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Verenna Huerta
Lindenwood University

Taylor Morrill
Lindenwood University

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General Perceptions of Homosexuality in a Small Private University in**The Greater Saint Louis Area**Verenna Huerta¹¹ and Taylor Morrill¹²

Homosexuality has long been a major topic of concern among political, social, and religious agendas. Societies have either labeled homosexuality as deviant or non-deviant behavior. This type of categorization has led to many negative assumptions about those who hold a different type of sexual orientation other than heterosexual. According to Pachankis and Goldfried, (2008, p. 3), "Gay male undergraduate students reported a higher fear of negative evaluation and greater social interaction anxiety than did heterosexual students." Students in educational systems who are homosexual, bisexual, lesbian, or transgendered often battle with peer evaluation. The knowledge of students' perceptions, attitudes, and comfort levels on homosexuality can create a base for future studies on the origins of these perceptions. Gaining a better understanding of these variables could possibly produce more effective support programs on campuses for LGBT student communities. The analysis of the general perceptions of homosexuality on a small private university (Lindenwood University) revealed that females had higher comfort levels and more positive attitude than males. The perceptions evaluated in the study reported that in general, students had a positive perspective on homosexuality.

¹¹ Verenna Huerta, Undergraduate Psychology Department, Lindenwood University, 4013 Los Arroyos Court, Harlingen, TX, 78550, fromthehumanmind87@yahoo.com.

¹² Taylor Morrill, Undergraduate Psychology Department, Lindenwood University, 1024 Sutor Rd, Tallahassee, FL, 32311, tayloramorrill@yahoo.com

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In today's mainstream America, sexual orientation has become a more acceptable topic for discussion. "Sexual orientation by definition is an enduring emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction that can range from exclusive homosexuality to exclusive heterosexuality and includes various forms of bisexuality (Dam, DePaul, & Walsh, 2009)". Although sexual orientation is becoming more open, homosexuality is still considered taboo in most American societies.

Homosexuality was once considered a mental disorder classified as *sexual orientation disturbance* (Spitzer, 1973). The push to remove homosexuality as a mental disorder was due to the fact that homosexuality, like heterosexuality is a form of sexual behavior, which is not in itself a psychiatric disorder. Many of the current problems with the non-acceptance of homosexuals lie with persons who continue to think incorrectly that homosexuals, as defined in the second edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, are suffering from a mental disorder (Spitzer, 1973). This misconception can cause a homophobic atmosphere that is both emotionally and psychologically dangerous for any and all persons who identify themselves as homosexuals. According to Meyer (2007, p.6) homosexuals suffer from *minority stress* or the "excess stress to which individuals from stigmatized social categories are exposed to as a result of their social, often a minority, position." Being a sexual minority can subject a person to stress due to having to live in a society whose culture, social structure, and norms do not correlate with their own (Meyer, 2007). An example of this cultural clash between the dominant heterosexual culture and the minority homosexual group is the lack of social institutions, similar to those of heterosexual marriage, allowing for family life and intimacy between two homosexual individuals (Meyer, 2007).

Many homosexuals who have “come out of the closet” (openly announcing themselves as homosexual) are met with daily challenges from society through stigmas, prejudice, and hate. More often than not, many of the challenges take place in school settings especially in high schools and universities. According to Pachankis & Goldfried, (2008, p. 5), “Gay male undergraduate students reported a higher fear of negative evaluation and greater social interaction anxiety than did heterosexual students.” A high percentage of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students reported high levels of verbal and physical harassment due to their sexual orientation and “64 percent reported that they did not feel safe at school (Dam, DePaul, & Walsh, 2009, p.4) For students attending Christian universities, many of those identifying themselves as homosexual, stated that upon the realization of their sexuality, came a flood of emotions including fear, confusion and shame. (Brooke, Dean, Stratton, & Yarhouse, 2009) Also reported in this study was a lack of support by the institution itself, meaning that there were no groups or organizations on the campus that explicitly dealt with homosexuals and bisexuals and their personal needs. According to Davis, Locke, and Saltzburge, (2009, p.8) there is a “need to intervene with sexual minority youth to ensure their mental health and developmental well being.” Due to the social negativity that many persons who fall under a sexual minority experience, “predictions of suicide attempts, suicidal ideation, self harm,” can be inferred on the basis of a person being either homosexual or bisexual. The knowledge of students’ perceptions and acceptance levels on homosexuality can create a base for future studies on the origins of these perceptions. Furthermore, knowing where college students in Missouri stand on the topic of homosexuality could lead to programs

to inform the public on homosexuality, in turn creating a more socially comfortable atmosphere for homosexuals.

