An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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May 26, 1992

Date of graduation: May, 1992
The Effect of Gay and Lesbian Speakers on Attitudes Toward Homosexuality: A Proposal

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ABSTRACT. Homophobia, or the societal fear and intolerance of gay men and lesbians, has been shown to be pervasive in general society, as well as on college campuses. Due to recent increases in anti-gay and anti-lesbian violence, and to the hostile climate for gays and lesbians, research on homophobia reduction is needed. One technique of homophobia reduction that is often used on college campuses is gay and lesbian speakers panel presentations. While these are often-used, their effectiveness has not been thoroughly examined. Few empirical studies have documented the effectiveness of gay and lesbian speakers in reducing homophobia. Even fewer studies have paid close attention to detail in experimental design. Much of the previous research has focused on the presence or absence of gay and lesbian speakers, and not on who they are and what they say. Therefore, a gap in the literature exists in this area.

The current study proposes to examine the effect of gay and lesbian speakers' panels on attitudes toward homosexuality. Much emphasis is placed on panelist training, evaluation, and procedures in an effort to control the quality of the panel. Experimental subjects (introductory psychology students) will be administered the Kite Index of Homophobia before and after the panel presentation. A control group will participate in the pre-test and post-test without viewing the panel. The importance of well-trained panelists and curriculum inclusion is also discussed.
THE EFFECT OF GAY AND LESBIAN SPEAKERS ON ATTITUDES TOWARD HOMOSEXUALITY: A PROPOSAL

Negative treatment of gays and lesbians is rampant in contemporary society. Gay men and lesbians are harassed, beaten, and even murdered because of their sexual orientation (Croteau & Kusek, 1992). This hostile societal treatment has been defined as homophobia, which involves personal and institutional prejudice against gays and lesbians (Herek, 1984b). Though many people think of homophobia simply as the fear of gay and lesbian people, it seems more accurate to refer to homophobia as a prejudice that is comparable to racism or sexism: a prejudice that leads to hatred of, intolerance of, and discrimination toward gays and lesbians (Croteau & Kusek, 1992).

Heterosexuals' attitudes toward homosexuals have been found to be generally negative and widely held (e.g. Schneider & Lewis, 1984; Schneider, 1987). The homophobia that manifests itself in American society is demonstrated in a number of ways. These negative attitudes are responsible for widespread societal mistreatment of homosexuals. For instance, gay men and lesbians are often subjected to much verbal and physical abuse because of their sexual orientation. In a review of the literature on hate crimes against lesbians and gay men, Herek (1989) found that "as many as 92% of lesbian women and gay men report that they had been the targets of anti-gay verbal abuse or threats" (p. 948). Further, nearly 25% reported physical attacks because of their sexual orientation.

In attempt to discover some of the roots of such prejudice
and discrimination, a number of studies have investigated some correlates of negative attitudes toward homosexuality. Herek's (1984a) review of the literature on homophobia yielded several factors that might contribute to disapproval or intolerance of homosexuality. Herek summarized that, when compared with persons who hold more favorable attitudes, persons with negative attitudes about homosexuality are less likely to have had contact with lesbians or gay men, are less likely to have engaged in homosexual behaviors, are more likely to perceive their peers as having negative attitudes toward homosexuality, are more likely to have resided in areas where negative attitudes are the norm (e.g. the midwestern and southern United States), are likely to be older and less educated, are more likely to be religious, to attend church more frequently, and to subscribe to a conservative religious ideology, are more likely to express traditional attitudes about gender roles, are less sexually permissive and manifest more guilt about sexuality, and are more likely to manifest high levels of authoritarianism.

There has been much debate in the literature about gender differences in the tolerance of homosexuality. Kite's (1984) meta-analysis of the research revealed a small gender difference in that heterosexual males' attitudes toward homosexuality were slightly more negative than heterosexual females' attitudes. The size of this effect, Kite reported, largely depends on the sex of the target (i.e. heterosexual men are more likely than heterosexual women to disapprove of male homosexuality) and the method of study.
These negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians are not the only way in which homophobia is demonstrated. Often, homophobia manifests itself in more overt ways. For instance, gays and lesbians are often victims of verbal or physical assault. National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) data indicate that these episodes are increasing with an alarming frequency (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 1989).

Though they are often perceived as liberal atmospheres, college campuses are not immune to the epidemic of homophobia. Several studies have shown that homophobia may be just as pervasive on campuses as it is in general society. Young and Whertvine (1982) surveyed 190 heterosexual college students and learned that the subjects generally held strongly negative attitudes about homosexuality.

When Jones and Motz (1991) studied the attitudes of a group of matriculating students, they found that those students were less likely to accept differences in sexual orientation than any other form of diversity. In fact, only forty percent of the subjects felt that understanding differences in sexual orientation was important to them. Furthermore, only one third of the students surveyed said it was important to them to make friends with someone of a different sexual orientation, while 78% of the matriculates would make friends with someone of another race.

