Attitudes towards lesbians and gay men and support for lesbian and gay human rights among psychology students

ELLIS, S. J., KITZINGER, C. and WILKINSON, S.

Attitudes Towards Lesbians and Gay Men and Support for Lesbian and Gay Human Rights Among Psychology Students.

Sonja J. Ellis, MSocSc, PhD
Celia Kitzinger, MA, PhD, CPsychol, FBPsS
Sue Wilkinson, BSc, PhD, CPsychol, FBPsS

Loughborough University, United Kingdom.

Sonja Ellis studied for her doctorate in the Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, UK and is now a Lecturer in Psychology at Sheffield Hallam University, UK. At the time of writing this paper all authors were based in the Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University. Celia Kitzinger is now at The University of York, UK, where she is Professor of Conversation Analysis, Gender and Sexuality; and Sue Wilkinson is now at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, BC, Canada, where she holds the Ruth Wynn Woodward Endowed Professorship of Women's Studies. All correspondence should be addressed to Dr Sonja J. Ellis, School of Social Science and Law, Sheffield Hallam University, Collegiate Crescent Campus, Sheffield S10 2BP, United Kingdom. [e-mail: S.Ellis@shu.ac.uk].

Abstract

A questionnaire comprising two scales, the short form of the Attitudes Towards

Lesbians and Gay Men Scale (ATLG-S; Herek, 1984) and the newly devised

Support for Lesbian and Gay Human Rights Scale (SLGHR) were administered to

226 students taking undergraduate psychology courses at universities in the

United Kingdom, to assess their attitudes towards lesbians and gay men, and their

level of support for lesbian and gay human rights. The results indicated that whilst

only a small percentage of respondents expressed negative attitudes towards

lesbians and gay men on the ATLG-S, the sample as a whole did not

overwhelmingly support lesbian and gay human rights. The lack of support for

lesbian and gay human rights is discussed in relation to its implications for

psychology students as future practitioners and policy makers.

Keywords

Psychology students, attitudes, human rights, lesbian, gay, homosexuality.

Within psychology, the study of attitudes towards lesbians and gay men is well-established. Many studies have investigated and documented the attitudes towards lesbians and gay men of particular groups of individuals, such as psychologists and mental health professionals (e.g. Annesley & Coyle, 1995; Fort, Steiner, & Conrad, 1971; Garfinkle and Morin, 1978; DeCrescenzo, 1983-84), social workers (e.g. Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Wisniewski & Toomey, 1987), medical trainees and professionals (e.g. Douglas, Kalman, & Kalman, 1985; Klamen, Grossman, & Kopacz, 1999), police officers (e.g. Fretz, 1975), students (e.g. Donnelly et al., 1997; Hudson & Ricketts, 1980; Matchinsky & Iverson, 1996; Proulx, 1997; Schellenberg, Hirt, & Sears, 1999), and resident assistants (D'Augelli, 1989). Recent psychological research has explored attitudes towards lesbians and gay men both as a means of identifying 'homophobic' individuals and groups, and to provide an impetus for initiating affirmative action in practice settings.

Studies of this type have consistently reported that people are significantly more likely to hold negative attitudes if they are male (Chng & Moore, 1991; D'Augelli, 1989; Donnelly et al., 1997; Klamen et al., 1999; Seltzer, 1992; Schellenberg et al., 1999), have a religious affiliation (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Seltzer, 1992; see also Eliason, 1995; Herek, 1994), are of an ethnic minority (Klamen et al., 1999), and have few lesbian or gay acquaintances (Klamen et al., 1999). In addition, studies have found more positive attitudes among students majoring in psychology as opposed to those with only a few credits in psychology (Matchinsky & Iverson, 1996), and among arts and social science students compared with science and business students (Schellenberg et al., 1999), and also that attitudes improve as a function of time spent in college education (Seltzer, 1992; see also Eliason, 1995). Recent studies have also tended to find that attitudes towards gay men are significantly more negative than attitudes towards lesbians (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997;

Schellenberg et al., 1999). However, these findings do not necessarily appear to hold true with non-western samples (e.g. see Proulx, 1997).

In comparison, only a few studies (e.g. D'Augelli, 1989; Eliason, 1996; Malaney, Williams, & Geller, 1997) have explored support for gay and lesbian rights issues. These studies have tended to indicate support for the rights of lesbians and gay men. For example, the majority of students surveyed in one study (Malaney et al., 1997) agreed that lesbians and gay men should be allowed to teach in schools, marry, and have their relationships legally condoned. On the other hand, Malaney et al. (1997) found much less support for lesbians and gay men to serve in the military, or to adopt children, and in another study (Eliason, 1996) up to 26% of university staff surveyed did not support the right of lesbians and gay men to teach children.

