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# Explaining Comfort with Homosexuality in Rural America

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**ABSTRACT.** While recent research has explored the determinants of homophobia in urban settings, few have looked at the perception of homosexuals in rural communities. This research fills this gap by exploring the ways in which Central Appalachians feel about homosexuality. In doing so, the impact of interpersonal contact with a homosexual as well as the factors of gender, age, religious beliefs, gender role prescriptions and fear of AIDS are identified through a multivariate analysis of 123 college students. In the end, the role of homosexual peers is emphasized, as are the effects of the perceived cause of homosexuality, and the anxieties over AIDS. Finally after some stipulations about methodological limitations, this work offers some suggestions as to how practitioners and social work educators can use this study to counter the homophobic ideas that are prevalent in rural Americans. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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Just as any other stigmatized group, homosexuals routinely face vindictive stereotypes and discrimination. Our language is filled with derogatory terms referring to homosexuals. Gays and lesbians also face institutionalized biases in societal organizations since they have been denied jobs and housing purely on the basis of their sexual orientation. They also cannot publicly join the military nor legally marry, and the official arm of the mental health establishment labeled homosexuality as a psychiatric disorder until 1973 (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2001). Likewise, homosexuals frequently experience physical displays of homophobia since law-enforcement authorities tallied 1,102 hate crimes based on sexual orientation in 1997 (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999).

This study addresses the issues of homophobic sentiments in the thoughts of Central Appalachian college students. When using the term homophobia, we mean the irrational "hatred, fear, or dislike of homosexuals and bisexuals" (Morales, 1995). Public opinion polls suggest that such thoughts are prevalent throughout the United States. For example, results from an early 1990s survey show that 71% of the people interviewed felt that sexual relation between adults of the same sex was always wrong, while 40% indicated that a gay man should not be allowed to teach in college (Davis & Smith, 1991).

While most adults in the United States still hold negative attitudes toward homosexual behavior, poll data show that attitudes have become slightly more favorable over the past three decades (Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Yang, 1997; Loftus, 2001). For example, whereas at least two-thirds of respondents to the General Social Survey (GSS) considered homosexual behavior "always wrong" in the 1970s and 1980s, that figure declined to 56% by 1996 (Yang, 1997). Thus, most of the modest moves toward greater tolerance occurred in the 1990s.

While research has established that many Americans continue to embrace many facets of homophobia, much of the quantitative studies have primarily focused on urban samples. In realizing the extent of anti-homosexual sentiments may vary along the urban-rural continuum, this study explores these ideas within a rural Eastern Kentucky context. In doing so, this research can see if there is greater amount of homophobia in rural contexts and if the many predictor variables in urban settings are applicable to college students in rural settings.

All in all, this work would be valuable to social workers and other audiences. As Van Soest (1996) and others have pointed out, both NASW and CSWE argue that social workers should work against policies and habits that discriminate against gays and lesbians. Subsequently, social work educators can use this information in their efforts of creating a greater tolerance among BSW and MSW students. In turn, this tolerance can lessen the types of feelings and worldviews that interfere with effective evaluation, casework, counseling and advocacy (Hayes & Gelso, 1993; O'Hare et al., 1996; Berkman & Zinberg, 1997). Moreover, since social workers have an imperative to sensitize clients, co-workers and the general populace about gay issues, practitioners can use this information in making interventions that counter homophobia in rural communities.

### ***THE DETERMINANTS OF HOMOPHOBIA***

Many qualitative pieces have shown that being gay in rural America is especially difficult (i.e., Bell & Valentine, 1995; McCarthy, 2000; Boulden, 2001). The few quantitative studies on this topic have found that living in rural areas contributes to higher levels of sexual prejudice towards homosexuals (Levitt & Klassen, 1974; Dhooper, Royse, & Tran, 1987; Pratte, 1993; Herek, 1994; Yoder & Preston, 1997; Wills & Crawford, 2000; Herek, 2002). For example, a national study found that farmers were more likely to think that homosexuality was "immoral" (Loftus, 2001) and a study of Kentuckians found that 35% of the city dwellers, 20% of small towners and less than 15% of ruralites thought homosexuality should be considered a legitimate alternative lifestyle (Doopher & Royse, 1989). While it seems that living in rural settings can sway a person's inclinations, it seems unwise and reductionistic to assume that this is the only cause of homophobic feelings.

