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Effects of Campus Climate and Attitudes on the Identity Development of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual College Students

To investigate campus climate and its effect on the identity development and college experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students, undergraduate college students were asked to complete measures of homophobia and campus climate. Results indicated that males and first-year students report higher levels of homophobia than females and seniors. However, students reported knowing of or engaging in only few instances of homophobic behaviors and felt that the college community was relatively open-minded. Four qualitative interview examples are also provided, documenting the experience of gay students' identity development and the effects that campus climate has had on their undergraduate experiences. The importance of examining the effects of the college experience on gay identity development is discussed, along with implications for college campuses.

The college years are critical in a person's identity formation, but for gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals, this period of time is especially important (Evans & Levine, 1990). College presents an arena in which past ways of thinking and adjusting can be challenged and, while most gay, lesbian and bisexual persons do not disclose their sexual orientation before entering college, many do during the college years (Rhoads, 1994). Yet before disclosing this important part of who they are to others, they must begin to feel comfortable accepting who they are and may need to develop strategies to address the stigma that often comes with being gay (Evans & Levine, 1990). Thus, college is often the time when young adults begin to explore their sexual identity and, for gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals, develop a strong, positive gay identity (Cass, 1979).

However, individuals can also encounter social

or environmental barriers in their attempt to form a positive gay identity. The social stigma often associated with being gay is manifested in our everyday environment, both in terms of homophobia (which implies an irrational fear) and heterosexism (defined as the assumption that everyone is heterosexual). In terms of homophobia, historically in the United States any non-heterosexual behavior has been considered a sickness. Until the 1970's treatments such as hormone injections and aversion therapy (involving electric shock and injections causing nausea) were employed to "fix" gay, lesbian, and bisexual clients (Davies & Neal, 1996; Silverstein, 1996) and it wasn't until 1973 that homosexuality was officially removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. While there has since been a certain amount of change in societal attitudes, acceptance of gay, lesbian, and bisexual

individuals is still not widespread. It appears that anti-gay attitudes and jokes, as well as prejudice and discrimination, remain largely acceptable in our society.

Relatedly, Herek (1994) identified two major types of heterosexism: (a) cultural heterosexism, which includes heterosexist societal customs and institutions and (b) psychological heterosexism, which encompasses individual attitudes and behaviors. "Cultural heterosexism is like the air we breathe" (Herek, 1994, p. 90). It is so ubiquitous that we do not even realize it is there. History books contain few or no references to the sexual orientation of famous gay artists, philosophers, composers, etc. Most organized religions define marriage as a heterosexual union. In addition, despite some notable changes, media portrayals of gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals are still infrequent and, when they do occur, are highly stereotypical.

As a result of the cultural heterosexism children grow up in, psychological heterosexism becomes more pervasive. Gay individuals are often feared and loathed, and same-gender sexual behavior is often considered disgusting. In a Time magazine poll done in 1994, 53% of people believed that gay relationships were morally wrong, and 65% stated that too much attention is paid to the rights of gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals (Henry, 1994). Research has shown that anti-gay individuals tend to be male, have had little contact with gay individuals, and are also racially prejudiced (Herek, 1988). In particular, many college students still report believing that same-sex sexual behavior is wrong and even disgusting (D'Augelli & Rose, 1990). In a survey of first-year college students by Malaney, Williams, and Geller (1997), 32.6% of those surveyed agreed that "it is important to have laws prohibiting homosexual relationships" (p. 371).

Male students seem to have the most homophobic attitudes on college campuses. On measures of homophobia, males tend to score significantly higher than females (Hansen, 1982; Herek, 1988; D'Augelli, 1989; Chng & Moore, 1991; Miller, Briggs, & Corcoran, 1997; Donnelly et al., 1997). In addition, younger students tend to have higher levels of homophobia than those who have been in college longer (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980; Van de Ven, 1994). This decline in homophobia scores over time suggests that the campus climate at college, while not entirely positive, may be

more open-minded than those of middle and high schools and that education may lead to great tolerance and acceptance of others.

