provide equal rights to gays and lesbians can be seen as reflecting homonegativity. Thus, although other research, described in the next section, has typically found that counsellors have positive attitudes to gay males, this study investigated Alberta high school counsellors' knowledge regarding homosexuality and their attitudes toward gay males. To do so, we endeavoured to invite all Alberta high school counsellors (grades 10 to 12) to complete three questionnaires. We were interested in the general levels of knowledge and attitudes, and the relationship between the two. Previous research has suggested that higher levels of knowledge may be accompanied by more positive attitudes.

#### EXPECTATIONS REGARDING THE MULTICULTURAL COMPETENCE OF COUNSELLORS

Counsellors today are expected to be multiculturally competent: they have developed sufficient capability to work with clients' particular form of diversity (Canadian Psychological Association, 2000; Sheppard, Schulz, & McMahon, 2007). In articulating the nature of multicultural competence, most attempts have focused on three dimensions that counsellors need: (a) having affirming attitudes, (b) developing adequate knowledge, and (c) learning specific skills pertinent to a diverse group (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). Arredondo et al. (1996) theorized that by having understanding and knowledge of the effect of racism, oppression, discrimination, or stereotyping on others, counsellors would become more aware of their own racist beliefs, attitudes, and feelings.

Counselling sexually diverse individuals was included within their multicultural framework (Arrendondo, 1999). Arrendondo et al.'s (1996) theory suggests that a relationship occurs between counsellors' knowledge of a particular minority group and their degree of prejudice toward that same group.

The current study empirically tested one aspect of this theory by looking at the attitudes of high school counsellors toward gay men and their knowledge of homosexuality. This investigation, an adaptation of a study by Wells and Franken (1987), has a sample of high school counsellors instead of students. The research question is, "What is the relationship between Alberta high school counsellors' knowledge of homosexuality and their attitudes toward gay males?" The main hypothesis is that high school counsellors who know the most about homosexuality will be the least homo-negative toward gay males, and that the converse will also be true (i.e., counsellors who know the least will be the most homo-negative). If such a finding is supported, it may have important implications for the multicultural training of counsellors in Canada, specifically regarding competence in working with gay clients.

Most counselling graduate students and counsellors in the U.S.A. today have positive attitudes toward GLB clients (Kilgore, Sideman, Amin, Baca, & Bohanske, 2005; Liddle, 1999; Phillips & Fischer, 1998; Pilkington & Cantor, 1996). Although empirical Canadian research is lacking in this area, we hypothesized that Alberta high school counsellors would, for the most part, be low in homo-negativity as well, based on our search of PsycINFO and ERIC literature.

Nonetheless, research has clearly established that schools (i.e., kindergarten to grades 12, or 13 in some jurisdictions) remain one of the most heterosexist and homophobic institutions in Canada (Totten, Quigley, & Morgan, 2004; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2003), and some evidence suggests that Alberta has been particularly vocal in its antigay sentiment compared to the other Canadian provinces and territories (Filax, 2004a, 2004b). The following sections provide a wider context for the study, outlining the disparaging social landscape that has characterized life for GLB individuals and students in Canada generally and in Alberta specifically.

### THE CANADIAN SOCIAL LANDSCAPE FOR GLB INDIVIDUALS

The social landscape for GLB individuals is strikingly different from what it was in 1969. Forty years ago, “homosexuals” were viewed as individuals suffering from a mental disorder who engaged in illegal activity (Bayer, 1981; Lee, 1977). Since then, many changes have unfolded, most notably (a) the decriminalization of homosexual behaviour in Canada in 1969 (Lee, 1977), (b) its declassification as a mental disorder in 1973 by the American Psychiatric Association (Bayer, 1981), (c) the ratification of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982 (Department of Justice, Canada, 1982), and (d) the many developments that have resulted since Section 15 of the Charter took effect in 1985 – the section assuring equal rights to all Canadians (Department of Justice, Canada, 1982). It has been largely a consequence of the Charter and the many court battles that arose (Lahey & Alderson, 2004) that led Canada in 2005 to become the fourth country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage (Department of Justice, Canada, 2005; Hurley, 2007).

### THE ALBERTA SOCIAL LANDSCAPE FOR GLB INDIVIDUALS

Throughout the many battles fought and victories won, however, the Alberta government took several actions to undermine efforts to provide equal rights to gays and lesbians. Filax (2004b) documented the many ways this government tried to circumvent the granting of equality to GLB individuals. For example, when the Supreme Court of Canada was considering the issue of providing a reference to the federal government regarding same-sex marriage, Alberta’s government was the only province or territory to send a legal representative to oppose it (Larocque, 2006). They also threatened to use the notwithstanding clause to avoid having to recognize same-sex marriage in Alberta, just as they previously had threatened to do in 1998 to avoid having to read sexual orientation into the provincial human rights act as a legitimate ground for protection (Filax, 2004b).