However, studies of this kind have tended to focus on a small range of issues, such as lesbian and gay parenting, lesbians and gay men serving in the armed forces, and employment issues as part of a study of the climate (socio-cultural environment) for lesbians and gay men in a given setting. Studies exploring lesbian and gay rights issues, have omitted to report on people's views in relation to (human) rights issues such as the right to life, the right to asylum, and the right to freedom of expression and access to information. Thus, no study to date appears to have explored people's support for human rights issues (*per se*), specifically as they apply to lesbians and gay men.

Furthermore, although some studies have systematically investigated heterosexism in psychology textbooks (e.g. Pilkington & Cantor, 1996; Simoni, 1996), psychological assessment instruments (e.g. Chernin et al., 1997), and professional psychology training programs (e.g. Pilkington & Cantor, 1996), few studies have looked at attitudes towards lesbians and gay men and/or endorsement of lesbian and gay rights among psychology students (*per se*). Although psychology students have often been employed as (generic)

'students' in attitude studies, the attitudes of psychology students (*qua* psychology

students) have seldom been the subject of psychological study in the way that studies of

medical students (e.g. Klamen et al., 1999) or social workers (e.g. Berkman & Zinberg,

1997; Wisniewski & Toomey, 1987) have been. Consequently, this study documents

attitudes towards lesbians and gay men and support for lesbian and gay human rights

issues of students taking undergraduate psychology courses in the United Kingdom.

METHOD

Subjects

Participants comprised 226 undergraduate students attending psychology classes in three

universities in the United Kingdom. Consistent with the typical composition of psychology

classes, 84% of the sample were female and 12% were male. The remaining 4% of

participants did not indicate their sex. The sample comprised predominantly white students

(82%), however, a number of black (5%), Asian (5%), and 'other' (3%) ethnic groups were

also represented. A further 5% of respondents did not specify their ethnic origin. Most

participants identified themselves as 25 years of age or under (75%). Forty-eight percent of

respondents reported their religious affiliation as Christian (Catholic or Protestant), 2% as

Muslim, 2% as Jewish, 2% as Hindu, 2% as 'other', 39% of the sample identified themselves

as having no religious affiliation, and 5% did not indicate whether or not they had a religious

affiliation. Students identifying themselves as heterosexual comprised the majority of the

sample (89%), with 2% identifying themselves as lesbian, 4% as bisexual (all were female),

one student as 'unsure', and 5% not specifying their sexuality. Most of the sample were full-

time students (81%), and of the total sample, 13% were in their first year of study, 60% in

their second year, 21% in their third year, and a further 6% did not specify their year of study.

Sixty-eight percent of the sample were majoring in psychology, whilst 22% were majoring in

other social science subjects (e.g. sociology, social policy, political science). Ten percent of

the sample did not specify their majoring subject.

Procedure

A questionnaire comprising 35 items was developed for this study. The newly devised

Support for Lesbian and Gay Human Rights (SLGHR) scale (25 items of the questionnaire)

was developed from surveys and interview schedules used in previous studies on lesbian and

gay issues (e.g. Malaney, 1994; Maney & Cain, 1997), human rights issues (e.g. Diaz-

Veizades et al., 1995; Doise et al., 1999) and moral issues (e.g. Ellsworth & Gross, 1994;

Kahn, 1997).

In order to construct this scale, an item pool was compiled by sifting through scales,

tests, questionnaires, and interview schedules from previous psychological studies, and

locating items addressing human rights issues. Where necessary, items were modified to

focus on human rights in relation to lesbians and gay men (e.g. "A person's race or sex

should not block that person's access to basic rights and freedoms" (Diaz-Veizades et al.,

1995) became "A person's sexual orientation should not block that person's access to basic

rights and freedoms"). In addition, a number of items were created from scratch to represent

current lesbian and gay human rights issues internationally, in areas not explored by previous

studies (e.g. "There is no situation in which it is justified to kill someone simply for being

lesbian or gay"). Next, items were systematically compared against the Universal Declaration

of Human Rights, to ensure that all items which could conceivably apply to lesbians and gay

men (*qua* lesbians and gay men) were represented. Items were then sorted according to the

article of the Universal Declaration to which each item pertained, their wording modified, and

repetitious items omitted. Scale items were finalised by systematically checking that each

relevant article of the Universal Declaration was represented (in full or in part) by an item on

the scale, and that the wording of each item accurately reflected the essence of the article to which it pertained. Around one third of the items were then reworded as opposing lesbian and gay human rights, and reverse-scored.

