

EXPLAINING COMFORT WITH HOMOSEXUALITY AMONG SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS: THE IMPACT OF DEMOGRAPHIC, CONTEXTUAL, AND ATTITUDINAL FACTORS

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While recent research explores the determinants of homophobia among college students, only a few studies look at the perceptions of homosexuals among social work students. Unfortunately these rare studies generally present a modest list of predictor variables or small sample sizes. To address this gap, this research explores the ways in which undergraduate social work students ($N=748$) from 12 colleges feel about homosexuality. In doing so, the work initially delineates the extent to which future social workers feel comfortable being around gay and lesbian persons. The work then explores the impact of specific social statuses, educational processes, and ideological beliefs. In the end, the role of homosexual peers is emphasized, as are the effects of familial attitudes, the perceived cause of homosexuality, conservative religious maxims, traditional gender role beliefs, and anxieties over AIDS.

JUST AS ANY OTHER stigmatized group, homosexuals frequently face vindictive stereotypes and discrimination. Our language is filled with derogatory epithets about homosexuals, and gay-lesbian-transgendered-bisexual peoples are often chided for being emotionally unstable, promiscuous, self-indulgent, indecisive, and prone to pedophilia (throughout the article the acronym GLBT is used for gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgendered individuals). Moreover, this hostility and repulsion is pervasive enough to be given the term of "homophobia," defined by Morales (1995) as the irra-

tional "hatred, fear, or dislike of homosexuals and bisexuals" (p. 1089).

Gay men and lesbians also face institutionalized biases in societal organizations. They cannot publicly join the military nor legally marry, and the American Psychiatric Association labeled homosexuality as a psychiatric disorder until 1973. Likewise, homosexuals frequently experience violent manifestations of homophobia. In 1997 law-enforcement authorities tallied 1,102 hate crimes based on sexual orientation (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997), and up to 87% of gay

adults reported they have been verbally assaulted because of their sexual orientation (Berrill, 1990), while another 22% experienced physical cases of hate crimes (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999).

In recognizing the damaging and unjust outcomes of heterosexism, numerous social work organizations insist that social workers should confront all discrimination and biases against GLBT peoples (the first National Association of Social Workers' argument against homophobia was ratified in 1977). For example, the 1999 revised NASW *Code of Ethics* argues, "social workers should not practice, condone, facilitate, or collaborate with any form of discrimination on the basis of . . . sexual orientation" (Sec. 4.02). Additionally, NASW offers policy statements that recognize that homophobia can impede effective practice and explicitly insists that a client's sexual orientation should not interfere with services provided: "same-gender sexual orientations should be afforded the same respect and rights as opposite gender orientations" (NASW, 1997, p. 202).

While these stipulations rest in the official *Code of Ethics*, some studies suggest that segments of human service workers never fully integrate these principles into their own value systems (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Hardman, 1997; Liddle, 1999; O'Hare, Williams, & Ezoiviski, 1996; Ryan, Bredford, & Honnold, 1999; Walters, Simoni, & Horwath, 2001). This absence is notable because it seems unlikely that social workers may totally divorce their moral stances on sexuality from their day-to-day interactions with GLBT clients. In fact, numerous studies suggest that negative atti-

tudes and misinformation about homosexuals may seriously diminish a social worker's and counselor's ability to provide effective interventions for gay or lesbian clients (Barrett & McWhirter, 2002; Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Casas, Brady, & Ponterotto, 1983; Crawford, McCleod, Zamboni, & Jordan, 1999; Kriegstein, 2003; Mohr, Israel, & Sedlacek, 2001; O'Hare et al., 1996; Ryan, 2000; Saulnier, 2002; Wiener & Siegel, 1990). Moreover, any signs of homophobic sentiments are especially troublesome if quality interventions move beyond mere tolerance. That is, good practice with GLBT clients must go further than simply avoiding the most destructive and blatant forms of homophobia. Instead, better modalities ought to be grounded in strength perspectives that recognize, affirm, and support the identities, experiences, and rights of GLBT clients (Van Den Bergh & Crisp, 2000).

The ways homophobia may undermine practice are multifaceted and complicated. Biases may begin at intake because psychologists with homophobic leanings are less likely to accept gay or lesbian clients into their caseload (Crawford et al., 1999; Wiener & Siegel, 1990). Homophobic feelings seem to interfere with effective assessments of clients and the choice of appropriate treatment goals or counseling techniques (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Hayes & Gelso, 1993; O'Hare et al., 1996; Ryan, 2000). Hayes and Gelso (1993) found that counselors with homophobic tendencies are more likely to inhibit or discourage a gay client's explicit discussion of their sexual orientation. This avoidance technique in turn halts the discussion of crucial topics (e.g., responses to discrimination, the ramifications

of "being out," crucial information on support groups, legal issues or venues of political advocacy). However, the openness to discussions of sexuality among clinicians does not guarantee high-quality or empowering services. Casas et al. (1983) found that stereotypical beliefs about GLBT populations seem to hamper a psychologist's ability to remember information about their homosexual clients. Even more damning, some articles conclude that therapists who harbored homophobic thoughts were more likely to apply dysfunctional labels to their gay clients. A work by Mohr and his colleagues (2001) found that homophobic counselors were more likely to see low levels of psychosocial functioning and stereotypical "gay" problems among GLBT clients (too promiscuous, unable to handle issues of intimacy, etc.). Likewise, a study of psychology graduate students concluded that individuals with heterosexist inclinations were much less likely to find positive qualities in gay or lesbian clients (Barrett & McWhirter, 2002).