Individuals who have personal interactions with homosexuals tend to have more positive views of homosexuality (Gentry, 1987; Whitely, 1990; O'Hare et al., 1996; Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Estrada & Weiss, 1999; Wills & Crawford, 2000). For example, Lance (1987) found that only 18% of students who spoke regularly with gays felt uncomfortable around homosexuals, while 61% of students who lacked such opportunities were very nervous in the presence of homosexuals (Lance, 1987). Similarly, Schope and Eliason (2000) found that having a gay friend or gay acquaintance made people less likely to laugh at an anti-gay joke. Other studies suggest that homophobia lessens after prolonged exchanges

with homosexuals (Basow & Johnson, 2000), while some suggest that a brief contact with one homosexual can produce attitudinal change (Cotton-Huston & Waite, 2000).

Another line of research emphasizes the quality of homosexual interactions over the quantity of such interactions. When exploring different sorts of interpersonal contact, conversations with gay siblings or friends seem to have greater impacts than contact with gay strangers or acquaintances (Herek & Capitano, 1996; Anderson, 2002; Herek, 2002). For example, a study of social workers found that knowing gay peers lessened homophobia more than knowing homosexual bosses or clients (Berkman & Ziberg, 1997) and a study of Southerners found that the support of gay rights was only enhanced by a presence of gay relatives and not gay friends or neighbors (Wills & Crawford, 2000). Thus, these subtler works suggest that contact effects are greater when the exchange is between people who share greater emotional closeness and similar amounts of power.

The link between ascribed gender and homophobic attitudes is a bit murky. Most available data suggest that homophobia is more pronounced among heterosexual men (Chng & Moore, 1991; Green et al., 1993; Pratte, 1993; Black, 1994; Pratarelli & Donaldson, 1997; Herek, 1998; Kite & Whitley, 1998; Plugge-Foust, 2000; Herek, 2002). Although much of the research is based upon convenience samples of BSW students (O'Hare et al., 1996) and other undergraduates, this "gender gap" has been replicated in at least two national probability samples (Herek & Capitano, 1996; Loftus, 2001). However, there is other research, which suggests that gender doesn't have an effect on homophobic attitudes in the general population (Oliver & Hyde, 1993), small town Louisiana (Wills & Crawford, 2000) and MSW programs (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997).

Since most people view homosexuality as a violation of traditional gender roles, those who cherish conventional prescriptions tend to abhor homosexuality. Subsequently researchers like Basow and Johnson (2000) have observed that a general acceptance of gender equality is usually linked to lower levels of anger towards homosexuals (Stark, 1991; Thompson, Grisanti, & Pleck, 1985; Weinberger & Millham, 1979; Herek, 2002). Moreover, people who desire a big distinction between the genders, and feel insecure about their ability to live up to the stereotypical images of femininity and masculinity, are the people who seem most bothered by homosexuality (Stark, 1991). Thus, Herek (1986) found that men who worry about being unable to live up to the social pressures of being tough and seducing women are more likely to

scapegoat gay men. Or in other words, men who internalized the machismo ethic, but doubt their ability to be macho enough, are prone to reaffirming their male identity by verbally disparaging gay men who supposedly lack the right qualities of masculinity.

While homophobia was around before the known existence of AIDS, many researchers suggest that homophobia is exasperated when people link the spread of AIDS to homosexuality (Marsiglio, 1993; Yoder & Preston, 1997; Waldner et al., 1999). Some researchers argue that heterosexuals feel cheated that tax dollars go for a "gay disease," while others suggest that young men resent homosexuals for supposedly starting a disease that disrupts their ability to have "condom-free" sex.

Some studies suggest that people are less likely to think homosexuality is deviant if they consider homosexuality a natural part of life (attribution theory holds that people who are perceived as causing their own stigmata will be evaluated more harshly than people who got the stigmata due to biology, luck or accident). Herek and Capitanio (1995) found that those who felt that homosexuality is purely voluntary held more negative attitudes than those who did not and a study from Louisiana found that respondents were more likely to think that AIDS is curse to gay people when they thought homosexuality was a choice (Wills & Crawford, 2000). Likewise, Eliason (1995) found that students from Sweden and the United States were less homophobic when they thought homosexuals were "born that way" and Midwestern students generally detested gays when they thought homosexuality was a controllable state (Whitely, 1990).