In addition to the SLGHR, a pre-existing scale (with demonstrated reliability and validity), the short form of the Attitudes Towards Lesbians and Gay Men Scale (ATLG-S; see Herek, 1994) was employed to measure attitudes towards lesbians and gay men. This scale comprised five items relating to male homosexuality, and five items relating to lesbianism. Items of both scales were interspersed among one another, and participants were asked to rate each statement on a 5-point scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". As employed by others (e.g. see Berkman & Zinberg, 1997), a 5-point scale was used for the ATLG-S, rather than the 9-point scale recommended by Herek (1994), so as to ensure uniformity with the SLGHR. Possible scores therefore ranged from 10 to 50 for the ATLG-S (with high scores indicating more negative attitudes) and from 15 to 125 for the SLGHR (with high scores indicating less support for human rights).

Two composite scores were calculated from the data in this study: An attitudes towards lesbians and gay men score (ATLG-S) and a Support for Lesbian and Gay Human Rights (SLGHR) score. Group comparisons on a basis of sex (male vs female), ethnicity (white vs non-white), religious affiliation (affiliated to a religion vs no religious affiliation), major (psychology vs other social sciences), age (18-21 vs 22-25 vs over 25), and year of study (first vs second vs third) were also undertaken for each item on the ATLG-S and for the composite scores. An independent-samples t-test (for sex, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and majoring subject) and a two-way ANOVA (for age and year of study) were used for these analyses. Where the Levene's test for equality of variances (on the t-test) was found to be statistically significant, results have been reported using the t-test for unequal variances.

However, since the SLGHR comprised 25 items, a factor analysis was undertaken on these items, resulting in three main factors (social and political rights; freedom of expression issues; privacy of identity issues). Analyses by sex, ethnicity, age, religious affiliation, majoring subject, and year of study were then undertaken on each of these three factors using a two-way ANOVA.

<div align="center">RESULTS</div>

Attitudes Towards Lesbians and Gay Men

Significant differences in attitudes towards lesbians and gay men were found for sex, ethnicity, and religious affiliation, but not for age, majoring subject, and year of study. Males were significantly more negative in their attitudes towards lesbians and gay men than females ($t = 3.13$, $df = 205$, $p < 0.002$), Non-white participants were significantly more negative in their attitudes towards lesbians and gay men than their white counterparts ($t = -3.94$, $df = 205$, $p<0.001$) and those who identified themselves as having some religious affiliation were significantly more negative in their attitudes towards lesbians and gay men than those who identified themselves as having no religious affiliation ($t = 2.12$, $df = 205$, $p < 0.04$). In addition, a highly statistically significant correlation ($r = 0.865$, $N = 214$, $p < 0.001$) was found between attitudes towards gay men (measured by the ATG subscale of the ATLG-S) and attitudes towards lesbians (measured by the ATL subscale), however, attitudes towards gay men were significantly more negative than attitudes towards lesbians ($t = 2.447$, $df = 214$, $p < 0.015$).

Results for each of the ten items of the ATLG-S are presented in table 1.

Table 1: Student Responses to Items on Herek's ATLG-S (N=226) expressed as

percentages of the total sample.

	agree/strongly agree	unsure/ neutral	disagree/Strongly disagree
2. Just as in other species, male homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in human men.	51.8	32.0%	13.6
6. Lesbians just can't fit into our society.	2.7	7.9%	88.6
9. Female homosexuality in itself is no problem, but what society makes of it can be a problem.	76.3	14.9%	5.3
11. I think male homosexuals are disgusting.	6.1	7.9%	83.7
16. Lesbians are sick	2.2	6.1%	89.9
19. Male homosexuality is a perversion.	6.2	10.1%	82.0
23. Male homosexuality is merely a different kind of lifestyle that should not be condemned.	86.8	6.1%	5.2
29. Female homosexuality is a sin.	7.9	6.1%	54.7
32. State laws regulating private, consenting lesbian behaviour should be loosened.	59.7	31.6%	6.6
35. Homosexual behaviour between two men is just plain wrong.	7.9	12.7%	77.6

* Figures do not add up to 100% as some participants did not respond to all questions.