Assuming homophobia distorts ethical and competent social work practice, this study explores the issue of homophobia among future social workers. Using a sample of 748 social work students from 12 colleges, this study investigates the extent to which baccalaureate social work students feel comfortable in settings with "out" GLBT persons, as well as the variables that might influence these reactions. In doing so, we posed these questions: Are the ideals of social work, including respect for diversity and self-determination, generally reflected in minds of undergraduate social work students? If so, what are the factors that bring forth such sentiments?

Correlates of Homophobia in the Literature

Although there is an extensive social scientific literature on the predictors of homophobia for the general U.S. population, the empirical studies on homophobia among social workers is underdeveloped. Much of the research on social work students is descriptive in nature and the explanatory studies are limited by a small number of independent variables (Ben-Ari, 1998; Black, Oles, & Moore, 1996; Cluse-Tolar, Lambert, Ventura, & Pasupuleti, 2004; Dongvillo & Ligon, 2001; Krieglstein, 2003; Newman, Dannenflesr, & Benishek, 2002; Snively, Kreuger, Stretch, Watt, & Chandha, 2004; Sun, 2002; Yuen & Pardeck, 1998). Building on these works, we developed a wider set of predictor variables by synthesizing the findings from the fields of social work, sociology, psychology, and education. In taking the human ecological approach as a given, we assumed that numerous social systems modify and shape a person's thoughts and actions. Consequently, we drew upon the works that identify the types of social settings that seem to foster and maintain hostilities toward GLBT individuals.

Social Statuses and Homophobia

Greater levels of homophobia have often been linked to certain socio-demographic qualities. As one might expect, some studies suggest that being gay or lesbian leads to greater acceptance of homosexuality (Eliason & Hughes, 2004; Hardman, 1997; Newman et al., 2002). For example, one study of career counselors found that homosexual professionals

were more apt to discuss the complications of "passing" as a straight person and provide information on employers that provide benefits to same-sex spouses (Bieschke & Matthews, 1996).

The link between gender and homophobic attitudes is not so clear. Many national studies suggest that homophobia is more pronounced among heterosexual men (Chng & Moore, 1991; Green, Dixon, & Gold-Neil, 1993; King, 2001; Ohlander, Batalova, & Treas, 2005; Sittig-Cossmann, 2004). However, this gender gap may or may not exist in social work circles. A national study of master of social work students found females to be more supportive of homosexuals than males (Newman et al., 2002), as have some single-campus studies of social work students (Black, Bennett, Cramer, & Oles, 1999; Cluse-Tolar et al., 2004; Oles, Black, & Cramer, 1999; Snively et al., 2004). Conversely, other studies contend that gender does not drive homophobia among social workers (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Cramer, 1997; Green, 2005; Ryan, 2000; Sun, 2002).

The relationship between race/ethnicity and homophobia also presents contradictory results. Many public opinion studies find that African Americans and Latinos are slightly more homophobic than their White counterparts (Herek & Capitano, 1995; Loftus, 2001; Ohlander et al., 2005; Ryan, 2000; Schulte, 2002; Sittig-Cossmann, 2004). However, the relationship of race and homophobia among social workers is less conclusive. A multi-campus study of MSW students noted that African American respondents were more likely to express negative attitudes toward homosexuals (Newman et al., 2002), and a study of BSW students in Texas netted similar

results (Black et al., 1996). Conversely, a number of studies on social work students find that race failed to sway a general sense of homophobia (Cluse-Tolar et al., 2004; Green, 2005; Sun, 2002) or a reluctance to work with GLBT clients (Hardman, 1997; Oles et al., 1999).

Some quantitative studies insist that living in rural areas contributes to higher levels of prejudice toward homosexuals (Dhooper, Royse, & Tran, 1987; Herek, 2002b; Ohlander et al., 2005; Schulte, 2002; Snively et al., 2004; Wills & Crawford, 2000; Yoder & Preston, 1997). For example, a national study found that farmers were more likely to think that homosexuality was "immoral" (Loftus, 2001), and another study found that urbanites were twice as likely as their rural counterparts to consider homosexuality a legitimate lifestyle (Dhooper et al., 1987).

Contextual Factors and Homophobia

Residing in certain social networks and institutional milieux seems to inspire homophobic predispositions. A number of studies have found that individuals who regularly converse with homosexuals tend to have more positive views of homosexuality (Basow & Johnson, 2000; Cotton-Huston & Waite, 2000; Eliason & Hughes, 2004; Hewitt & Moore, 2002; Whitely, 1990; Wills & Crawford, 2000; Wood & Bartkowski, 2004). For example, Lance (1987) found that only 18% of students who spoke regularly with gay people felt uncomfortable around homosexuals, while 61% of students who lacked such opportunities were nervous in the presence of homosexuals. Studies also reveal that social workers employed in schools, mental health centers,

and settlement houses are less homophobic when they know gay or lesbian people (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Crawford et al., 1999; Krieglstein, 2003; O'Hare et al., 1996; Snively et al., 2004; Walters et al., 2001).