As a consequence of the Alberta government’s opposition to recognizing equal rights for GLB individuals, Alberta has remained distinct within the Canadian mosaic, politically espousing views that are both homo-negative and heterosexist. *Homo-negativity*, which refers to “negative intellectual attitudes and beliefs about lesbians and gay men” (Ellis

& Fox, 2001, p. 1238), is preferentially used in this article over the older term *homophobia*, which refers to "the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals" (Weinberg, 1972, p. 4). Herek (1996) has noted that "'Heterosexism' has been defined as the ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any nonheterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community" (p. 101).

What effect, if any, has homo-negativity and heterosexism had on the GLBs who live in Alberta, or upon those who work with them? What effect is it still having on GLB youth attending school? Although most of these questions are beyond the scope of this article, the current study provides information regarding the attitudes of Alberta high school counsellors toward gay men and their knowledge of homosexuality. Before reviewing the current research endeavour, however, we consider in the next section the indirect evidence that suggests the impact of heterosexism and homo-negativity on GLB youth.

#### THE PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACT OF HETEROSEXIST AND HOMO-NEGATIVE ENVIRONMENTS ON GLB INDIVIDUALS

##### *Internalized Effects*

Both American and Canadian research suggests that the situation for GLB individuals is still not considered ideal. A British Columbia study reported that 46 per cent of the gay and lesbian youth surveyed had attempted suicide at least once; their average age at first attempt was 13 years (McCreary Centre Society, as cited in Wells & Tsutsumi, 2005).

A study published in the 1970s indicated that gay men in the San Francisco Bay area were 13.6 times at greater risk of attempting suicide compared to heterosexual men (Bell & Weinberg, 1978). Nearly 20 years later, a Calgary study found that gay males between ages 18 and 27 were 13.9 times at greater risk of making a suicide attempt (Bagley & Tremblay, 1997), again highlighting extreme suicide risk in this population.

Besides suicide, many other psychosocial problems have been associated with being a teenage GLB person. Compared to heterosexual adolescents, GLB youth experience greater degrees or incidents of emotional isolation (Ryan & Futterman, 1998), psychological stress (Chesir-Teran, 2003), substance abuse (Orenstein, 2001), verbal abuse from family members and peers (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001), running away from home

(Bohan, 1996), and school absences (Chesir-Teran, 2003). These youth are also likely to have fewer same-gender friendships, reduced self-esteem, and reduced feelings of school safety (Chesir-Teran, 2003). Furthermore, GLB adolescents engage more frequently in high-risk sexual behaviours (Blake et al., 2001), and sadly, as many as 30 per cent of all young gay males are infected with HIV (Peterkin & Risdon, 2003).

The situation for GLB youth noted above is no longer being universally reported in the literature, however. Savin-Williams (2001a, 2001b, 2005) advanced a perspective that recognizes the resiliency of youths exploring same-sex behaviour or adopting a sexual-minority identity. As he noted, *most* sexual-minority youth do not attempt suicide (Savin-Williams, 2001b). He has also encouraged researchers to document how sexual-minority youth become healthy, well-adjusted adults.

#### *Externalized Effects*

*Violence.* The literature on GLB youth notes an increased vulnerability to violence. A study from a recent national, American, longitudinal study reported strong evidence that GLB youths are at greater risk of experiencing, witnessing, and perpetrating violence (Athanasas & Larrabee, 2003). Janoff (2005) reported 107 queer<sup>1</sup> bashing homicides and 344 queer-bashing incidents in Canada since 1990, 5 and 24 of which happened in Alberta, respectively. These statistics, particularly regarding queer bashings, are likely low compared to the actual numbers because of the hesitancy that sexual minorities often have to report such incidents to the police (Janoff, 2005). Other research suggests that antigay violence is often more violent compared to generic violence, with a greater likelihood that the victim is unknown to the perpetrator(s) (Peterkin & Risdon, 2003).

Extreme violence within Canadian schools is thankfully rare (Covell, 2005). The first fatal school shooting that occurred in 20 years happened in 1999 in Taber, Alberta, by a 14-year old assailant who had been repeatedly bullied (Covell, 2005; "Tragedy in Taber," 2004; Walton, 2004).

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<sup>1</sup> Note: Although the senior author does not personally like the term "queer," many writers use it as a non-condescending term to refer to anyone who deviates in any way from hegemonic heterosexuality.

This boy had been "harassed daily at school by 'male jocks' who also called him 'faggot' and 'gay'" (Filax, 2006, p. 34). Furthermore, of the 28 random school shootings that occurred in American schools since 1982, all the assailants had been repeatedly teased and bullied with homophobic epithets (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003).