Males were significantly more likely than females to endorse the statements "I think male homosexuals are disgusting" (t = 3.03, df = 28.66, p < 0.005), "lesbians are sick" (t = 2.66, df = 214, p < 0.008), "male homosexuality is a perversion" (t = 3.00, df = 214, p < 0.003), and "homosexual behaviour is wrong" (t = 2.69, df = 29.07, p < 0.012). Similarly, males were significantly more likely than females to disagree that "male homosexuality is merely a different kind of lifestyle that should not be condemned" (t = 2.53, df = 214, p < 0.012),

For ethnicity, significant differences were found for all but one item. Non-white participants were significantly more likely than white participants to agree with the statements "lesbians just can't fit into our society" (t = -2.41, df = 214, p < 0.017), "male homosexuals are disgusting" (t = -2.88, df = 212, p < 0.004), "lesbians are sick" (t = -2.14, df = 213, p < 0.034), "male homosexuality is a perversion" (t = -2.56, df = 213, p < 0.011), "female homosexuality is a sin" (t = -3.57, df = 214, p < 0.001), and "homosexual behaviour between two men is just plain wrong" (t= -3.52, df = 213, p < 0.001). Congruent with this, they were significantly more likely to disagree that "male homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in human men" (t = -2.72, df = 212, p < 0.007), that "male homosexuality is merely a different kind of lifestyle which should not be condemned" (t = -2.36, df = 213, p < 0.019), and that "state laws regulating private, consenting lesbian behaviour should be loosened" (t = -2.22, df = 212, p < 0.027).

Those who identified themselves as having a religious affiliation (e.g. Christian, Muslim, Jewish) were significantly more likely than those with no religious affiliation to disagree that "male homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in human men" (t = 2.22, df = 212, p < 0.007), that "state laws regulating lesbian behaviour should be loosened" (t = -2.22, df = 212, p < 0.027), and that "male homosexuality is merely a different kind of lifestyle that should not be condemned" (t = 2.21, df = 212, p < 0.029). They were also significantly more likely to agree that "female homosexuality is a sin" (t = 2.79, df = 211.89, p < 0.006).

As with males, younger respondents were significantly more likely to agree with the statement "I think male homosexuals are disgusting" than were older respondents (F [2, 214] = 3.32, p < 0.038). Similarly, younger participants were significantly more likely to disagree that "state laws regulating private, consenting lesbian behaviour should be loosened" (F [2, 214] = 4.14, p < 0.017).

Finally, for the statement "lesbians just can't fit into our society" significant differences were found only for majoring subject. Psychology majors were found to be significantly less likely to agree with this statement than other social science students ($t = -2.61$, $df = 203$, $p < 0.01$). Significant differences in responses were not found for year of study on any item.

Support for Human Rights

Significant differences in support for lesbian and gay human rights were found for sex, religious affiliation, and age, but not for ethnicity, majoring subject, and year of study. Males were significantly less supportive of lesbian and gay human rights than females ($t = 2.69$, $df = 207$, $p < 0.008$), and those affiliated to a religion less supportive than those not affiliated to any religion ($t = 2.65$, $df = 206$, $p < 0.009$). Significant age differences in support for lesbian and gay human rights were also found (F [2, 208] = 3.84, $p < 0.023$), with older participants indicating greater support than younger participants.

Responses to individual questions showed inconsistencies in respondents' overall support for lesbian and gay human rights. For example, to the statement "a person's sexual orientation should not block that person's access to basic rights and freedoms" 93.9% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. However, when asked about specific human rights issues, much fewer respondents indicated support for a pro-lesbian and gay rights position (see table 2). Fewer than half of respondents (43.4%) agreed that "lesbian and gay couples should have all the same parenting rights as heterosexuals," and fewer than half (46.5%) expressed disagreement with the item "society has a right to prevent lesbians and gay men who want to speak in schools from actively promoting homosexuality as equivalent to heterosexuality."

Table 2: Student Responses to items from the SLGHR (N=226) expressed as

percentages of the total sample.