Some studies suggest that the influence of GLBT interactions on attitudes is more than a matter of quantity. When exploring different sorts of interpersonal contact, conversations with gay siblings or friends seem to have greater impacts than contact with homosexual parents, strangers, or acquaintances (Anderson, 2002; Barrett & McWhirter, 2002; Eldridge, Mack, & Swank, 2006; Herek, 1988, 2002a; Herek & Capitano, 1996). For example, a study of social workers found that knowing gay peers lessened homophobia more than knowing homosexual bosses or clients (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997), and having gay or lesbian friends was the biggest inspiration to work with gay and lesbian clients among BSW students (Oles et al., 1999). Thus, contact seems to create greater ramifications when participants share both emotional closeness and similar amounts of power.

In following this logic, it seems that people who have direct exchanges with gay men and lesbians seem to base their attitudes on experiences—and these personal experiences often refute the common stereotypes and clichés. Conversely, people who have little contact with GLBT persons may think of homosexuality in more abstract and symbolic terms (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993; Schulte, 2002; Sittig-Cossmann, 2004). In turn, seeing homosexuals as cultural representations can lead to expressions of polemical, hyperbolic, and self-righteous characterizations of GLBT persons. Such thinking may spring from a

lack of knowledge or a belief that one can lift his or her prestige by degrading homosexuals.

With this in mind, the way a person verbalizes thoughts and feelings on homosexuality may be as pivotal in shaping mindsets as talking with a GLBT person. Accordingly, hearing gay-friendly comments from family members and peers seems to lessen homophobia among college students.

In using social learning theory, some works find a high congruence between parental and child attitudes toward homosexuals (Kulik, 2004; Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993; Sigelman, Mukia, Woods, & Alfred, 1995). This line of research suggests that homophobic individuals are often raised by homophobic parents and surrounded by homophobic friends (Schulte, 2002; Sittig-Cossmann, 2004).

While college students are probably swayed by the sentiments of friends and family members, the college environment itself can be a socializing agent. Because the college experience and specific classes often demand that students think critically on moral issues, one might assume that college generally stimulates a "liberalizing effect." However, the ability of college curricula to lessen homophobia is far from clear. Broad measures of years of schooling sometimes find that juniors and seniors are less homophobic (Black et al., 1996; Cluse-Tolar et al., 2004; Eliason & Hughes, 2004; Hewitt & Moore, 2002; Krieglstein, 2003; Loftus, 2001; Ohlander et al., 2005; Yuen & Pardeck, 1998) and sometimes do not (Anderson, 2002; Ben-Ari, 1998; Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Ryan, 2000). Likewise, the effects of taking a semester-long course on gay or lesbian issues are not certain or universal. Among the general collegiate populace, classes that

have discussions, films, and factual information on gay matters usually lessen antipathy toward gay people (Bean, Keller, Newberg, & Brown, 1989; Wells, 1991). Among social work students, this conclusion is sometimes echoed, in that hostile and ambivalent attitudes toward lesbians and gay men are often eased after completion of a class on sexuality (Bassett & Day, 2003; Ben-Ari, 1998; Cramer, 1997; Oles et al., 1999) or after passing an introductory social work course (Royse & Riffe, 1999; Yuen & Pardeck, 1998). However, other works challenge this assertion, noting that a single social work class did not exert enough change capacity to meet statistical significance (Black et al., 1996; Crawford et al., 1999; Dongvillo & Ligon, 2001).

Homophobia and Attitudinal Frames

While certain demographic features and contextual settings may lead to homophobic sentiments, so might the adherence to certain ideological perspectives and attributional styles. In fact, cultural scripts may be the cornerstones of homophobia because they work as filters that help people organize and categorize incoming information on matters of sexuality.

Viewing homosexuality as a violation of or break with traditional gender roles and cherishing conventional prescriptions can influence opinions on homosexuality. For example, researchers like Basow and Johnson (2000) observed a link between a general acceptance of gender equality and lower levels of anger toward homosexuals. Moreover, people who desire strict gender boundaries, and want individuals to conform to stereotypical images of femininity and masculinity are often those who seem most bothered by

homosexuality (Eldridge et al., 2006; Green, 2005; Herek, 2002b; Schulte, 2002; Whitley, 2002).

Certain religious institutions might push their members into greater disdain of homosexuals (Cotton-Huston & Waite, 2000; Ryan, 2000; Wills & Crawford, 2000; Yoder & Preston, 1997). Some studies have identified a correlation between the frequency of church attendance and contempt of homosexuals (Cluse-Tolar et al., 2004; Cramer, 1997; Herek, 2002b; Ohlander et al., 2005). One possible reason for this contempt may be that regular congregants seem to base their sexuality opinions on the more conservative passages of the Bible and other religious texts. Likewise, when parishioners see religious scriptures in a fundamentalist or "literalist" light they are more likely to express negative views of homosexuality (Eliason & Hughes, 2004; Green et al., 1993; Herek & Glunt, 1993; Loftus, 2001; Marsiglio, 1993; Ohlander et al., 2005; Plugge-Foust, 2000; Schope & Eliason, 2000; Seltzer, 1992). Similarly, based on their studies, some authors assert that social workers are generally more homophobic when they highlight the importance in being religious (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Snively et al., 2004) or when they label themselves as conservative fundamentalists (Krieglstein, 2003; Newman et al., 2002).