#### *School Environments for GLB Individuals*

*Homophobia in Schools.* Research has clearly established that schools (i.e., kindergarten to grades 12, or 13 in some jurisdictions) remain one of the most heterosexist and homophobic institutions in Canada (Totten et al., 2004; Williams et al., 2003). Homophobic remarks are frequently heard in schools (Totten et al., 2004).

Besides homophobic remarks, the potential for violence toward GLB youth in schools remains high. One Canadian study reported that about 20 per cent of gay and lesbian youth had been "physically assaulted at school in the past year" (McCreary Centre Society, as cited in Wells & Tsutsumi, 2005, p. 20). Another report indicated that about one-third of junior and senior high school students in Calgary in the mid-1990s were carrying weapons to school (Sillars, 1995), and one analysis indicated that half of school suspensions in Nova Scotia were related to carrying weapons (Covell, 2005).

*Retaliation.* When harassment becomes severe enough, retaliation becomes more likely, and preferably in a manner considered socially appropriate. One such case was that of Azmi Jubran, a secondary student in North Vancouver, who filed a complaint in June, 1996, with the British Columbia Human Rights Commission. Azmi had been repeatedly teased by his peers and called all the homophobic pejoratives one can imagine. On April 6, 2005, he was awarded \$4,500 in damages, sending a strong message that if schools do not act, judges will ("B.C. Court of Appeal Supports Bullied Student," 2005).

*School Response.* Are schools prepared to deal with the issues that will arise as more sexual minority students demand recognition, acceptance, and equitable treatment? The answer in most cases appears to be "no." Little (2001) argued that the Canadian educational system has failed sexual-minority youth. Shelby notes that "The drop-out rate for GLBTQ [gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning] students is

twenty-eight percent, compared to the national Canadian average of only nine percent" (cited in Little, 2001, p. 105).

There is a growing realization by those involved in the school systems (i.e., kindergarten to grade 12, or grade 13 in some jurisdictions) that the needs and safety of gay and lesbian students, and others who are targeted as such, must be addressed. Studies have shown that adolescents are self-identifying as gay or lesbian at increasingly younger ages (Savin-Williams, 2005). Because gay and lesbian youth are also disclosing their identities at younger ages than in the past (Platt, 2001; Taylor, 2000), a likely prediction is that as Canada becomes more tolerant and accepting of sexual-minority youth, this trend will continue. In the 1970s, the average age of self-disclosure occurred during the mid to late 20s, whereas currently the mean age is 18 (Floyd & Stein, 2002; Platt, 2001). Furthermore, it is not unusual to find gay and lesbian students disclosing their sexual identities while still in high school (Platt, 2001). The mean age of disclosure in a sample of 116 gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth was 16.8, 16.0, and 16.8 years, respectively (Maguen, Floyd, Bakeman, & Armistead, 2002). All the studies noted above are based on American samples.

Since most of the studies and homophobic incidents reviewed for this article, several, if not most, provinces have taken proactive steps to improve the safety and quality of life of sexual-minority youth in schools. In Alberta, mandates to improve the safety of sexual-minority youth attending school have been incorporated into several documents and projects (Grace & Wells, 2004; Wells, 2005). Edmonton, the capital city of Alberta, officially passed a bylaw in 2003 forbidding bullying of minors (Walton, 2004). Walton reported that statements regarding safe schools now abound throughout North American jurisdictions. Consequently, school divisions have an increased obligation to "deliver the goods" by providing safer school environments. Blake et al.'s study (2001) has shown "that teachers who receive appropriate training, curricula, and materials to provide gay-sensitive instruction in schools can make a difference in the lives of GLB youths" (p. 944).

*School Counsellors and Their Training.* School counsellors, another group who can make a difference in the lives of GLB youth, are expected to provide guidance, counselling, and consulting services to all students



within their schools (Schmidt, 2002), regardless of how diverse they may be. Are they prepared and able to deliver competent service to gay and lesbian students?

Graduate students and practitioners of counselling psychology receive little formal training regarding gays and lesbians. Alderson (2004) sent a four-question e-mail survey to the designated faculty contact in 14 Canadian universities for information about their graduate program in counselling psychology. The survey was completed by 10 of these individuals (71% response rate). The modal response (i.e., the most frequently reported answer) to the following questions was 3, 3, 0, and 0 hours, respectively: (a) *hours of masters level training concerning GLB awareness*, (b) *hours of masters level training concerning GLB counselling*, (c) *hours of doctoral training in GLB awareness*, and (d) *hours of doctoral training in GLB counselling* (Alderson, 2004). This response would hardly appear to represent adequate training, especially because both the Canadian Counselling Association Code of Ethics (Sheppard, Schulz, & McMahon, 2007) and the Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists (Canadian Psychological Association, 2000) require their members to be professionally competent, including having knowledge of a client's particular form of diversity.