Given the research findings regarding gay identity development and the potentially negative effects of societal values, we decided to embark on a study of attitudes and climate on a college campus to determine the extent to which campus climate impacted gay identity development. We hypothesized that heterosexual college students would have lower levels of homophobia than those found in previous studies. Specifically, we hoped that some lessening of homophobic attitudes had occurred in the twenty years since Hudson and Ricketts's (1980) early college study. We also hypothesized, consistent with previous literature, that we would find higher levels of homophobia in males and that first-year students would have higher homophobia scores than more advanced students. As far as campus climate, we expected that a majority of students would have heard anti-gay jokes or remarks, but that few would have actually witnessed physical/sexual assault or verbal harassment of a gay, lesbian or bisexual person. We also expected a majority of students to describe the college campus climate as fairly warm and open-minded in terms of embracing diversity.

We also included several excerpts of interviews with gay students to further elaborate on the impact of climate on actual identity development. We used a qualitative methodology (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997) to explore how the campus climate and attitudes affected the formation and maintenance of positive identities for these students.

METHOD

Participants

Two hundred thirty-three undergraduate students at a small liberal arts college participated in the study of campus climate and attitudes. Fifteen participants reported being gay, lesbian, or bisexual; two hundred eighteen reported being heterosexual. The analyses relating to homophobia and campus climate were performed on the group of heterosexual students (N = 218). Although the participants (45.9% male, 54.1% female) were predominantly White (85.3%),

several other racial/ethnic groups were represented (6.9% African American, 3.2% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1.8% Hispanic/Latin American, .5% Native American, and 2.3% unspecified). Participants also represented a range of academic classes (44% first-year students, 18.3% sophomores, 17.9% juniors, and 19.7% seniors).

Measures

The Survey on Campus Climate contains several items developed by Eliason (1996). The items on campus climate include questions asking participants how often they had experienced anti-gay events (e.g. jokes, harassment, graffiti, etc.); how many gay, lesbian, or bisexual individuals they knew personally; whether they valued having a gay studies class in the curriculum (on a scale of 1-5; from 1 meaning very valuable to 5 meaning not at all valuable); and whether they felt the campus environment was comfortable for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students (on a scale of 1-5; from 1 meaning very open-minded/accepting of diversity to 5 meaning very close-minded/unaccepting of diversity).

The Index of Homophobia (IHP; Hudson & Ricketts, 1980) is a 25-item instrument that uses a 5-point Likert scale to determine the degree to which a person holds homophobic and heterosexist attitudes. Scores range from zero (extremely low homophobia/heterosexism) to 100 (extremely high homophobia/heterosexism). People who score from 0 to 25 are considered "high grade non-homophobics", and those who score from 26 to 50 are considered "low grade non-homophobics." Those who score from 51-75 are considered "low grade homophobics", and people scoring above 76 are considered "high grade homophobics." Some items are reversed-scored to control for response set biases. The IHP has excellent reliability, and has good construct validity when correlated to the Sexual Attitudes Scale (Hudson & Murphy, 1978).

Procedures

Participants were recruited at college residence hall meetings and in academic courses. After hearing about the anonymous and voluntary nature of the questionnaire study and their right to withdraw from the study at any time, participants signed an informed consent sheet. Next, participants completed a brief demographics sheet, a survey on campus climate, and the IHP. Participants were assigned random numbers to ensure anonymity. The items on the

IHP and the Survey on Campus Climate were used to construct an image of the attitudes and experiences on campus in relation to the gay, lesbian, and bisexual population.

RESULTS

The overall mean homophobia score for the entire sample was 45.40 ($SD=13.32$), indicating a low grade non-homophobic attitude approaching low grade homophobia. This average level of homophobia is significantly lower than that of the norming sample in the 1980 study by Hudson and Ricketts ($M = 53.0$), $t(217) = -8.420$, $p < .01$. Yet males still reported higher levels of homophobia than females on average, with means of 48.20 and 43.03, respectively. These differences were significant, $F(1,217) = 8.421$, $p < .01$. (See Table 1 for the homophobia scale means and standard deviations.)

A one-way ANOVA also revealed a significant main effect of academic class on homophobia, $F(3,214) = 5.882$, $p < .01$. A Tukey HSD post-hoc test was performed to determine the specific univariate differences. First-year students were found to have significantly higher levels of homophobia than seniors. In addition, those who valued a gay studies class more had lower levels of homophobia than those who did not, $F(4,213) = 7.144$, $p < .01$. Findings also revealed that those who knew more gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals were significantly less homophobic than those who knew fewer ($c_{[3]}=14.544$, $p < .01$).

In addition, most participants (90.8%) reported knowing at least one gay, lesbian or bisexual individual personally, and 30.7% report knowing five or more gay people personally. The average opinion of campus climate was 2.161, indicating that the campus climate is perceived to be somewhere between relatively open-minded and in between open- and close-minded. Participants were more indifferent to the value of a gay studies class, with an average score of 2.85, in between valuable and neither valuable or valuable, but closer to the latter.