Attribution theory holds that people who are perceived as causing their own hardships will be evaluated more harshly than people who came by their stigma as a perceived result of biology, luck, or accident. In support of this theory, some studies suggest that people consider homosexuality as less deviant if they think it is a "natural" part of life

(Eldridge et al., 2006; Furnham & Taylor, 1990; Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2002; Hewitt & Moore, 2002; Schulte, 2002; Tygart, 2000; Whitely, 1990; Wood & Bartkowski, 2004). Likewise, Eliason (1995) found that students from Sweden and the United States were less homophobic when they thought homosexuals were "born that way." Furthermore, other studies conclude that college students were less likely to befriend a lesbian mother when they thought homosexuality was controllable and a self-selected status (King, 2001) or that people were more homophobic when they thought homosexuality was a purely voluntary choice (Herek & Capitanio, 1995; Wills & Crawford, 2000).

Finally, while homophobia thrived before the existence of AIDS, many researchers suggest that homophobia is exasperated when people link the spread of AIDS to homosexuality (Herek & Capitanio, 1999; Marsiglio, 1993; Waldner, Sikka, & Salman, 1999; Yoder & Preston, 1997). These researchers argue that heterosexuals feel cheated and indignant when their tax dollars go for a supposed "gay disease," while others suggest that straight men resent homosexuals for supposedly starting a disease that disrupts their ability to have "condom-free" sex. Regardless of the specific reasons, people who follow the irrational panic of attaching AIDS to homosexuals seem to also want to keep a great social distance from gay and lesbian peoples.

This literature review suggests that negative reactions to homosexuals can spring from many sources. Because these sentiments can emerge from a confluence of factors, the following analysis will focus on demographic factors (sexual orientation, gender, racial sta-

tus, rural residency), straight-gay interactions (contact with homosexual siblings, friends, schoolmates), homophobic sentiments of close referents (extent of homophobia among parents, friends, and the social work profession), the impact of educational environments (class on homophobia, year of study) and influence of certain worldviews (gender role prescriptions, religious beliefs, the etiology of homosexuality, fear of AIDS).

Method

Sample

This article draws on the attitudes of undergraduate students from 12 social work education programs. In seeking a geographical diversity, we created a stratified sample of all accredited BSW programs in the United States (the list of accredited BSW programs came from the Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors). In doing so, we first placed the name of all undergraduate social work programs into one of nine geographical regions identified by the U.S. Census Bureau. Next, we randomly selected two colleges from each geographical subset (this meant we had the names of 18 colleges as possible sample units).

Faculty members from each of the 18 universities were then contacted. In trying to find students who were starting and ending their undergraduate social work education, we communicated with professors who facilitated the first and last classes in their program's social work curriculum. This means we targeted professors who taught "introductory" courses that mostly had sophomores and juniors and "practice" and "field" seminars that

contained seniors (in no college was this the same instructor).

Every selected professor then received e-mails and phone calls that solicited their participation. Although several instructors from every college were contacted, only professors from 14 colleges agreed to distribute surveys in their classes. We then mailed a batch of surveys based on the estimated enrollment of the professor's classes. Out of these 14 institutions, we received 748 completed and usable surveys from 12 colleges (a response rate of 83% for 892 surveys that were mailed to the professors from the 14 colleges).

The sample was comprised mostly of females (85%, $n=635$). Most of the students were of the traditional age group for undergrads (mean age was 24.1 years and roughly three fourths of the students were between 18 and 24 years old), and the sample had a majority of students from European American ancestries (73%, $n=546$, European American; 12%, $n=90$, African American; 6%, $n=45$, Latino/a; 3%, $n=22$, Asian American; 1%, $n=6$, Native American). The sample had a very middle-class composition, as 31% ($n=232$) of the students came from families that earned between \$30,000 and \$70,000 a year, while an annual family income of \$71,000 to \$100,000 was observed for 15% ($n=112$) of the students (conversely 5%, $n=37$, of the students came from families with incomes under \$10,000 while 4%, $n=30$, resided in families with incomes that surpassed \$150,000). Along the urban-rural divide, the sample was slightly skewed to rural life. Twenty-six percent ($n=194$) of the students said they spent most of their youth in towns under 19,000 inhabitants, and 13% ($n=97$) said they had rural back-

grounds (only 17%, $n=127$, came from large cities and 16%, $n=118$, were suburbanites).

Among issues of sexualities, 24 of the respondents identified themselves as completely homosexual and 628 suggested they were completely heterosexual. The other 91 students placed themselves in middle gradations of the straight-gay continuum. Among issues of homosexual contacts, about 17 reported they had a gay or lesbian parent while 37 had homosexual siblings. Interactions with gay or lesbians were much higher, with 37% ($n=276$) of the students indicating that they had homosexual friends and 67% ($n=502$) of the respondents knew a homosexual classmate. Finally, access to class content on homophobia was common, as 72% ($n=538$) of the students had at least one college course that discussed prejudice against homosexuals.

Measures

Most quantitative studies on social workers measure homophobia through Herek's (1994) Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men Scale (ATLG) (i.e., Bassett & Day, 2003; Black et al., 1996; Cramer, 1997). While the ATLG scale highlights global resentments and hostility toward homosexuals, its emphasis on abstract values fails to situate the emergence of homophobia within face-to-face interactions. In trying to understand how people respond to the presence of homosexuals in "real-life" scenarios, we borrowed five questions from the Index of Homophobia (Hudson & Ricketts, 1992). This index focuses on issues of desired social distance because it taps the ease or trepidation of being around homosexuals. In doing so, the items concentrate on the affective responses of warmth, disgust, or

aversion toward settings that contain gay or lesbian participants. To us, this scale is a closer approximation of how social work students might treat GLBT clients because it centers on a person's comfort with homosexuals in public settings (see also Dongvillo & Ligon, 2001; King, 2001; Snively et al., 2004).