	Agree/Strongly agree	Unsure/ neutral	Disagree/ Strongly disagree
Social and Political Rights			
34. Lesbian and gay couples should have all the same parenting rights as heterosexuals do (for example, adoption, fostering, and access to fertility services).	47.6	29.9	22.5
28. Society has a right to prevent lesbians and gay men who want to speak in schools from actively promoting homosexuality as equivalent to heterosexuality.	24.0	27.4	48.6
13. Books promoting lesbianism and gay male homosexuality as a positive lifestyle should be freely available in school libraries.	55.5	27.0	17.5
24. It should be acceptable for lesbian and gay male couples openly to express their affection for their partners in public without fear of harassment or violence.	79.1	12.3	8.6
21. Lesbian and gay male couples should be legally permitted to marry, just as heterosexual couples are.	63.4	22.2	14.4
14. The age at which male homosexual sex is considered legal should be the same as that for heterosexual sex.	66.3	17.0	16.7
31. Just like people persecuted for their religious and political beliefs, lesbians and gay men should be granted asylum in another country when homosexuality is persecuted in their own.	57.4	30.1	12.5
17. The partner of a lesbian or gay man should be entitled to the same immigration rights (for example, permanent resident status or citizenship) as is a partner of a heterosexual man or woman.	78.0	15.7	6.3
26. All university modules in fields such as social psychology, education, history, English literature, and health studies should explicitly include lesbian and gay male perspectives.	48.8	36.2	15.0
33. It is <u>not</u> appropriate for lesbians and gay men to serve in the armed forces.	78.0	13.2	8.8
15. All employers should strive to develop just and favourable conditions in the workplace for lesbians and gay men.	82.9	10.9	6.2
7. The partner of a lesbian or gay male employee should be entitled to the same spousal benefits (for example, parental leave, insurance cover, travel benefits, pension rights, etc) as a married or defacto partner of a heterosexual employee.	71.5	19.3	9.2
5. Children should be taught respect for the rights of lesbians and gay men.	83.1	11.4	5.5

Table 2 continued…

	Agree/Strongly agree	Unsure/ neutral	Disagree/ Strongly disagree
Freedom of Expression Issues			
18. A person's sexual orientation should not block that person's access to basic rights and freedoms.	96.6	1.8	1.6
30. Lesbianism and male homosexuality should be listed in policies, legislation and treaties as protected from discrimination, in the same way that race, class, sex, and religion are.	84.2	10.4	5.4
10. No one, in any country of the world should be arrested, detained, or exiled simply for being lesbian or gay.	94.4	3.0	2.6
8. Lesbians and gay men should only be allowed to express their views as long as they don't offend or upset the majority.	14.4	11.2	74.4
20. If it is discovered that a primary school teacher is lesbian or gay, she/he should not be allowed to continue teaching.	4.2	5.9	89.9
3. Lesbians and gay men should not have the right to flaunt their sexuality in public at marches and demonstrations.	7.8	17.1	75.1
12. A country should have the right to impose the death penalty on lesbians and gay men if that is consistent with that culture's values and beliefs.	4.8	5.4	89.8
4. Lesbians and gay men should not be fined or arrested for engaging in consenting sexual acts of whatever nature (for example, anal intercourse or sadomasochism) in the privacy of their own homes.	89.4	4.8	5.8
22. For the most part, policies which guarantee equal rights to lesbians and gay men in such matters as jobs and housing damage society's moral standards.	7.3	9.8	82.9
1. There is never a situation in which someone's homosexuality should be a cause for job discrimination.	82.6	8.0	9.4
Privacy of Identity			
25. It is okay for a newspaper or organisation to publicise that a person is lesbian or gay without that person's permission.	10.5	18.1	71.4
27. A man's homosexuality or a woman's lesbianism should not be raised as an issue in a court of law, unless the case under consideration directly relates to homosexual acts.	90.1	7.7	2.2

* Figures do not add up to 100% as some participants did not respond to all questions.

For Factor 1 (social and political rights) significant differences were found for age, sex, and religious affiliation, but not for ethnicity, majoring subject, and year of study. Younger respondents were consistently found to be significantly less supportive of social and political rights for lesbians and gay men, than were older respondents (F [189, 2] = 5.64, p < 0.004); males less supportive than females (F [189, 1] = 4.31, p < 0.04); and those with religious affiliations less supportive than those with no religious affiliation (F [189, 1] = 6.45, p < 0.01).

For Factor 2 (freedom of expression issues) significant differences were found for age, ethnicity and sex, but not for religious affiliation, majoring subject, and year of study. Again, younger respondents were found to be significantly less supportive than older participants (F [190, 2] = 3.66, p < 0.03); non-white respondents significantly less supportive than white participants (F [190, 1] = 13.00, p < 0.001), and males significantly less supportive than females (F [190, 1] = 9.32, p < 0.003).