Page and Yee (1986) asked male and female undergraduates to rate gay men and lesbians in terms of 41 adjective rating scales, with each scale having a masculine and a feminine pole. They found
that gay men were rated significantly different from ratings of normality on 27 of the 41 adjectives, while lesbians were rated different from normality on 11 of the 41 adjective scales. For the most part, subjects' conceptions of lesbians were more favorable than their ideas about gay males. Page and Yee concluded that male gender nonconformity is viewed as more deviant than female gender nonconformity.

In addition to these attitudinal demonstrations of homophobia, this prejudice is manifested on college campuses through violence and harassment. In 1989, 80 American gay, lesbian, and bisexual college students were murdered because of their sexual orientation (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 1990). This frightening statistic demonstrates the need for widespread attitude change surrounding campus tolerance of homosexuality.

Few would argue with the claim that college campuses are in need of improvement in the tolerance of homosexuality, yet no single method has proven to be completely effective in doing so. Gay and lesbian student organizations at many universities conduct educational forums to help reduce homophobia, but only a few empirical studies have documented the effectiveness of these attempts (for a more thorough review, see Stevenson, 1988 and Croteau & Kusek, 1992). An overview of the existing research shows the need for an increased amount of empirical research in this area.

Anderson (1981) evaluated the effect of a brief seminar on human sexuality on the attitudes of 37 nursing students. In
addition to a film, the workshop contained dialogue with gay male and female mental health professionals. Anderson found that differences between pretest and posttest means were significant; thus, the workshop was effective in reducing participants' negative attitudes toward homosexuality. Further, attitudes remained more positive six months after the intervention.

Stevenson (1988) reported on an unpublished study in which a large sample of students (198) underwent a series of antihomophobia presentations, including lectures, classroom discussions, media presentations, and a panel of lesbians and gay men. The results showed large differences (over one standard deviation) between pre- and posttest attitudes toward homosexuality.

Another unpublished study (Freeland & Stevenson, 1986; reviewed in Stevenson, 1988) investigated the impact of a homosexuality unit on heterosexual Introductory Psychology students. One section was given no treatment, one viewed a film and heard a brief lecture, and another section participated in a panel discussion presented by the gay and lesbian alliance at that university. Contrary to the authors' predictions, no significant differences in homophobia were found after implementation of the various treatments.

After gay and lesbian speakers presented in two human sexuality classes, Lance (1987) found that students' attitudes changed significantly in a more tolerant direction. Exposure to these speakers, then, was effective in reducing previously held negative attitudes. Similarly, Pagtolun-An and Clair (1986) found
that interaction with an openly-gay speaker had a significant effect in reducing negative attitudes toward homosexuality.

However, presentations made by gay and lesbian speakers, some believe, may not always be effective in reducing homophobia. In fact, Serdahely and Ziemba (1984) suggested (based on observations made while teaching sexuality education courses) that having gay speakers make presentations in classes may actually increase the amount of prejudice held by class members. Their research did not support this prediction (no attitude changes were found in either direction), but it is still important to note that "the extent to which gay speakers have an impact on attitudes undoubtedly depends on who the speakers are and what they do and say" (Stevenson, 1988).

Because much of the previous research focuses only on the presence or absence of gay speakers, and not on the quality and content of their presentations, a gap in the literature exists. The current study aims to deal with the qualitative aspects of gay and lesbian speakers' presentations in an attempt to help bridge some of this gap in the research.

This study will continue an examination of the effect of gay and lesbian speakers' panels on attitudes toward homosexuality. It is predicted that students who hear a panel presentation by gay and lesbian speakers will hold more positive attitudes in a pretest and posttest examination than students who do not view the gay and lesbian speakers.
METHOD

Subjects
It is proposed that the participants will be undergraduate students in an introductory psychology course. Two different samples will be used, a control group and an experimental group; the control group will be pretested and posttested without viewing the panel presentation, while the experimental group will view the presentation and participate in the pretest and posttest.

Procedure
Students in both samples will be given a questionnaire to complete in class one period before a presentation on gay and lesbian issues. Subjects will be asked to answer as honestly as possible and guaranteed that their replies would be kept anonymous.

The questionnaire consists of the Kite Homosexuality Attitude Scale (Kite & Deaux, 1986) which is composed of 21 items which are responded to on a five-point Likert-type scale. A higher score on the Kite Scale indicates a greater tolerance of homosexuality than does a lower score. This scale possesses excellent internal consistency and good test-retest reliability, as presented in Kite and Deaux (1986). The words "gay men and lesbians" have been substituted for the term "homosexuals" to ascertain that subjects would consider lesbians as well as gay men when answering, a measure recommended by Stevenson (1990).

One class period after the pre-test is administered, the treatment group will participate in a presentation by the university gay and lesbian student organization. The control group
will not view this presentation before taking the posttest.