Experiences of anti-gay events/situations were scored from on a four-point scale from 0-3, where 0=never, 1=rarely, 2=sometimes, and 3=often. Jokes were the most frequently experienced form of anti-gay behavior, with 98.6% of participants

TABLE ONE

Homophobia Scores across Demographic Groups		
	M	SD
<u>Sex</u>		
Male	48.20	12.71
Female	43.03	13.42
<u>Academic Class</u>		
First year	48.51	14.68
Sophomore	45.58	11.62
Junior	45.10	10.51
Senior	38.58	11.57
<u>Ethnicity</u>		
White/Caucasian	45.34	13.32
Black/African American	53.67	4.48
Asian/Pacific Islander	44.50	20.49
Hispanic/Latin American	31.00	0.00
Native American	37.60	5.98
Other	37.57	15.59

hearing them at some point at college, and 46.3% hearing them often. Almost 14% of participants reported witnessing some form of physical or sexual assault of a gay person, and 49.5% of participants had seen graffiti about gay, lesbian, or bisexual individuals. Sixty-one percent had heard gay persons being verbally harassed, and 25.7% report witnessing threats directed at a gay person. Means and standard deviations for campus climate events are presented in Table 2.

Qualitative Interviews

Because the purpose of the current study was to examine campus climate in relation to gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity development, we wanted to add several interview excerpts to the quantitative survey data. Therefore, we present below a summary of four qualitative interviews (2 male, 2 female; 2 White, 1 African American, 1 Asian/Pacific Islander) designed to explore the personal experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual college students with regard to campus climate.

All four interviewees reported experiencing both positive and negative attitudes on campus, with indifference to gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues being the most typical pattern. In terms of the negative attitudes, interviewees reported experiencing several types of homophobic

behaviors, either directly or indirectly. Remarks and jokes from non-family members, usually other college students, were a general experience, and almost all interviewees had been called derogatory terms such as "faggot" and "freak" at some point at college. In addition to derogatory comments directed to the interviewees, some reported hearing anti-gay comments and jokes when the speakers weren't aware that there was a gay person listening. Other forms of anti-gay behaviors experienced by interviewees included vandalism, harassment, and threats. In addition to campus-based homophobia, interviewees typically have experienced homophobic behaviors and remarks from their family.

Interviewees reported less incidence of heterosexism on campus, although three stated that it is present in the media and in "real life." Examples of the more insidious heterosexism experienced by interviewees include insensitive comments, such as other students assuming that they are straight and asking about opposite sex partners (e.g. "Do you have a boyfriend/girlfriend?"). One interviewee expressed the concern that sexuality and issues relating to gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals aren't covered enough in classes. A few interviewees stated that gay characters, relationships, and issues are rarely

TABLE TWO

<u>Campus Climate Event Scores</u>		
<u>Event</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
Jokes	2.36	0.69
Verbal Harassment	0.92	0.87
Graffiti	0.68	0.78
Physical/Sexual Assault	0.16	0.43
Denied Access to An Event	0.01	0.01
Personal Property Damage	0.28	0.55
Threats	0.33	0.62

Note: Scoring was as follows: 0 = Never, 1 = Rarely, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Often.

seen on TV or in the news, and that you seldom see members of the same sex showing affection in public, although opposite sex affection abounds. One interviewee remarked, "A lot of gay people talk about living in 'straightworld.' And you walk down the street, and you see lots of guys and girls holding hands, but you don't see a lot of gay couples walking around . . . And it's like living in this world where you're really different. If you're straight, you don't even think about it."

In those interviewed, reactions to instances of homophobia and heterosexism tended to be diverse. Yet all reported some kind of negative reaction, ranging from a small degree of discomfort to depression. One interviewee, discussing an instance when students living on his hall made fun of him and called him a faggot, said, "That really affected me, because before I had never really run into it, besides what I had seen on the news, or what other people had told me. But to experience something like that firsthand, even though it wasn't anything huge, was still kind of disturbing—to see it was still there." Another interviewee, discussing homophobic situations in general, stated that "Occasionally I run into homophobic persons. Sometimes I become very upset and then depressed about that—that they call themselves educated individuals, yet they lack such strong elements of compassion."