For Factor 3 (privacy of identity issues), significant differences were found for age and for sex, but not for ethnicity, religious affiliation, majoring subject, and year of study. Like the other two factors, younger respondents were found to be less supportive than older respondents (F [2, 192] = 5.40, p < 0.05), and males less supportive than females (F [1, 192] = 9.18, p < 0.003).

Attitudes towards Lesbians and Gay Men and Support for Human Rights

A highly statistically significant relationship was found between attitudes toward lesbians and gay men and support for lesbian and gay human rights (r = 0.878, N = 207, p < 0.001). Thus, the more negative a participant's attitude toward lesbians and gay men, the less likely he/she was to indicate support for lesbian and gay rights.

DISCUSSION

In the present study, 226 university students taking psychology modules were surveyed about their attitudes towards lesbians and gay men, and their level of support for lesbian and gay human rights. Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements, and the completed questionnaires were then analysed on a basis of the whole sample, and with respect to selected demographic variables.

Compared with other studies employing the ATLG, the response pattern of the whole sample in this study was similar to that in some studies (e.g. D'Augelli, 1989), but not uniformly consistent. For some items there was a marked difference in responses. For example, for four of the five items pertaining to gay men ("I think male homosexuals are disgusting," "male homosexuality is a perversion," "male homosexuality is merely a different kind of lifestyle that should not be condemned," and "homosexual behaviour between two men is just plain wrong"), a greater proportion of respondents in D'Augelli's (1989) sample indicated negative attitudes than the proportion of respondents who did so in the present study. Similarly, a greater proportion of respondents in D'Augelli's study responded negatively to the statement "Female homosexuality is a sin" than did in this study. Furthermore, in Herek's studies (see Herek, 1994), responses to all statements yielded a much greater proportion of negative responses. However, it may be that the difference in proportion of negative responses between this study and other studies is due to cultural differences, in that both Herek's and D'Augelli's studies were undertaken in the United States where there appears to be much stronger anti-lesbian/gay lobby than in the United Kingdom (e.g. see Concerned Women for America, 1995; McFeely, 1999).

Since normative cut-off points are not given for the ATLG-S, and a 5-point rather than 9-point scale was employed in this study, it is not possible to compare mean attitude scores in this study with those in previous studies. Even so, it is striking that although overall scores for this sample were reasonably low on average (M = 18.4, SD = 7.0), around 16% of respondents did not disagree with the statement "male homosexuality is a perversion," and almost 9% did not disagree with the statement "lesbians are sick."

The finding that male respondents expressed significantly more negative attitudes than female respondents is consistent with other recent studies (e.g. D'Augelli, 1989; Donnelly et al., 1997; Klamen et al., 1999; Malaney et al., 1997; Schellenberg et al., 1999; Seltzer, 1992), as is the finding that participants with some religious affiliation were more homophobic than participants with no religious affiliation (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Seltzer, 1992; see also Eliason, 1995; Herek, 1994). Similarly, although studies vary in whether or not they find significant differences for ethnicity, lesbian and gay psychologists have typically reported that lesbians and gay men often experience difficulty in coming out due to negative attitudes towards homosexuality in their respective cultures (e.g. see Chan, 1989; Tremble et al., 1989). The finding of this study that non-white participants express more negative attitudes is consistent with this. However, caution should be exercised in interpreting this finding given the substantial body of literature highlighting ethnocentric bias in psychometric measures (e.g. see Rogler, 1999; Walsh & Betz, 1990).

However, our findings do not concur with those of Matchinsky & Iverson (1996), in that significant differences in attitudes were not found for majoring subject. In the present study, with only one exception ("lesbians just can't fit into our society"), there were no significant differences between students majoring in psychology and those majoring in other subjects, for any of the items in the questionnaire.

In relation to lesbian and gay human rights issues, at first sight the findings of this study suggest that respondents were generally supportive of lesbian and gay human rights. This was evident in that the SLGHR scores for the sample were reasonably low on average (M = 49.3, SD = 15.4, compared with a maximum possible score of 125 indicating uniform lack of support for lesbian and gay human rights), and in that there was overwhelming support (93.9%) for the statement "a person's sexual orientation should not block that person's access to basic rights and freedoms." However, responses to questions about specific human rights issues did not show a level of support consistent with the response to this general statement. For example, fewer than half of respondents were willing to extend parenting rights to lesbians and gay men (43.4%); about a third (33.7%) did not agree that lesbians and gay men should have the right to marry, and more than a quarter of the respondents (26.8%) did not agree that spousal benefits should be extended to the partners of lesbian and gay employees. These findings suggest that although SLGHR scores were reasonably high, respondents in the present study did not overwhelmingly support lesbian and gay human rights.