With some educational settings trying to counteract the trends towards homophobia, the effectiveness of these interventions is unclear (Harbeck & Uribe, 1992). General measures of years schooling sometimes show a "liberalizing" effect (Loftus, 2001) and sometimes do not (Anderson, 2002). Similarly, educational programs that mostly consist of providing written materials have had mixed results. One study found that reading articles on the biological aspects of homosexuality changed student ideas (Piskur & Degelman 1992), while others found that the act of simply reading educational literature on homosexuals had no impact upon the acceptance of homosexuality (Pratarelli & Donaldson, 1997; Cotton-Huston & Waite, 2000). Conversely, many studies find that taking a semester-long course on gay or lesbian issues can have a positive outcome. Among the general collegiate populace, classes that have class discussions, films and factual information on gay matters usually lessen antipathy towards gays (Bean et al., 1989; Wells, 1991). Among social work students, some studies have found a significant improvement in the

attitudes of students towards lesbians and gay men after completion of a class on sexuality (Cramer et al., 1994; Ben-Ari, 1998) or after passing an introductory social work course (Royse & Riffe, 1999).

As universities might push students to greater acceptance of homosexuality, certain religious institutions might have the opposite effects (Yoder & Preston, 1997; Cotton-Huston & Waite, 2000; Wills & Crawford, 2000). A direct correlation has been found between the frequency of church attendance and contempt of homosexuals. That is, people who attend religious services frequently are more likely to be homophobic (Bouton et al., 1989; Koch, Preston, Young, & Wang, 1991; Sneddon & Kremer, 1992; Fisher et al., 1994; Cramer, 1997; Herek & Glunt, 1998; Estrada & Weiss, 1999; Herek, 2002).

Also, many seem to base their sexuality opinions upon their interpretations of the Bible and other religious texts. Research has found that people with a religious fundamentalist orientation were significantly more likely to express negative views (Herek & Glunt, 1993; Fisher et al., 1994; Loftus, 2001), as were people who had a literalist approach to the bible (Seltzer, 1992; Green, Dixon, & Gold-Neil, 1993; Marsiglio, 1993). In other research, it has been found that many conservative Christians express their version of righteousness by showing their disdain for homosexuals (Lugg, 1998; Schope & Eliason, 2000; Plugge-Foust, 2000)

## METHODS

### *Sample*

To gather the data, this study conveniently drew upon the students at our home institution. Being a regional university in Eastern Kentucky, almost all of the undergraduate population is white (95.2% of the 8,000 students are Euro-American and 4.3% are African-American). Moreover, many of the students are first generation college students (only 7% of surrounding counties have adults who have bachelor's degrees) and there is a noticeable contingency of older returning students (24% of the students are over 25 years old). Finally, a large percentage of the students grew up in economically distressed communities. The university's most serviced counties have per capita incomes around \$11,000, and poverty rates above 35% (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 1994; Rural Development Working Groups, 1995).

Data were collected through convenience sample of students who were attending five sorts of classes—College Algebra, English Composition, Introduction to Psychology, United States Government, and Fine Art classes. These classes were selected since they contained a wide range of students from different majors.

### ***Procedure***

The anonymous surveys were administered during the fall semester of 2001. They were distributed during the first fifteen minutes of class. No compensation was offered for their participation in the study. Students were informed that completing the survey was strictly voluntary; their answers would be anonymous, and they could discontinue participation at any time. A total of 135 surveys was completed, of which only 123 were used for analysis as others had incomplete data.

### ***Measurement***

To study homophobia, we explored the issue of comfort with homosexuals in public settings. To measure this level of comfortableness, we borrowed five questions from the Index of Homosexuality (Hudson & Ricketts, 1992). The first three questions highlighted a low level of public discomfort with homosexuals: “I would enjoy attending social functions where homosexuals are present,” “I would feel comfortable going to a gay bar,” and “I would feel at ease talking with a homosexual person at a party.” The last two items displayed a high level of discomfort with homosexuals: “I would be upset if I learned my doctor was a homosexual” and “It would bother me if a person of the same sex found me attractive.” We were able to include these five items in an index due to a high level of parallel reliability (Cronbach’s alpha of .86).

Our first independent variable dealt with geographical residence. In responding to the question, “Where did you spend most of your youth?” we created the dummy index of rural = 1 and the other = 0. Likewise, gender was coded as female = 1 and male = 0.