Before the 1970s, the goal of therapists and counsellors was to convert homosexually-inclined individuals toward heterosexuality, and success was usually measured by the elimination of homosexual behaviour (Richardson, 1993). Despite the positive changes occurring in society since then regarding tolerance and in some cases acceptance of GLB individuals, many mental health professionals continue to hold subtle biases against working with them, and they often lack information for working effectively with them as well (Campos & Goldfried, 2001). Although most counselling providers no longer view homosexuality as pathological, they frequently retain attitudes and behaviours toward GLB clients that are not helpful, including (a) having trouble remembering client information, (b) avoiding uncomfortable topics, and (c) either downplaying or over-emphasizing the importance of sexual orientation in conceptualizing a client's problem (Cochran, 2001).

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HOMO-NEGATIVITY AND KNOWLEDGE OF HOMOSEXUALITY

Wells and Franken (1987) were unable to find previous studies that looked at the relationship between knowledge about homosexuality and attitudes toward it. Because they could not find a published scale that measured knowledge of homosexuality, they developed an 18-item Homosexual Information Scale and a 21-item attitude questionnaire. The authors hypothesized a relationship between knowledge and attitudes, suggesting that greater knowledge would be related positively to lower homo-negativism (as measured by their attitude questionnaire and the Hudson & Ricketts [1980] Index of Attitudes toward Homosexuals). Wells and Franken (1987) tested a sample of 137 students enrolled in a human sexuality course at a Midwestern state university (65 women, 67 men). Because their findings provided evidence of a positive association between knowledge and attitudes, the authors concluded that the reduction of homo-negativism (i.e., in a self-selected sample of students taking a sexuality course) can be accomplished by increasing knowledge about homosexuality and that knowledge will increase as individuals reduce their homo-negativism.

Research by Waterman, Reid, Garfield, and Hoy (2001) has supported the notion that educating students about homosexuality is effective in changing attitudes; Rudolph (1989) found that the mental health practitioners who participated in a three-day workshop about gay and lesbian counselling increased their tolerance toward homosexuality.

Not all research has revealed a positive relationship between knowledge and attitudes, however. Eliason and Hughes (2004) found that, although substance abuse counsellors in Chicago had considerably more contact with GLB clients and more training to work with them compared with treatment counsellors in rural Iowa, they did not have more positive attitudes toward them. In both groups, "nearly half reported negative or ambivalent attitudes" (p. 626).

In summary, the research suggests that, despite the negative environment experienced by GLB individuals in Canada generally and in Alberta specifically, counsellors generally have positive attitudes toward GLB clients. The present investigation explores the relationship between

the attitudes that Alberta high school counsellors have toward GLB individuals and their knowledge about them.

## METHOD

In this section, we have presented particular characteristics of the participants, including the geographic selection of the participants, details as to how they were recruited for the study, and the exact process of collecting data, including the types of questionnaires used and the psychometric properties of those questionnaires.

### *Participants*

We mailed to the counselling centres of 648 high schools (i.e., grades 10 – 12) in Alberta in January 2004 three questionnaires assessing knowledge about gays and lesbians and homo-negativity. From these, 175 questionnaires were returned before a second mail out occurred in February 2004. The second mail-out resulted in another 63 returned questionnaires. However, because 15 questionnaires contained no data, these were not included in the final sample size of 223 (34.4% response rate). We intended to mail one copy of each of the questionnaires to each high school in Alberta. However, we may have missed some high schools because the mail-out list used did not always indicate which schools were at the senior high level. The participants, guidance counsellors within the Alberta high school system, included public, Catholic, and private schools.

### *Procedure*

Participants, who were provided brief information about the nature of the study, took 10 minutes to complete the three questionnaires enclosed. We also enclosed answers<sup>2</sup> that were sealed with instructions not to open them until the survey was completed. We supplied a postage-paid envelope with the surveys for direct mailing upon completion of the questionnaires.

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<sup>2</sup> We supplied answers because we thought many respondents would want to know how they did on the questionnaire and because we wanted this research to serve an educational function.

Our intent was to sample all high school counselling centres in Alberta in 2004. We used the Alberta Education website (<http://www.edc.gov.ab.ca>) to create the list, but in 2004, the website did not have a search strategy to allow users to target only high schools. As of 2007, the website contains such a search strategy, found within the document entitled *Alberta Education Authorities and Schools* (Information Services, 2007). Our search of the 2007 document revealed that there were 659 schools in Alberta that included grades 10 to 12. Because the mail-out in 2004 included 648 schools, we concluded that our mail-out was sent to most schools catering to high school students with perhaps a few exceptions.

#### *Questionnaires*

We included three questionnaires in the mail-out to potential participants. This included (a) a sexuality knowledge questionnaire designed by the principal author, (b) the Homosexual Information Scale (Wells & Franken, 1987), and (c) the Modern Homonegativity Scale – Gay version (Morrison & Morrison, 2002).