Method

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 106 university students in the greater St. Louis area who attend a small university, Lindenwood University. Researchers recruited participants from the Lindenwood Participant Pool as well as outside of the campus cafeteria located on the second floor of the Spellman building. The students consisted of 56 males and 45 females with an average age of 20.31 ($SD=2.278$). The participants were mainly from North America, Missouri in the United States, and were predominantly single, 94%. The last question of the demographic asked the participant the status of sexual orientation. The overwhelming majority was heterosexual, 91.1%, but approximately 10% either answered no comment, homosexual, or bisexual.

Materials

The materials for this study consisted of a survey (Appendix A), informed consent form (Appendix B), feedback letter (Appendix C), verbal script (Appendix D), description of the study (Appendix E), and ballot-like box. The survey included a demographic section consisting of six general questions that involved the participant's sex, age, country/state of origin, marital status, and sexual orientation. The second portion of the survey included ten questions addressing the participants' individual perceptions on homosexuality as it relates to relationships and general acceptance within public environments. Each question is set to a six point Likert scale ranging from 1, strongly disagree to 6, strongly agree.

Procedure

The students who were recruited through the Lindenwood Participant Pool were given two informed consent forms in which to read and sign, with one copy to be returned to the researcher. Next, the participant was given a survey with two sections. The first section consisted of six general questions involving the participant's sex, age, country/state of origin, marital status, and sexual orientation. The second portion of the survey had a group of ten questions addressing the participants' individual perceptions on homosexuality as it relates to relationships and general acceptance levels within public environments. The participants answered the questions using a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1, strongly disagree to 6, strongly agree.

Participants were also recruited at Lindenwood University outside of the campus cafeteria located on the second floor the Spellman building. Tables were set up with dividers so that each participant would have the opportunity to complete the survey in privacy. Clip-boards were also provided to participants who chose not sit behind the confined area of the divider. Upon approaching a potential participant, the researchers introduced themselves and asked him or her if he or she would like to take part in a survey of 16 questions addressing the topic of romantic relationships. The potential participant was also notified that the survey covers a sensitive topic and that completion of the survey was not imperative if the questions arouse any level of uneasiness when answering, and that any concerns or questions that may arise would be answered anytime by the researcher. Once a participant had completed the survey, he or she would place the survey into the ballot box, were debriefed, and given the feedback letter.

Results

The analyses of this study focused on students' perceptions, attitudes, and comfort levels with homosexuality. Calculating these viewpoints, SPSS was used to conduct an independent t-test, as well as compute the descriptive statistics for the data. In order to compute the data for this study, each question was put on a scale from 1 to 6. If a question was answered with 1, it meant that individuals perceptions, attitudes or comfort levels revealed to be pro-homosexuality, whereas 6 revealed perceptions, attitudes and comfort levels to be anti-homosexuality. There were five questions based on one's comfort level of homosexuality. The scale for comfort level ranged from five to thirty. These two numbers represented the extremes on each end of the spectrum for comfort level. For example, if a score were 5, then that particular individual was considered to be very comfortable as opposed to a score of 30, equaling an uncomfortable level. Furthermore, there were eight questions assessing positive or negative attitudes towards homosexuality. The extremes for the attitude portion was 8 (positive attitude) and 48 (negative attitude). The perceptions portion of the survey was found to be based on societal norms. There were 4 questions in the survey that pertained to perceptions. Perceptions category consisted of questions that were relatively direct in their content, for example, one asked whether one would be okay if their coworker was fired because of their sexuality. Even though that particular participant may feel uncomfortable with homosexuality, he or she may be hesitant to circle 6 (meaning its okay for people to be fired because of their sexuality) due to societal pressure to work on accepting such individuals in work situations.

For the analysis of this study, a t-test was used to compare males' and females' comfort levels, attitude, and perceptions towards homosexuality. For the independent t-test, all 105 participants' data were included. Both comfort level, $t(97)=.011$, $p<.05$ and attitude, $t(93)=.020$, $p<.05$ were found to have significance. This significance suggests that females have higher comfort levels and have a more positive attitude towards homosexuality than males at Lindenwood University. There was no significance found with perception level, $t(94)=.245$, $p>.05$ among males and females. To further analyze the data, a t-test was used to validate our hypothesis. The independent T-test only encompassed data that had "straight" circled as sexual orientation, 96 participants. The results again revealed significance for comfort level, $t(87)=.0515$, $p<.05$ and attitude, $t(82)=.018$, $p<.05$ but not for perception level, $t(83)=.135$, $p>.05$. The significance for comfort levels and attitudes repeated the implication that females had higher comfort levels and more positive attitudes than males.