To measure interpersonal contact we created a list of eight different types of acquaintances (similar to Schope & Eliason, 2000; Cotton-Huston & Waite, 2000; Herek, 2002). The eight specific sorts of relationships were: knowing homosexual co-workers, siblings, best friends, other family members, school acquaintances, professors, church members and mother. Respondents were asked to check yes or



no as to whether they knew someone who was homosexual in such statuses.

To measure the variable fear of AIDS, we developed the statement: "The AIDS epidemic is due to homosexuals." We looked at traditional gender roles via the single item: "Mothers with young children in the house should not work." To measure perceived cause of homosexuality, we formed the statement, "People are born as homosexuals." To measure the impact of education material, we asked, "Have you ever obtained information through class or another source pertaining to the act of homosexuality?" Possible responses were yes or no, 1 = Yes and 0 = No.

For the independent variable religious attendance, we asked each respondent to describe his or her attendance at a religious activity in the past year. In a five-point scale, people who said they went to church several times a week were given a 5, while those who never attended were given a zero.

Finally, we explored the concept of biblical literalism. Borrowing the question from Loftus (2001) we asked: "What is your opinion about the Bible?" In coding the responses we decided that everybody who answered "The Bible is the word of God, and should be taken literally word for word" were going to be deemed literalists. The responses about the importance of human interpretations of the Bible were considered non-literalists.

## *FINDINGS*

### *Descriptive Results*

To explore the amount of homophobia in our sample, Table 1 contains the actual items in our index. As a whole, none of the items showed a great preponderance of students who were comfortable with homosexuals in public settings. Only the item, "I would feel at ease talking with a homosexual person at a party," displayed a slight skewing in the positive direction (mean = 3.268 and 49% Agree and 39% Disagree). Two of the five items had somewhat symmetrical distributions with a light gravitation towards discomfort. For example, 38% of the students indicated that they would not "enjoy attending social functions" with homosexuals, while 30% of the students indicated that they would. Likewise, 43% of the students would be upset if they realized their doctor was gay/lesbian, while 35% would not be bothered. Finally, two items left the vast majority of the students nervous. Sixty-nine percent

TABLE 1. Univariate Statistics: Comfort with Homosexuals Index

Item	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.
I would enjoy attending social functions where homosexuals are present.	10.6	20.3	30.9	17.9	20.3	2.829	1.266
I would feel comfortable going to a gay bar.	7.3	15.4	8.1	13.8	55.3	2.057	1.387
I would feel at ease talking with a homosexual person at a party.	22.8	27.6	20.3	12.2	17.1	3.268	1.391
I would be upset if I learned my doctor was a homosexual.	26.8	14.6	22.8	24.4	11.4	2.789	1.375
It would bother me if a person of the same sex found me attractive.	8.1	16.3	21.1	15.4	39.0	2.39	1.359

of the students feel uneasy “going to a gay bar,” while a person of the “same sex finding them attractive” bothers 54% of the students.

In making sense of these data, it is clear that about one-third of the students always feel uncomfortable around gays and slightly less than one-fourth of the students are always fine with homosexuality. For the rest of the sample, comfort levels seem dependent on the issue of assumed heterosexual hegemony. That is, a large segment of students are somewhat relaxed with homosexuals at social functions that are dominated by “straights.” Conversely, these same students are much less comfortable with settings that are explicitly seen as a “homosexual domain.” Thus, the issue of comfort seems closely connected to issues of power. Most students are ambivalent or mildly hostile towards homosexuals in settings that have only a few “token” homosexuals. Nevertheless, for these mildly homophobic students, the notion of being in a situation that circumvents the heterosexual privilege is very unsettling. Thus, a large section of the students can tolerate homosexuals as long as heterosexuality is prioritized and homosexuality is considered to have a subservient or invisible role in the group.

### ***Explanatory Results***

After elaborating these general patterns of comfort, we wanted to identify the factors that drive such sentiments. First we ran simple

correlations to see if there is a bivariate relationship between each independent variable and the dependent variable. Next we ran on OLS regression in order to control for issues of spuriousness and mitigating factors (see column 3 of Table 2 for the standardized betas for predictor variables that were significant in the bivariate calculations).