*Sexuality Knowledge Questionnaire* (Alderson). Twenty-four (24) True/False items measuring general knowledge about homosexuality and sexual orientation, relationship behaviours of homosexual individuals, and adolescent practices in relation to homosexuality were included on this questionnaire. The senior author chose items by first reviewing the items of the Homosexual Information Scale by Wells and Franken (1987) and then reviewing the content pertaining to homosexuality found in (a) four current general human sexuality textbooks (Crooks & Baur, 2002; Hyde & DeLamater, 2002; King, 2002; Rathus, Nevid, Fichner-Rathus, & McKenzie, 2002), (b) one text dealing with the psychology of adjustment (Weiten & Lloyd, 2000), and (c) one journal article (Cochran, 2001). The 24-item Sexual Knowledge Questionnaire was then constructed to provide a more comprehensive and current picture of the research about homosexuality since the Wells and Franken (1987) article was published.

Internal reliability consistency of the Sexual Knowledge Questionnaire yielded an alpha value = .848 for participants in this study. Additionally, this measure was significantly correlated with the Wells questionnaire ( $r = .545, p < .01$ ), indicating content validity for knowledge.

*Homosexual Information Scale* (Wells & Franken, 1987). Eighteen True/False items comprised this questionnaire to measure knowledge about homosexuality. Items represented four factors: (a) gay-lesbian life satisfaction, (b) homosexuals as role models, (c) sexual behaviour, and (d) influencing heterosexuals to become homosexuals. Internal reliability consistency alpha score for the original group was .79, with a test-retest reliability of .84. Additionally, face validity was confirmed via professional colleagues and based on information documented in the current literature for correct answers.

In this study, we combined the two knowledge questionnaires for the overall knowledge scores of high school counsellors. Internal reliability consistency coefficient for the scales combined yielded an alpha score of .92.

Participants received one point for each correctly scored T/F question for the combined 42-item knowledge questionnaire. Correct scores were then added for an overall total knowledge score. We used these total scores for later analyses, notably the means and correlation.

*Modern Homonegativity Scale – Gay version* (Morrison & Morrison, 2002). Morrison and Morrison suggest that homo-negativity within post-secondary students has transformed from “old-fashioned” to “modern” (p. 18), meaning that it has moved away from objections based on biblical scripture and morality to more abstract concerns (e.g., GLBs make unreasonable demands for change, discrimination is now historical). Although Morrison and Morrison developed two scales to measure modern homo-negativity toward gay men and another toward lesbians, we chose only the gay version (MHS-G) for two reasons: (a) reduced administration time with using only one version; and (b) previous research has shown that heterosexual men are generally more homo-negative than heterosexual women, and their homo-negativity is greater toward gay males than toward lesbians (Span & Vidal, 2003). Consequently, using only the MHS-G would suffice to delineate those individuals who are the most homo-negative.

The original 13-item scale was reduced to 12 items following results from a factor analysis (Morrison & Morrison, 2002) which revealed that modern homo-negativity was correlated to political conservatism, religious behaviours, and religious self-schema. Items on the 12-item scale

are rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Reliability alpha coefficient was calculated at .91 for both males and females answering the questionnaire. We have included a copy of the three questionnaires in the Appendix.

In the absence of cut-off scores for "high" or "low" homo-negativity, the authors inferred these categories from the total scores of the participants. An individual who marked a score of 3 for each of the 12 items on the MHS-G would have a total score of 36. Thus, an individual whose score averaged 36 would be classified as "relatively neutral" in the author's interpretation. Additionally, an individual who scored between 12 and 23 would be classified as "low" on homo-negativity, "moderately low" if they scored between 24 and 35, "moderately high" if they scored between 37 and 48, and "high" if they scored between 49 and 60. This scoring corresponds with the Likert scale categories used in the MHS-G of strongly disagree (low), disagree (low moderate), don't know (neutral), agree (moderate high), strongly agree (high). Total scores were calculated for the 12 homo-negativity items. These total scores were used in later analyses.

## RESULTS

In this section, we present both the descriptive and inferential statistics derived from the scores of the total sample of 223 participants. The results supported our overall hypothesis that high school counsellors who knew the most about homosexuality were the least homo-negative toward gay males, and that the counsellors who knew the least were the most homo-negative. Further, we found that the majority of high school counsellors were low in homo-negativity, as hypothesized in this study. Details pertaining to these hypotheses follow. Specifically, we will discuss the response rate of the participants in answering the questionnaires, provide the corresponding scores achieved and their categorization, and detail the relationship found between knowledge and homo-negativity. We also discuss validity and reliability with respect to the statistics and questionnaires used.

Following are the details of the responses to the knowledge questionnaires by the high school counsellors. The majority of participants (87%) answered all 42 items of the knowledge scale with an additional

6.7 per cent answering 41 items. The total correct mean scores for participants for their knowledge about homosexuality was 31.10 (a score of 74% for correct answers on this scale), with a standard deviation of 4.79. Ninety-four per cent of the sample was able to achieve a passing score on their homosexuality knowledge, that is, they answered at least 50 per cent of the items correctly or received a score of at least 21 out of the 42 items.