The first three questions of our comfort-with-homosexuals index dealt with low levels of public discomfort: "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" (5=strongly agree). 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" (1=strongly agree). In creating an additive index, higher scores indicate greater levels of comfort while lower scores suggested greater degrees of dread, annoyance, and consternation (Cronbach's $\alpha=.872$).

Our initial independent variables dealt with demographic factors. To see if somebody considered themselves gay or lesbian we asked respondents to place themselves on a 5-point continuum of completely homosexual to completely heterosexual (Bieschke & Matthews, 1996; Whitely, 2002). Gender, race, and marital status were treated as dummy variables in which female, White, and married were coded as 1 while other responses got zero. In classifying a rural background, respondents who spent most of their youth in a rural setting or small town were deemed rural, while others who grew up in mid-sized towns and large metropolitan areas were

treated as urban. Age had an open-ended question and we kept the data in interval form.

To measure interpersonal contact we created a list of different sorts of homosexual acquaintances (similar to Herek, 2002b; Schope & Eliason, 2000; Wood & Bartkowski, 2004). Respondents were asked to check yes or no as to whether they knew someone who was a homosexual brother, sister, mother, father, close friend, or school acquaintance.

In the analysis, most types of relationships were kept as single items, such as having a gay or lesbian close friend or school acquaintance. The sibling and parental contacts became composite scores (brother+sister, mother+father).

To address issues of content in the socialization process we asked respondents if they perceived homophobic sentiments by immediate significant others and the social work community (similar to Herek, 1988). In concentrating on parental attitudes we proposed: "My mother believes homosexuality is wrong" and "My father believes that homosexuality is wrong" (Cronbach's $\alpha=.744$). The role of negative assessments of peers was tested through "My friends are generally accepting of homosexuals," while an appraisal of social worker values read "Most social workers think that homosexuality is acceptable" (responses were coded on a 5-point Likert scale with 5=strongly agree for the parental homophobia and 1=strongly agree for the friend and social worker homophobia variables).

To discern the impact of educational experiences we created two variables. Regarding curriculum matters we asked: "Have any

of your college courses discussed prejudice against homosexuals?" (1=yes). The accumulative effect of taking upper division social work classes was handled through a student's location in the standard class ranking schema (4=senior).

The final set of variables dealt with issues of beliefs and values. We explored traditional gender conceptions via a four-item scale that combined items from the Attitudes Toward Sexuality Inventory (Patton & Mannison, 1995) and the Attitudes Toward Family Life Scale (Lye & Biblarz, 1993). Some items dealt with approval of conventional divisions of labor: "It is much better for everyone in a family if the father earns the main living and mother takes care of the home and family" (5=strongly agree). Other items dealt with male patriarchy in the realm of sexuality: "Women should have fewer sexual partners than men" and "If a guy spends a lot of money on a girl he has the right to expect a few sexual favors" (Cronbach's $\alpha=.669$). To capture conservative religious slants we wrote "Religious teaching against homosexuality seems reasonable" (5=strongly agree). To measure perceived causes of homosexuality and controllability, our items focused on biological etiologies and whether a person can change or modify their sexual orientation (King, 2001; Whitely, 1990). In doing so, we modified three statements that originated in the works of Tygart (2000) and Wood and Bartkowski (2004): "Male homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in men" (1=strongly agree), "Homosexuality is a lifestyle, people choose to be homosexual" (5=strongly agree), and "Homosexuality is caused by biological forces beyond the per-

son's control" (Cronbach's $\alpha=.802$). To measure the fear of AIDS, we offered the statement: "I would feel comfortable providing social work services to a person living with AIDS" (1=strongly agree).

Results

Descriptive Results

In displaying the amount of homophobia in our sample, Table 1 contains the actual items in our index. In the aggregated form, the distribution of every item tilted toward greater comfort, as the majority of responses fell on the comfort side (means fell between 4.09 and 3.07). However, these means did not indicate pervasive or universal levels of comfort because every item had a considerable block of students who were unable to confirm a sense of comfort around homosexuals (the undecideds secured between 10% to 31% for every measure, and the discomfort categories fell between 14% and 27%).

When exploring single measures, two of the five items showed greater degrees of comfort and consensus. Almost four out of five ($n=600$) students felt secure chatting with gays or lesbians at social gatherings while only 14% ($n=102$) would be upset if they had a gay or lesbian medical doctor. Nevertheless, such overwhelming majorities were not present for the other prompts. Only a slim majority would enjoy a social event with gay or lesbian participants (53%, $n=392$) or be unvexed by a same-sex crush (52%, $n=384$). Finally, the situation of entering a gay bar had no real tendencies since the distribution almost formed a symmetrical shape (44%, $n=339$, would be comfortable; 37%, $n=279$, would not).