The interviewees suggested that there is still a need for more exposure and awareness of gay,

lesbian and bisexual issues as well as a need for more direct education and attitude change on college campuses. Although there have been improvements in the last 30 years, clearly homophobia and heterosexism still exist on college campuses and can affect the identity development of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students.

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study suggest that attitudes towards gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals on college campuses may be improving, and, with it, campus climate. The average homophobia score for the current sample was lower than that for other colleges in previous years (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980). The lower homophobia scores in higher academic classes demonstrate that attitudes may improve over time and with education. It is feasible that homophobic individuals, exposed to a liberal, open-minded environment that, as a whole, is intolerant of close-mindedness, may change their homophobic attitudes. However, the scores still hover halfway between homophobia and non-homophobia, indicating further need for education and attitude change.

The survey of campus climate revealed few prevalent homophobic and heterosexist behaviors, except for jokes, which appear to be fairly common. Verbal harassment and graffiti occur occasionally. The low occurrence of anti-

gay behaviors may indicate that, while these behaviors are more socially acceptable than the intolerance of other groups, there is a move toward being politically correct. This may not result in a reduction in anti-gay behaviors so much as the move to be more careful around whom one expresses such behaviors. Presumably, verbal harassment, jokes, and assault usually occur only around those whom the perpetrator thinks are accepting of such attitudes and who will probably also participate in such behaviors. However, the fact that threats and assaults were even reported is still disturbing. Despite the fact that the heterosexual students perceived these events to occur rarely on campus, they may in fact be more prevalent than reported (Evans & Rankin, 1998). The fact they do occur at all shows that attitude and behavior change is still very necessary.

Several cautions should be noted when interpreting the results of the survey data and the interviews. The primary limitation is that the participants were recruited from one campus and were predominantly White. The results, thus, may not fully represent the attitudes and perceptions of other college students, especially those at large public institutions or at more culturally diverse campuses. Furthermore, the qualitative interview data only represent four perspectives. Thus, we recommend viewing those data only as case examples. Only students who were comfortable discussing issues surrounding their sexual orientation participated in interviews. It is possible that gay, lesbian, and bisexual students who were as open about their sexual identity might report more difficulties associated with campus climate and attitudes. Also, while the interview setting provided intimacy and convenience, the lack of anonymity may have made interviewees screen their answers more.

Future research could remedy the limitations discussed by focusing on larger sample sizes and greater racial diversity. Most research in the area of gay identity development focuses on White, middle-class, adult male subjects. In many ways, these results cannot be generalized to include the experiences of women and those of differing race, socio-economic status, age, and education levels. Much more research needs to be done on the effects of race on gay identity development. It is hypothesized that minorities

face a doubly difficult challenge of developing their identity as a member of a minority race as well as their identity as a gay person (Wall & Washington, 1991). For the same reason, more research should be conducted specifically with women. Finally, additional research should focus on ways to improve attitudes on college campuses, through education and policy changes.

The importance of examining the effects of the college experience on the identity development of gay individuals must not be understated. The college environment mirrors society as a whole, in that similar issues and attitudes may be encountered in residence halls, classes, and extracurricular activities that can be found in the "real world" (Bourassa & Shipton, 1991). Fortunately, some examination of college campuses has already begun. In 1993, the University of Amherst formed a task force to seek ways to improve the quality of life for its gay, lesbian, and bisexual students (Malaney et al., 1997). Also in 1993, San Francisco State University began to offer a gay studies program (Malaney et al., 1997). However, such is not the case at many other colleges and universities. According to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (1992), only about 10 percent of all colleges and universities have protective clauses for gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals, such as an equal opportunity clause that the college will not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation.

Therefore, much more can be done to educate students, faculty, and staff about the value of diversity and make them more aware of issues important in the gay community. For example, active recruitment of staff and faculty who are gay or are accepting of gay individuals could help make attitudes on campus more warm and open-minded. A gay studies class is another potential way to educate others, increase awareness, and improve attitudes (Bohan, 1997). Additional suggestions for improving the campus environment for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students include sensitivity training (e.g., for resident assistants, counselors, campus security, academic/career advisors), additional library resources, and general intolerance of antigay and heterosexist behavior and attitudes (Davis & Neal, 1996; Obear, 1991; Shoenberg, 1989). A more active stance could convey the message that homophobia and heterosexism are not acceptable. While college campuses may attract

students who are open-minded and accepting of diversity, we still have much to do to improve the quality of life for gay students in all areas of college life.

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