Table 2 presents the associations between the independent variables and the comfort index. When exploring the simple two variable associations, we found that eleven of the sixteen variables were statistically significant (column 2 of Table 2). Of the seven variables that were sig-

TABLE 2. Bivariate Correlations and Multiple Regression for Comfort with Homosexuals

Item	r	Beta
Lesbian/gay contact		
Siblings	.283**	.202**
Mother	-.022	
Other family member	.170*	.002
Best friend	.463***	.206**
School acquaintance	.496***	.338**
Professor	.340***	.094
Co-worker	.299***	.061
Church member	.107	
Biblical literalism	-.116*	.079
Gender (Female)	.295***	.001
Religious attendance	-.130	
Rural childhood	-.206*	-.016
Traditional gender roles	.012	
Fear of AIDS	-.387***	-.188**
Perceived cause (choice)	-.427***	-.281**
Information on homosexuals	.083	
R-Squared	-	.572
F- Score	-	13.147***

Note: Beta is the standardized regression coefficient and significance is determined through t-values.

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

nificant at the .001 alpha, three showed moderately strong relationships with comfort (homosexual school acquaintances, homosexual best friends, and the perceived cause of homosexuality) and four showed modest correlations (fear of AIDS, homosexual professors, homosexual co-worker and being female). There were some significant but weak relationships between having a homosexual sibling or extended family member, and being from a rural setting. Finally, as having a literal interpretation of the Bible showed the last weak but significant relationship with homophobia.

While interaction with homosexuals generally enhanced the comfort levels, interaction with homosexual church members or homosexual parents presented no such effects. Likewise, attending religious services, holding traditional gender creeds and gaining factual knowledge had no noticeable impact.

In coming to some initial conclusions for these simple correlations, it is clear that students are more comfortable with homosexuals when they know gays in the same age group (acquaintances, friends, co-workers and siblings). Conversely, knowing homosexuals from other age groupings seem important but less salient (professor, mother, and church member). On religious matters, people who take a conservative stance to the Bible are slightly more homophobic while attending religious activities or talking with homosexual congregationists presents no such effects. Finally, being a woman is more important than what a person thinks about women's work roles; the students from rural background were more uncomfortable with gays as were people who considered homosexuality a controllable choice.

To explore the direct impact of these variables when controlling for the other crucial variables, we ran an OLS multiple regression for the 11 significant variables (column 3). As expected, some of the variables retained their statistical significance. Three of the gay interaction variables remained significant. The recognition of homosexual schoolmates maintained the highest beta coefficient while homosexual best friends and siblings presented a modest impact. Conversely the scores of homosexual co-workers, professors and extended family members, fell out of the significance realm. Thus, it seems that the influence of homosexual contacts vary according to the type of interpersonal relationship. Contact with homosexual peers seem much more pivotal than contact with gays from other social groupings or professions. Both of the demographic factors of gender or ruralness lost their significance, while the fear of AIDS and the perceived causes of homosexuality remained important factors. Thus, it would be safe to assume that being a woman

or living outside of a large metropolitan centers does not directly influence how comfortable one is towards homosexuality in our sample. Rather, any difference along gender and rural-urban lines is actually driven by the fact that women and people who live in the city, are those people who have more contact with homosexual peers, are less afraid of AIDS, and think that homosexuality is caused by biological factors.

While only five of our independent variables were able to maintain significance in a multivariate analysis, the cumulative effects of these factors were quite impressive. That is, the r-square was at .572 and the f-score was at 13.147 (significant at the .001 alpha).

### *DISCUSSION*

This study reveals that homophobia is still common among Central Appalachian college students. With four of the five comfort items presenting means under three 3, the majority of this sample reported discomfort around homosexual persons. However, this comfort level was not constant since the degree of unease fluctuated. With about one-fourth of the sample feeling calm around gays in all settings, the rest of the students felt most relaxed when talking to homosexuals in a "heterosexual" party. On the other hand, the level of anxiety skyrocketed when students were hypothetically placed in settings that had explicit gay connotations (being attractive to person of the same sex or going to a gay bar). Thus like the work of Engstrom and Sedlock (1997), who found that male students were most irritated by being invited to a gay bar or observing homosexuals holding hands, our data suggest that homophobia becomes heightened when straights are in settings that require a public recognition of homosexuality. Or stated otherwise, students are less comfortable with homosexuality when gays are no longer closeted and heterosexual universality seems uncertain or contested.