TABLE 1. Univariate Statistics for Comfort With Homosexuals Reported by Social Work Students (N=748)

Item	Strongly Agree		Agree		Undecided		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		M	SD
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
	I would enjoy attending social functions where homosexuals are present	156	21	236	32	228	31	68	9	48		
I would feel comfortable going to a gay bar	142	19	197	26	119	16	129	17	150	20	3.07	1.423
I would feel at ease talking with a homosexual person at a party	296	39	304	40	75	10	32	4	31	4	4.09	1.024
I would be upset if I learned my doctor was a homosexual (reversed)	44	6	58	8	149	20	233	31	254	34	3.80	1.66
It would bother me if a person of the same sex found me attractive (reversed)	70	9	112	15	173	23	214	29	170	23	3.40	1.25

Explanatory Results

After elaborating these general patterns of comfort, we wanted to identify the factors that are associated with such sentiments. We ran four OLS regressions to establish the extent in which the variance in the Comfort Index can be explained by all of our independent variables (through a significance test of R^2), and the relative predictive importance of each independent variable when holding the other variables constant (by comparing beta weights). As expected, our study meets the statistical assumptions of having linear relationships, homoscedasticity, interval data, an absence of outliers, and data whose range is not truncated.

The first three regressions separate the distinctive effects of the demographic, contextual, and ideological types of factors, while the last contains coefficients for all of our variables. This sequential approach highlights the direct impact of single variables when controlling for other similar variables (as seen in the standardized beta coefficients). This approach also accentuates the cumulative effects for each variable set because it supports the comparison of adjusted R^2 scores.

Table 2 presents the multivariate calculations for the independent variables and the Comfort Index. In exploring the demographic factors by themselves, all of these variables were statistically significant (column 2). Only sexual orientation was significant at the .001 alpha, as it showed a moderately strong relationship with comfort (beta=.338). However, this regression also indicates that comfort with homosexuals is not only predicted by sexual orientation. Gender, race, and a rural

upbringing all showed significant but modest associations (beta scores between .109 and .097 and $p < .01$). Finally, the totality of demographic factors accounted for 14% of the comfort level in the comfort scale.

Column three suggests that the contextual factors as a whole were better at predicting student comfort levels ($R^2 = .459$, $p < .001$). The potency of the individual contact variables is also demonstrated by the fact that three of these factors had beta coefficients above .20 and probabilities of less than .001 (friend contact, parental homophobia, friend homophobia). Schoolmate had a slightly smaller coefficient of .155 ($p < .001$) and the perceptions of homophobia among social workers and taking a class on homophobia created associations between .075 and .069 ($p < .05$). However, contact with gay family members and simply taking more college classes did not result in significant results (beta scores ranged between .054 and .020). Thus, this initial regression suggests that students were swayed a great deal from the messages found in the social environment. The attitudes of peers and close friends were equally important, as were the level of interactions with homosexuals (however, having a gay or lesbian parent did not seem to produce consistent results). Additionally, the mere completion of additional social work classes failed to generate significant results, but having a class that explicitly explores homophobia cultivated a greater acceptance of gays and lesbians.

The next regression suggests that the ideological factors by themselves present some of the strongest ramifications. With an adjusted R^2 of .508, slightly over half of the variance is explained by these four perceptions. Among

the individual variables, the perceived cause of homosexuality created the largest consequences so far ($-.389, p < .001$). However, the etiology of homosexuality did not eliminate the effects of the other worldview variables. With all of the beliefs maintaining beta scores above .157 and probabilities below .001, it

seems that discomfort is more likely to appear when students condone conservative gender and religious mores and have a great fear of AIDS. Moreover, embracing conservative religious tenets and AIDS anxieties matched the strongest contact factors in the earlier context model.

TABLE 2. Regression of Demographic, Contextual, and Attitudinal Variables on Comfort-With-Homosexuals Index, Reported by Social Work Students (N=748)

Variable and Measure	Demographics +Contexts +Beliefs			
	Demographics	Contexts	Beliefs	+Beliefs
Demographics				
Gay-lesbian identity	.338***			.081**
Gender (female=1)	.107**			-.024
Race (White=1)	.109**			.026
Rural	-.097**			-.032
Contexts				
Parental contact		.020		.018
Sibling contact		.054		.028
Friend contact		.229***		.184***
School acquaintance contact		.155***		.147***
Parental homophobia		-.232***		-.091**
Friend homophobia		-.298***		-.162***
Social worker homophobia		-.075*		-.068*
Class on homophobia		.069*		.038
Year in college (senior=4)		.049		.007
Beliefs				
Traditional gender roles			-.157***	-.108**
Traditional religious beliefs			-.230***	-.171***
Perceived cause (choice)			-.389***	-.300***
Fear of AIDS			-.203***	-.131***
Adjusted R ²	.138	.459	.508	.598
F	28.796***	62.550***	185.829***	53.856***

Note. Coefficients reported are standardized beta values. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

When integrating all of the variables into a single model, some interesting results emerge. The full model is quite robust because all of the variables predict 60% of the variation in comfort for social work students. Moreover, 10 of the factors show enough potency to retain statistical significance in this 18-variable equation. Of the individual variables, it is clear that perceived controllability of homosexuality presented the strongest association ($\beta = .300, p < .001$), while the impact of peer contact, homophobia among one's friends, AIDS fears, and conservative religious beliefs had similar influence (beta scores fell between .184 and .131, $p < .001$). More modest but significant connections were observed for matters of sexual orientation, parental attitudes, gender role expectations (beta weights of .108 to .081, $p < .01$) and perceived social worker sentiments (beta weights of .068, $p < .05$).