Discussion

The study addressed three levels concerning acceptance of homosexuals: comfort levels, attitudes, and perceptions. Although it was a descriptive study, analyses were able to be made addressing the above criteria on the basis of sex. In conclusion, it was found that men were significantly less comfortable around homosexuals and tended to have more negative attitudes towards homosexuality in general than women. The perceptions category revealed no statistical significance and it was concluded that this was due to the content of the questions under this category. The statements upon which the participants were to agree or disagree, involved social and societal stigmas that would have had to

have been challenged in order to evoke strong negative or positive perceptions of homosexuality.

Goldfried and Plachankis (2009), in their study addressing the gay males and their social anxiety in social situations around other heterosexual males found that in many of these all-male situations, homosexuals reported higher levels of fear and anxiety. The fact that the results of this study revealed heterosexual males to be less comfortable and have higher negative attitudes than women towards homosexuality, is a further testament to the rationality behind these reports of fear and anxiety. It can be inferred that the stigma behind homosexuals being psychologically sick as Spitzer (1973) explained in his paper involving homosexuality as a disorder in the DSM II, has changed as the all around attitudes and perceptions of homosexuality fell below the middle range between the two extremes of pro-homosexuality and anti-homosexuality. Due to the scores for more positive perceptions and those conveying more comfort around homosexuals being given a lower numerical value, it is statistically significant that the means of the values were below the middle range of the two extremes, thus, in this study, illustrating that the scores for both males and females were more pro homosexuality than anti homosexuality.

Some interesting aspects pertaining to the study were observed by the researchers as the survey was being handed out and taken. First, participants who took the survey through the Lindenwood Participant Pool revealed some interesting differentiations between the sexes in the time it took to complete the study. Most males seemed to take a few minutes longer than the females to complete the study. Some participants had some difficulty with the terminology used on the study as well as identifying some portions, such as the "marital status" portion, as being vague and unclear. Many participants added

in categories such as “straight” when “heterosexual” already existed as well as an “engaged” and “in a relationship” category under the “marital status” portion. When recruiting outside of the Lindenwood Participant Pool, it was observed that the level of discretion varied significantly as many persons chose to sit behind dividers or even take the survey into a corner of the room while others were quite content filling the survey out right in front of the researchers. It would be interesting to see if there is significance between such behaviors and how individuals report their attitudes and perceptions on similar sensitive subjects.

The study itself had a few limitations that may have both skewed and perhaps limited the possibility for further statistical analyses to be completed. To begin with, the sample size of 105 students was fairly weak, as well as a major portion of the participants recruited were from the Lindenwood Participant Pool which involved students from selected psychology, sociology, anthropology, and athletic training courses. This was hardly a strong representation of the university and future studies might find different locations around school so that students in all majors might be able to participate. The demographic portion of the survey, as mentioned before, had vague descriptions and lofty terminology. A category specifically for non-married couples would be added rather than the confusing “never married” category, and general terminology such as “straight” and “gay” would be added to “homosexual” and “heterosexual” to further clarify their meanings.

When recruiting outside of the cafeteria, many of the participants knew the researchers and their stances on the subject previous to taking the survey, and this knowledge may have induced social pressure on the way they answered the questions on

the survey thus potentially skewing the results. This obstacle would have been very difficult to avoid due to the small social environment of the university.

Future studies on the topic of individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and comfort levels with homosexuality could compare the results of those found on Lindenwood University with other universities in the region, state, or even country. Due to the content of the study and the research found on the necessities for support groups to be active on campuses and within scholastic institutions, it would be important to relay the results found here to this particular institution's Gay/Straight Alliance for their potential evaluation of the general social atmosphere regarding the subject of homosexuality.

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Appendix A

PLEASE FEEL FREE TO SKIP ANY QUESTIONS YOU FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE WITH.

Male/Female:

Age:

Country of origin:

State originally from, if in US:

Marital Status:

1. Single, 2. Never Married, 3. Married, 4. Separated, 5. Divorced, 6. Widowed

Sexual Orientation:

Homosexual, Heterosexual, Bisexual, don't know, no comment

**PLEASE STATE HOW MUCH YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE
FOLLOWING STATEMENTS**

1. If I were on a sports team, I would be bothered if one of my teammates was homosexual.
1 strongly disagree 2 disagree 3 mildly disagree 4 mildly agree 5 agree 6 strongly agree

2. I am okay with having a friend who is in a romantic relationship with the same sex.
1 strongly disagree 2 disagree 3 mildly disagree 4 mildly agree 5 agree 6 strongly agree