The results of our study indicate that interpersonal contact with gays or lesbians is connected to comfortableness with homosexuality. However, influence of contact with homosexuals varies along different sorts of interpersonal relationships. Interacting with people of the same age and social status seems to have the biggest impact: best friend, school acquaintance and siblings. Moreover, knowing homosexuals in the more formal roles of professor and co-worker had no impact in the multiple regression and the very informal role of mother had no impact either.

As expected, respondents who felt that homosexuality is a choice proved to be less comfortable with homosexuals. This means that attribution theory presents some merits since affective responses to homosexuality were moderated by the perceived controllability of sexual identities.

Although gender and gender roles were not significant in the multivariate analysis, we think future research should retain these variables. It is possible that gender roles do not really influence homophobic sentiments for all Americans (Basow & Johnson, 2000; Cotton-Huston & Waite, 2000) or that gender simply works differently in the subcultures of rural Central Appalachia. But, without a comparison group of students from other regions, this conclusion is still debatable. Likewise, our single item on gender roles could have focused on the wrong dimension of gender roles (i.e., attitudes toward mother work expectations may be less pertinent than images of female sexuality). Therefore, different sample designs or more comprehensive gender role indexes could show that gender roles are crucial homophobia regardless of geographical region.

Being from a rural setting produced no impact in the full model, but our findings may not be conclusive on this matter. All of the students of this study chose to attend a rural college so there may be issues of selectiveness. That is, our study contains rural students who wanted to stay rural and urban students who moved to a rural commuter college. Thus, future research would benefit from adding urban colleges to make a broader sample.

When dealing with the notion of Bible beliefs, the simple correlation found a significant negative relationship between literalism and homophobia. However, with this variable losing significance in the multivariate context, the figures suggest that the other significant variables were more important than conservative religious beliefs. While the role of fundamentalism lost its significance in the multivariate context, we think it is wise to keep this factor in subsequent research. Since our sample size was relatively small and Appalachia has a strong "bible-belt" history, the lack of significance could have been due to relatively small number of non-fundamentalists in the sample.

Appalachians who fear the spread of AIDS also feel uncomfortable around homosexuals. The power of the relationship is probably due to the misconception that AIDS is primarily confined to a gay subculture and perhaps some students still believe that one catches HIV through meeting an infected person. Without any measures about insufficient knowledge of HIV or the trends of AIDS transmission to different

social groupings, we cannot determine the source of these fears. Similarly, our sampling frame cannot ascertain if AIDS fears are more rampant in the hollers of Eastern Kentucky than other parts of the US.

In addition to these four suggestions mentioned for future research, we believe other research designs would improve upcoming research. First, since the extent of homophobia can be different for gays and lesbians, future measure ought to separate homosexuals into two different categories. This will help to determine if there is more homophobia is stronger when directed at gay men. Second, the use of cross-sectional data place limits on temporal-ordering matters (i.e., people who like homosexuals probably try to initiate more contact with homosexuals). Third, while it is easier to sample college students, this approach limits the external validity of the research (people who attend college are different from people who do not). Thus a national random sample of all adults might be more representative of the country's comfort level with homosexuals (it will cover a wider range of ages, education levels, incomes, and races).

Even with some methodological limitations, this work provides some crucial insights. This study shows that homophobic attitudes are mutable since certain social environments inspire or mitigate such feelings. In turn, social work educators should try to construct formal and informal settings that reinforce social tolerance. While offering factual information to students had no direct impact on comfort with homosexuals, we still think it is important to keep sexual orientation material in the curriculum. Since the lack of educational influence could be due to a weakness in our measures, future studies might find that homophobic notions are lessened through different pedagogical approaches (through a didactic lecture, discussion groups, professors disclosures of their sexual orientation, etc.). Moreover, with the fear of AIDS showing such strong effects, it seems clear that teachers should take efforts to alleviate such impressions. However, this study clearly suggests that lived experiences are probably a better teacher than classroom events. Thus, campus leaders should try to create informal settings that facilitate greater interactions between heterosexual and homosexual students. Be it in classroom experiences or extracurricular events, we would have less homophobic peoples if society establishes encounters between straight and gay folks. Additionally, leaders of other societal institutions would do well to facilitate such interactions if they wish to reduce discrimination and prejudice.

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