While most of the factors maintained significant links to the dependent variable, four variables failed to do so. Three of the demographic factors lost significance when controlling for the other variables. Variables of race, gender, and urban living lost significance after the contextual and ideological factors were inserted (beta scores between .032 and .024). This suggests that essentialist associations of homophobia to race, gender, and rurality are probably misguided, as being a person of color, male, or rural does not intrinsically bring forth greater homophobia. Instead, any apparent links are probably because of the reality that people who occupy these social locations may be drawn to greater conservative gender or religious beliefs, have less contact with homosexuals, and sit in a more homophobic network of friends and family

members. Likewise, taking a class that dealt with homophobia also failed to retain significant effects ($\beta = .038$). Since the inclusion of ideological factors reduced this variable to non-significance, one might assume that taking a class did not present universal results for students. It is possible that classes on homophobia only have an effect if students are receptive and willing to seriously explore issues of religious convictions, gender expectations, the causes of homophobia and professional social work stances on the topic. Otherwise, classroom materials may have very little resonance for the students who are resistant to the process of reflecting on these interwoven topics.

Limitations

Before concluding this article, we want to warn about some possible methodological shortcomings. Along theoretical lines, a long list of independent variables does not guarantee that all extraneous or confounding variables were eliminated. It is possible that some crucial aspects of educational processes were ignored and that the study failed to address every pertinent ideological correlate. Similarly, when using cross-sectional data there can always be a potential problem of temporal ordering. For example, any of the ideological factors may be after-the-fact justifications of homophobia rather than clear-cut antecedents. Additionally, our selection of students was not purely random. Although each public university in the United States with an accredited BSW program had a chance of getting into the study, the undergraduates who were not beginning and ending their programs were automatically removed from the population. Likewise, certain types of professors may

have been more or less likely to distribute surveys in their classrooms. As for measurement errors, every survey has potential problems of item wording, social desirability, and over-demanding recall. For example, students may not recognize or remember if they participated in a class that dealt with discrimination against homosexuals and the knowledge of the sexual orientation of friends and family members may be a little tricky. Likewise, while we assumed honesty and frankness, it is possible that discussion of sexuality can be highly swayed by a process of impression management. That is, students could have voiced less homophobic sentiments because they wished to be that way or that they thought such sentiments concurred with social work ethics. Finally, one can never be certain of the degree of synchronicity between the student's expressed attitudes and how they actually interact with GLBT individuals.

Discussion

Fear or discomfort with GLBT peoples among social workers can compromise the quality of services provided and undermine efforts of social justice. It is important that social workers understand their reactions to GLBT clients so they can perform in a supportive and appropriate manner (or modify negative reactions when necessary). Professional organizations and educational institutions often provide curricula that are intended to inspire such beneficial practices. It is within this context that our study conducted a national sample of undergraduate social work students.

This study reveals that homophobia is not rampant among this student populace. With means resting between 4.09 and 3.07, the

aggregated score tilted in the comfortable direction. However, this comfort level seems far from complete. The percentage of fully comfortable scores for each item rested between 39 and 19. This suggests that roughly one fourth of the sample fully values the presence of homosexuals in their immediate surroundings. The degree of uncertain scores fluctuated between 10% and 31%, thus another noticeable segment is undecided or ambivalent about homosexuals. More alarming, a sizable section of the sample fell in the ranks of the uncomfortable. That is, between 37% and 14% of the students preferred social distance for all of the scenarios.

With comfort levels for the sample fluctuating between the different items in our comfort index, it seems that homophobia is not constant and somewhat contingent on situational characteristics. With roughly 53% of the respondents reporting stable and consistent reactions in all settings, the remaining students saw their reactions vacillating among different settings. Most of the "fair-weather toleraters" felt most relaxed when talking to homosexuals in a "heterosexual" party, while their level of anxiety skyrocketed when students were hypothetically placed in settings that had explicit gay connotations (being attractive to a homosexual admirer or going to a gay bar). In retaining a provisional morality, many respondents were somewhat relaxed with homosexuals when "straights" control or dominate a social event. Conversely, much of this tolerance disappears when settings circumvent heterosexism and "normalize" homosexuality. This suggests that levels of comfort depend on degrees of social power, as many BSW students limit their comfort and

tolerance to settings were heterosexual privilege seems to prevail (homosexuality is bearable as long as heterosexuality is prioritized and homosexuality is considered a subservient, minor, or a "token" status).

Researchers have identified a number of situational, ideological, and demographic factors that induce and reinforce homophobic emotions. In applying these variables to a sample of social work students, one realizes that most of these predictor variables work similarly well in both populations.

At a basic level, a truism was confirmed, bisexuals and homosexuals are more comfortable with the presence of gay or lesbian individuals. However, with other factors being statistically significant, it is clear that sexual orientations alone do not determine positive reactions to gay-straight conversations.

This study illustrates a relationship between homophobia and social networks. It is clear that perpetual isolation from homosexuals leads to greater levels of sexual prejudice. Moreover, while being around gays and lesbians generally lessens homophobia, the influence of homosexual contacts varies along different sorts of interpersonal relationships. Conversations with homosexual peers seems much more pivotal than contact with gays from other ages and social statuses (best friend and school acquaintance had the biggest impact). However, with only cross-sectional data in hand, these data may also suggest that gay-friendly students seek out GLBT acquaintances and homophobes may sequester themselves into straight-only social circles.