At first, this inconsistency seems surprising. However, theory around racial attitudes (e.g. see Krysan, 1998; McConahay, Hardee, & Batts, 1981; Schuman, Steeh, & Bobo, 1985), seems to suggest that in the liberal ethos of today's society, it is not generally considered acceptable (particularly among university educated individuals) to express attitudes which are overtly discriminatory (i.e. sexist, racist, heterosexist). Consequently, respondents are likely to endorse egalitarian values in responding to a statement such as "a person's sexual orientation should not block that person's access to basic rights and freedoms," to which a negative response would clearly indicate a prejudiced viewpoint (cf. McConahay et al., 1981; Schuman et al., 1985). However, when presented with a specific issue (e.g. "society has a right to prevent lesbians and gay men who want to speak in schools from actively promoting

homosexuality as equivalent to heterosexuality"), people tend to perceive lesbians and gay men as receiving something 'extra', and invoke the argument of equity (or what seems fair) in order to absolve them from claims of being prejudiced (cf. Krysan, 1998). So, while people may support equal rights as a general principle, they fail to extend that support to specific issues of equality. This pattern of response would seem to indicate the expressed belief in egalitarianism as a socially desirable value, but a lack of commitment to it, especially when it comes into conflict with one's personal values and beliefs (see Schuman et al., 1985).

Although few previous studies have comprehensively investigated lesbian and gay rights issues, the findings of this study were comparable to those of other studies in some respects. For example, questions relating to parenting issues and marriage yielded similar response patterns to those in other studies (e.g. Malaney et al., 1997). However, respondents in this study showed greater support than in other studies with regard to issues such as the extension of spousal benefits to lesbian and gay couples (e.g. see Eliason, 1996), and in allowing lesbians and gay men to serve in the military (Malaney et al., 1997). It may be that this too is due to the cultural differences discussed earlier, or as with attitudes, social sciences students (as employed in the present study) may be more supportive of lesbian and gay rights than students generally (cf. Schellenberg et al., 1999).

Considering the results for the ALTG and the human rights subscales together, these results are a cause for concern. Like the medical students in Klamen et al.'s (1999) sample, many students taking psychology courses are likely to become practitioners or policy makers in the future, working directly with, or influencing the lives of lesbians and gay men. The prevalence of negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men, particularly in regard to the lack of endorsement of lesbian and gay human rights, does not bode well: If lesbian and gay rights are not supported in principle, they are unlikely to be supported in practice. Our

attention might therefore turn to how we might improve the attitudes of psychology students in relation to lesbian and gay issues.

Psychology students often receive little (if any) exposure to lesbian and gay issues in their courses, and are therefore not well prepared to become practitioners working with, or on behalf of, lesbians and gay men (e.g. see Buhrke, 1989a; Kitzinger, 1990; Pilkington & Cantor, 1996). As many lesbian and gay psychologists (e.g. Allen, 1995; Cain, 1996; Eliason, 1996; Kitzinger, 1989) have highlighted, lesbian and gay male invisibility perpetuates negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay men, and breeds ignorance about their issues, needs, and concerns. It is therefore important that heterosexual students (and those who teach them) are encouraged to challenge their own negative attitudes, and to explore the ways in which these might prevent them from being ethically sound practitioners. Consequently, lesbian and gay issues could more frequently be made an integral part of the curriculum, through exposure to lesbian and gay perspectives in the classroom (e.g. see Burhke, 1989b; Chng & Moore, 1991; Wells, 1989), by inviting lesbian and gay speakers (e.g. see Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Geasler, Croteau, Heineman, & Edlund, 1995; Long, 1996), through provision of lesbian and gay resources (e.g. see Long, 1996; Schreier, 1995), the establishment and enforcement of anti-discrimination and human rights policies (see Eliason, 1996; Travers & Schneider, 1996), and education in human rights. The importance of measures such as these is one important strategy in promoting positive social change in attitudes towards lesbians and gay men, and in support for lesbian and gay human rights.

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