As hypothesized, most high school counsellors were categorized as low on homo-negativity. The mean score for all participants on modern homo-negativity was 29.93 with a standard deviation of 9.97. Using the cut-off scores for each of these categorizations explained in the Measures section, we found that 71 per cent of the participants had a relatively low homo-negativity score (that is, participants achieved a total score of 24 or less), 4 per cent had a score indicating relative neutrality (that is, neither high in homo-negativity nor low in homo-negativity, with an average score of 36), 19 per cent of the participants scored in a moderate range of homo-negativity (that is, achieved a score between 37 and 48), and 5 per cent scored high in homo-negativity (that is, achieved a score greater than 48). A maximum high score of 60 could be obtained on the scale, representing an endorsement of 5's = strongly disagree on items that demonstrated, with face validity, a high degree of homo-negativity.

The present study met the minimum statistical requirement for proceeding with the correlational test as detailed by the following reliability and validity checks. We examined a scatterplot for this large sample size and confirmed the approximate linearity of the data with no outliers. Modern homo-negativity in this sample was a relatively normal distribution (kurtosis = -0.31, skewness = 0.332; ratio of kurtosis to its standard error = 0.32). This suggests that modern homo-negativity scores were slightly skewed to the right (i.e., close to 0), had a greater variability or spread (i.e., kurtosis is both negative and low), and the ratio of kurtosis to its standard error meets the standard cut-off (kurtosis  $-2 < \text{kurtosis} < 2$ ) to be considered a normal distribution, thereby ensuring the validity of the results in this study. The reliability of the MHS was .91.

Our hypothesis regarding the relationship between homo-negativity and knowledge was confirmed. Specifically, we found a significant relationship between the mean total scores of knowledge and homo-

negativity for high school counsellors in this study. Results from a Pearson correlational analysis indicate a negative significant relationship ( $r = -.423$ ,  $p < .01$ ) between the level of knowledge about homosexuality and modern homo-negativity. In other words, as scores for one variable increased, scores for the other decreased. Further, 18 per cent of the variance in the homo-negativity scores is explained by the level of knowledge about homosexuality ( $r^2 = .179$ ).

#### DISCUSSION

Results of the present study confirmed the hypothesis that lower levels of knowledge about homosexuality within high school counsellors are negatively correlated with higher levels of homo-negativity. Conversely, greater knowledge about homosexuality is negatively correlated with lower scores on modern homo-negativity. These results are consistent with Wells and Franken's (1987) findings regarding college students; they also support Arrendondo et al.'s (1996) theory that there is a relationship between knowledge of a particular minority group and attitudes toward that same group. Furthermore, this study reveals that Alberta high school counsellors are, for the most part, low in measured homo-negativity toward gay males.

Although correlational research cannot provide causal linkages, these results suggest a relationship between lack of knowledge and increased homo-negativity toward gay males. It is possible, for example, that having greater knowledge leads people to develop less negative views toward a target population. Perhaps the opposite is true: having positive attitudes toward gay males leads people to learn more about them. Yet another possibility is that a variable not tested explains the results, such as openness to GLB individuals, cultural or religious views, or having friends and colleagues who are gay. These possibilities would need to be explored in future studies that allow for causal statements.

A question needing further study would be whether educating counsellors about gay and lesbian psychology and their issues would prove beneficial in reducing homo-negative attitudes toward them. Previous research has shown that counsellors who received a three-day workshop on gay and lesbian counselling (Rudolph, 1989) and students who attended a semester course about homosexuality (Waterman et al.,



2001) reported diminished homophobia on before-and-after measures, although other research suggests that education alone might not always be sufficient to create this effect (Eliason & Hughes, 2004).

Although research indicates that schools continue to be heterosexual and homophobic institutions (Totten et al., 2004; Williams, et al., 2003), it is encouraging to note through our investigation that a sample of high school counsellors in Alberta, a province known for its opposition to gay and lesbian rights ("Canadian Marriage Faces Opposition," 2003; Filax, 2004a, 2006; Laghi, 1998), have mostly positive attitudes toward gay males. It remains surprising, however, that counsellors and psychologists alike are provided little to no graduate training in gay and lesbian psychology and their issues, despite the expectation written into the ethics codes of professional mental health associations that counsellors are expected to be knowledgeable about a client's particular form of diversity (Alderson, 2004).