While the structure of networks is linked to different perspectives, so are the messages that are conveyed in such networks. Students

wanted to separate themselves from homosexuals when they had parents and friends who chastised homosexuality. Likewise, the students who believed that practicing social workers rejected homosexuality preferred greater social space as well. Thus, it seems that homophobia is closely connected to the processes of modeling and values transmission. In effect, it seems that students internalize homophobic messages that are conveyed by emotionally close referents. However, without longitudinal data one has to caution about the directionality of this relationship. It is possible that students who are totally repulsed by homosexuality intentionally place themselves into homophobic milieus (thus reversing the temporal ordering of causality). Likewise, visions of widespread homophobia among social workers or "loved ones" may not be the result of first-hand conversations with these people. Instead, these hostile sentiments may be invented or imagined since they can function as a defense mechanism that normalizes and justifies their prejudices.

As expected, internalizing certain worldviews also normalizes homophobia. Consistent with attribution theory, students who felt homosexual orientations spring from natural forces were calmer around gays and lesbians. Additionally, students who excessively feared the spread of AIDS were less appreciative of the presence of homosexuals. The power of the relationship is probably a result of myths and misconceptions about AIDS, but without any measures about faulty HIV information we cannot determine the source of these fears. Likewise, it is possible that students may use AIDS fears and biological explanations of homosexuality as post-hoc rationales or justi-

fications of their pre-existing dislikes of homosexuals.

Our other ideological variables were wedded to homophobia. Students who ascribed to traditional gender prescriptions were more homophobic. This means, future social workers were more likely to oppose homosexuality when they endorsed conventional notions of wifely duties and accepted greater male aggressiveness. Along religious matters, the role of conservative Bible beliefs and religious fundamentalism cannot be denied. Students who have internalized the "homosexuality-as-sin" argument were much less inclined to want to be around gay or lesbian individuals.

While many of these aforementioned variables remained significant in the final analysis, some of our variables saw their significance drop between earlier and later models. The variables of gender, race, and rurality were important in only the first regression of purely demographic factors. They fell from significance when the roles of contextual and ideological factors were held constant. Thus, it would be safe to assume that being a woman, White, or living outside of a large metropolitan center are not the fundamental forces behind a person's comfort level. Rather, apparent differences along race, gender, and rural-urban lines may actually be driven by the underlying reality that women, city dwellers, and Whites have more contact with homosexual peers. Similarly, people of different social statuses may gravitate to different stances on gender mores, religious tenets, AIDS beliefs, or the cause of homosexuality.

Finally, the role of curriculum content offers some intriguing results. When controlling for only the contextual factors, the expo-

sure to educational materials on prejudice and discrimination snuck into statistical significance. However, this direct connection disappeared when the ideological variables were entered into the final model. This scenario can generate two divergent interpretations. First, the loss of significance could be because of a methodological weakness. Curriculum effects may be stronger in a study that uses longitudinal data or has a larger comparison group of students who have not experienced a GLBT classroom. Our measure for class content might also be too broad and general. In simply asking students if they ever heard a class discussion on prejudice, our study misses some of the more nuanced elements of classroom experiences. Thus, more precise questions on curriculum content or the use of different teaching pedagogies might generate more robust results. Conversely, our findings might offer an accurate depiction of this process. To the possible dismay of educators, it may be true that taking a class in-and-of-itself does not produce drastic transformations. If this is the case, the consequences of having gay materials in a classroom could be conditional and contingent on certain mitigating factors. Students may be more open and receptive to curriculum content if they come from a gay-friendly background (i.e., less conservative parents, friends, gender, or religious precepts). Likewise, coursework may not routinely change student mindsets on homosexuality if the course fails to counter conservative perspectives on patriarchy, religious identities, and the importance of professional ethics.

These conclusions suggest that classroom interventions must be augmented by extra-curricular experiences. To use the contact

hypothesis for positive benefits, schools of social work can do several things. Since a brief exposure to GLBT issues in the classroom is not sufficient to induce dramatic change, social work programs might develop a more holistic and systematic approach to combating homophobia. Schools should foster "gay-friendly" campuses to recruit and support GLBT faculty, staff, and students. This is a valuable goal in itself, because it helps students of different sexual orientations feel at ease, and it models proactive macro practice (see Hylton, 2005). Likewise, with an increased number of publicly "out" homosexuals on campus, even the most homophobic freshmen will inevitably experience informal interactions between themselves and people of different sexual orientations. Similarly, social work programs can also take the formal approaches of establishing and sponsoring guest lectures on campus, the creation of discussion groups among straight students, and the formation of GLBT support groups. Finally, the implementation of a non-discriminatory curricula and social environment requires a supportive college faculty. This means schools should take deliberate steps to insure that social work professors themselves are not homophobic (see Ben-Ari, 2001; Hylton, 2005; Mackelprang, Ray, & Hernandez-Peck, 1996).

Future research can use this information in several ways. Methodologists may apply different measures for homophobia, as our comfort index might ignore important settings of greater comfort or the use of the term "homosexual" may ignore differences of attitudes towards gays, lesbians, and bisexuals (Green, 2005; Herek, 2002a). Likewise, other

readers may be concerned about the temporal slant of our comfort items because questions about future interactions with homosexuals may not totally correspond with the actual behaviors of our respondents. Researchers can take these findings into different samples or research questions. To explore homophobia among other populations, scholars may apply these important variables to samples of employed workers or social work professors. Likewise, researchers may want to explore the relationship between comfort with homosexuals and the practice routines or political behaviors of human service professionals. Finally, longitudinal studies that measure student attitudes during their entire university careers could add nuanced understandings of long-term effects of the college setting. Most importantly, studies that follow the subsequent careers of social work students could fill a crucial void. It is only through such studies that we can gain an accurate grasp of what educational experiences subsequently guide the daily practices of employed social workers.

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