3. I would feel uncomfortable if one of my professors was homosexual.
1 strongly disagree 2 disagree 3 mildly disagree 4 mildly agree 5 agree 6 strongly agree

4. Same sex relationships are less meaningful than opposite sex relationships.
1 strongly disagree 2 disagree 3 mildly disagree 4 mildly agree 5 agree 6 strongly agree

5. I would attend a Gay Pride Parade if my friend asked me to attend.
1 strongly disagree 2 disagree 3 mildly disagree 4 mildly agree 5 agree 6 strongly agree

6. Same sex bars/clubs would be okay in my city.
1 strongly disagree 2 disagree 3 mildly disagree 4 mildly agree 5 agree 6 strongly agree

7. I would be okay if one of my coworkers was fired due to him or her being homosexual.
1 strongly disagree 2 disagree 3 mildly disagree 4 mildly agree 5 agree 6 strongly agree

8. A man and a woman is the only acceptable romantic relationship.
1 strongly disagree 2 disagree 3 mildly disagree 4 mildly agree 5 agree 6 strongly agree

9. Since you need a man and woman to procreate (have a child) any relationship outside of a man and a woman is pointless.

1 strongly disagree 2 disagree 3 mildly disagree 4 mildly agree 5 agree 6 strongly agree

10. Upon recruitment, military personnel ought to ask the sexual orientation of a potential recruit.

1 strongly disagree 2 disagree 3 mildly disagree 4 mildly agree 5 agree 6 strongly agree

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

I, _____ (print name), understand that I will be taking part in a research project that is designed to study students' perceptions on romantic relationships. If I agree to participate, I will be given a short questionnaire addressing the topic mentioned above. The survey contains sensitive material and I may choose not to answer any question I feel uncomfortable with. I understand that I should be able to complete this project within 10 minutes. I am aware that my participation in this study is strictly voluntary and that I may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or prejudice. I should not incur any penalty or prejudice because I cannot complete the study. I understand that the information obtained from my responses will be analyzed only as part of aggregate data and that all identifying information will be absent from the data in order to ensure anonymity. I am also aware that my responses will be kept confidential and that the data obtained from this study will only be available for research and educational purposes only. I understand that any questions I may have regarding this study shall be answered by the researchers involved to my satisfaction. Finally, I verify that I am at least 18 years of age and am legally able to give consent or that I am under the age of 18 but have on file with the LPP office, a completed parental consent form that allows me to give consent as a minor.

(Signature of participant) Date: _____

(Printed name of participant)

(Signature of researcher obtaining consent) Date: _____

Researchers Contact Information:
Taylor Morrill
(850)509-4639
Tm536@lionmail.lindenwood.edu

Verenna Huerta
(636)627-9850
vh797@lionmail.lindenwood.edu

Supervisor:
Dr. Michiko Nohara-LeClair
Course Instructor
(636)949-4371
mnohara-leclair@lindenwood.edu

Appendix C

Feedback Letter

Thank you for participating in our study. The survey was used in order to determine students' perception and acceptance levels of homosexuality in Missouri who attend a small university such as Lindenwood University. Please note that we are not interested in your individual answers, we are only interested in the answers of a large group as a whole, of which you are now a part of. No identifying information about you will be associated with any of the findings.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding any portion of this study, please do not hesitate to bring them up now or in the future. Our contact information is found at the bottom of this letter. If you are interested in obtaining a summary of the findings of this study at a later date, please contact us and we will make it available to you at the completion of this project.

Here are two links to support groups in the Greater St. Louis area that will help with any other concerns you may have with the subject of homosexuality as well as other alternative romantic relationships and lifestyles: www.findmycenter.com and www.growingamericanyouth.org

Thank you again for your valuable contribution to this study.

Sincerely,

Principal Investigators:

Taylor Morrill 850-509-4639 (tm536@lionmail.lindenwood.edu)

Verenna Huerta 636-627-9850 (vh797@lionmail.lindenwood.edu)

Supervisor:

Dr. Michiko Nohara-LeClair 636-949-4371 (mnohara-leclair@lindenwood.edu)

Appendix D

Script when recruiting participants:

“Hello. How are you doing today? My name is _____ and I was hoping you could take a short 16 questions survey on romantic relationships for my research psychology class at Lindenwood University. The questions do address a sensitive topic, so if at any time you feel uncomfortable, you are welcome to either skip that question or stop the survey with no penalty. Thanks for all your help.”

Appendix E

Woman to Woman?

Man to Man?

In this study you will be asked to complete a short questionnaire about perceptions of romantic relationships. This study does involve a sensitive topic. The entire process should take no more than 10 minutes of your time.