#### *Limitations*

Four limitations of the present study may have affected the results. First, in most forms of survey research, there are those who complete the questionnaires and those who do not, thereby creating selection bias effects. We suspect these effects are minimal, however, because of the large sample size targeted and the respectable return rate of completed questionnaires. It is possible that those who did not respond may have been individuals uncomfortable with answering questions about homosexuality with the result that they would have scored higher on modern homonegativity. Furthermore, the 15 blank questionnaires returned to us may suggest a negative attitude toward the subject matter of this study. Despite this potential bias, the results from the Knowledge Questionnaires and the Modern Homonegativity Questionnaire were relatively normally distributed (kurtosis = -0.31 and skewness = 0.33) with a wide distribution of scores, thereby indicating that the criteria for a normal distribution were met for statistical purposes.

A second potential limitation is that because the sealed answers to the knowledge questions were mailed along with the protocols, some participants might have previewed the answers before responding. Consequently, any of the participants may have inflated knowledge scores.

A third potential limitation concerns the transparency of the items comprising the Modern Homonegativity Scale (MHS). Although the scale was normed on college students, the items can easily be discerned regarding "political correctness." For example, reasonably sophisticated respondents would know how to answer questions like item 10: "Gay men should stop complaining about the way they are treated in society, and simply get on with their lives" (see Appendix). Although the MHS was published recently (i.e., 2002), the instrument may be already outdated due to rapid societal changes that have occurred in Canada regarding rights for sexual minorities, such as same-sex marriage becoming legal in two provinces in 2003 and throughout Canada in 2005 (Lahay & Alderson, 2004; Larocque, 2006). Consequently, some participants may have already been more susceptible to responding to certain items on the MHS based on political correctness.

Interestingly, Morrison and Morrison (2002) did not find a significant correlation between scores on the MHS and the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale, suggesting that social desirability bias is low. It may be that political correctness is quite different from social desirability. Respondents in the present study may have underreported their levels of homo-negativity on questions surrounding political correctness. Future research would be needed to answer this question.

As a final limitation, there may be moderating variables to explain the results of this study that are more salient than knowledge of homosexuality on homo-negativity. The present study indicates that knowledge of homosexuality only partially accounted for homo-negativity scores. Extensive research has already established a strong relationship between homo-negativity and variables such as political conservatism, religiosity, and limited exposure to gay men (Pearl & Galupo, 2007). However, the relationship of these variables to knowledge about homosexuality remains unknown.

#### *Future Research*

Further research is needed to consider the relationship between homo-negativity and knowledge of gays, lesbians, and other sexual minorities. Furthermore, because so little education regarding gays and lesbians is currently offered to most graduate students within mental health disci-

plines, further research to explore counsellor competencies is of importance. If counsellors often *feel* confident to work with gay and lesbian clients despite having little training to do so, as suggested by Savage, Prout, and Chard (2004), one wonders how effective these counsellors might be.

Future directions in research should focus on how in-service training seminars, workshops, and conventions for counsellors affect both attitudes toward and knowledge of GLB clients. Further research could also focus on current counselling practices actually used with sexual minority youth in Canadian high schools.

Gay and lesbian students are at greater risk for a myriad of psychosocial and physical health problems as outlined earlier. They also seek out school-based counsellors for help with "(1) coming out, (2) family relationships/acceptance, (3) harassment and (4) safety" (Wells & Tsutsumi, 2005, p. 18). Gay and lesbian students deserve the best care that counsellors can provide them. A greater knowledge and appreciation for their issues, struggles, and their psychology is vital if this goal is ever to be fully realized.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The present study provided empirical evidence that for Alberta high school counsellors, lower levels of knowledge about homosexuality are correlated significantly to higher levels of modern homo-negativity toward gay males, and the converse is also true (i.e., higher education or knowledge of homosexuality is related to lower scores on modern homo-negativity). These results, which are consistent with the Wells and Franken (1987) findings regarding college students, provide support for one aspect of Arrendondo et al.'s (1996) theory that a relationship exists between knowledge of a particular minority group and attitudes toward that same group.

The Alberta high school counsellors who completed the questionnaires for this study generally scored low in homo-negativity toward gay males. It is possible that some of them who chose not to participate or the 15 who mailed back blank questionnaires had an unfavourable opinion toward this minority group. Further research will be needed to determine the actual reasons for not participating in this type of study.

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## Appendix

### *Sexuality Knowledge Questionnaire with Answers in Parentheses (Alderson)*

1. (F) Approximately 25-to-30% of adolescent boys have homosexual experience during their teenage years.
2. (T) Approximately 6-to-11% of adolescent girls have homosexual experience during their teenage years.
3. (F) Having sexual experiences with someone of the same gender before age 15 is a good predictor of sexual orientation in adulthood.
4. (T) Sexual orientation is usually well-established by adolescence.
5. (T) Usually homosexuals disclose their sexual identity to a friend before they tell a parent.
6. (F) People with homosexual orientations often have gender identity problems as well.
7. (F) If children are raised by openly homosexual parents, the likelihood that they themselves will develop a homosexual orientation is greater than if they were raised by heterosexual parents.
8. (T) Gay men and lesbian women have an increased incidence of anxiety and depression compared to heterosexual men and women.
9. (T) Research suggests that it is detrimental to the health of gay men to conceal their sexual identity.
10. (F) Homosexuals place more importance on the physical attractiveness of their dating partners than do heterosexuals.
11. (T) The experience of love is similar for all people regardless of sexual orientation.
12. (T) Compared to heterosexual couples, homosexual couples tend to more flexible in their views about role expectations.
13. (T) Gay male couples are likely to have the most permissive attitudes about sexual activity outside of a committed relationship compared to lesbian couples and heterosexual couples.
14. (T) Whereas gay men tend to develop emotional relationships out of sexual ones, lesbians typically feel emotional attraction to their partners before experiencing sexual feelings.
15. (F) Anal intercourse is the most prevalent sexual behavior among gay men.
16. (F) Cunnilingus is the least prevalent sexual activity among lesbians.
17. (T) In some cultures, it is normal practice for boys to have sex with their same-gender during adolescence.
18. (F) Most lesbians have not enjoyed having sex with men.

19. (F) In the world as a whole, the most common mode of transmission of the HIV virus is through gay male sex.
20. (F) Although children masturbate, they cannot have an orgasm until they enter puberty.
21. (T) Testosterone is the hormone responsible for the growth of pubic hair on girls.
22. (T) Boys' breasts typically grow during puberty.
23. (T) Sexual attraction develops for most children around the age of 10.
24. (F) Research supports the notion that sex education offered in schools increases the amount of sexual activity amongst adolescents.

*Homosexual Information Scale with Answers in Parentheses (Wells & Franken, 1987)*

25. (F) In the last 25 years there has been an increase in homosexuality.
26. (F) Most homosexual men and women want to be heterosexual.
27. (T) Lesbian women and homosexual men report equal or greater sexual satisfaction than do heterosexual men and women.
28. (F) Most homosexuals want to encourage or entice others into a homosexual or gay lifestyle.
29. (T) Heterosexual teachers, more often than homosexual teachers, seduce their students or sexually exploit them.
30. (T) History reveals that a significant number of homosexuals have made important contributions to various societies.
31. (T) Most other cultures view homosexuality more positively than do Americans.
32. (F) Greece and Rome fell because of homosexuality.
33. (F) Heterosexuals generally have a stronger sex drive than do homosexuals.
34. (T) About one-half of the population of men and more than one-third of women have had a homosexual experience to the point of orgasm at some time in their lives.
35. (F) Most homosexuals follow "masculine" or "feminine" behavior in their same-sex relationships.
36. (T) The homosexual population includes a greater proportion of men than of women.
37. (T) Heterosexual men and women commonly report homosexual fantasies.
38. (F) If the media portrays homosexuality or lesbianism as positive, this could sway youths into becoming homosexual or desiring homosexuality as a way of life.
39. (F) Homosexuals are usually identifiable by their appearance or mannerisms.

40. (T) Homosexuals who live with a same-sex partner are usually reported to be as happy or happier than are married women and men.
41. (F) Homosexuals do not make good role models for children and could do psychological harm to children with whom they interact as well as interfere with the normal sexual development of children.
42. (T) Causation of sexual orientation is very complex and without a definite answer at this time.

*Modern Homonegativity Scale* (Morrison & Morrison, 2002)

Circle the answer you feel is most appropriate, using the following scale:

1 = strongly agree

2 = agree

3 = don't know

4 = disagree

5 = strongly disagree

SA	A	DK	D	SD	
1	2	3	4	5	1. Many gay men use their sexual orientation so that they can obtain special privileges.
1	2	3	4	5	2. Gay men seem to focus on the ways in which they differ from heterosexuals, and ignore the ways in which they are the same.
1	2	3	4	5	3. Gay men do not have all the rights they need.
1	2	3	4	5	4. The notion of universities providing students with undergraduate degrees in Gay and Lesbian Studies is ridiculous.
1	2	3	4	5	5. Celebrations such as "Gay Pride Day" are ridiculous because they assume that an individual's sexual orientation should constitute a source of pride.
1	2	3	4	5	6. Gay men still need to protest for equal rights.
1	2	3	4	5	7. Gay men should stop shoving their lifestyle down other people's throats.
1	2	3	4	5	8. If gay men want to be treated like everyone else, then they need to stop making such a fuss about their sexuality/culture.

- 
- |   |   |   |   |   |  |
|---|---|---|---|---|--|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 9. Gay men who are "out of the closet" should be admired for their courage.  |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 10. Gay men should stop complaining about the way they are treated in society, and simply get on with their lives. |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 11. In today's tough economic times, Canadians' tax dollars shouldn't be used to support gay men's organizations.  |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 12. Gay men have become far too confrontational in their demand for equal rights.                                  |

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SA A DK D SD