Careful consideration was given to the content of the panel presentation. The heart of the presentation will be a lengthy question-and-answer session. Throughout this session, speakers will focus on conveying three main points, as recommended by Croteau and Kusek (1992): explaining that they are not attempting to "recruit" the audience members to be gay or lesbian; encouraging the audience members to ask questions freely but respectfully; and stating that their opinions and experiences were their own and did not reflect those of the entire gay and lesbian population. Furthermore, the panelists will make several attempts to emphasize similarities between homosexuals and heterosexuals to help heterosexual audience members see that both groups do have commonalities.

Before they are allowed to do presentations, members of this organization must participate in two training sessions and observe at least three presentations made by their peers. The training sessions focus on presentation skills and procedures. Also, the sessions include such topics as internalized oppression, the effects of discrimination, gender inclusive language, AIDS, teamwork, and bisexuality (Wanzer, Avery, & Campbell, 1992). After participating in such training sessions, the presentors have been equipped with the skills required to educate others about homosexuality.

At the conclusion of both presentations, a handout (Appendix) will be given to audience members, and the posttest will be
administered. The handout includes several facts about homosexuality, as well as a number of resources recommended for further reading. Also, the reverse side of the handout contains information about the university gay and lesbian student organization for audience members who may be interested in further contact with the group.

Conclusion
This study is intended to investigate the effectiveness of gay and lesbian speakers panels in reducing homophobia. It is predicted that students who view a panel presentation will hold more favorable attitudes toward homosexuality than students who do not attend the presentation.

If this hypothesis is supported by the data gathered, a number of implications will follow. For instance, the university gay and lesbian student organization will sponsor an increased number of panels if they are proven effective. Also, a heightened amount of outreach to the local community will be enacted in attempt to broaden the audience.

In the event that speakers panel presentations prove effective in reducing homophobia on campus, university administrators might consider making panel attendance a mandatory part of general studies requirements. That requirement, plus solid support of the gay and lesbian student organization by university administrators, may help to warm the chilly climate now faced by gay and lesbian college students.

Future research on this topic might investigate the effect of
other interventions, such as reading a text, when used along with a speakers panel presentation. As gay and lesbian issues slowly weave their way into the curriculum, educators would be wise to keep abreast of the effectiveness of different teaching methods in attempt to foster positive attitude change.
Appendix

Homosexuality Fact Sheet

Approximately one in ten people is gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Although studies vary, many agree that 10 or 11% of people are homosexual. There are over 2000 gay, lesbian, and bisexual students at Ball State.

No one knows why people are homosexual or bisexual, just as no one knows why people are heterosexual. Many studies have been conducted to determine the cause of homosexuality but none have found a conclusive origin.

Homosexuality is not a mental illness. The American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its manual of mental disorders in 1974.

It is completely legal to discriminate against someone in employment, housing, and education on the basis of sexual orientation in all but five states: Wisconsin, Massachusetts, Hawaii, Connecticut, and New Jersey.

Gays and lesbians are banned from service in the United States military, the FBI, and the CIA. Legal marriage between same-sex couples is not possible in this country. Lesbian and gay marriages are legal only in Denmark and the Netherlands and only for the residents of those countries.

Many Americans have closely associated AIDS with gay men. In North America, AIDS manifested in the gay male community first, but worldwide HIV transmission is predominantly heterosexual. Most new AIDS cases in the U.S. are in the heterosexual population. HIV is a virus. It does not know sexual orientation, race, or gender. AIDS is a human disease, not a gay disease.

Although some people perceive homosexuals as a threat to children, over 95% of child molesters are heterosexual white men.

Children raised by gays and lesbians are no more likely to be gay than those raised in heterosexual households. Also, some studies have found that children of gays and lesbians might even be more well-adjusted than children of heterosexuals.

Gay and lesbian people do not recruit heterosexuals or force them to be homosexual. This myth leads many heterosexuals to dislike or even fear homosexuals. Although "homophobia" is defined as the fear of homosexuals, homophobia is best seen like racism and sexism, a prejudice that leads to hatred and discrimination towards gay and lesbian people.

Homophobia can be reduced by getting to know a gay person or by listening to a panel like this one.

If you would like to learn more about what it is like to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual, please refer to the following resources or contact one of the people listed on the other side of this sheet:


Lesbian and Gay Student Association

General Information

The Lesbian and Gay Student Association, or LGSA, exists to provide an anonymous, safe, and friendly place for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students to meet and get information. LGSA develops a social support group to create a comfortable, accepting atmosphere for its members. Volunteers from LGSA form our speakers panel committee which visits classes and residence halls. Other programming and special events are developed and planned by the membership.

Membership

LGSA is open to all Ball State students, faculty, and staff. Not all members are homosexual, and we don’t ask anyone’s orientation at the meetings. Membership is anonymous and there are no dues. Ball State alumni and other non-BSU affiliated people may attend as honorary members.

Organization

President Brian Craig is the spokesperson for the organization. External Vice-President Kenton Campbell directs educational programming; Internal Vice-President Kerry Poynter coordinates social and membership activities. They, along with the Secretary and Treasurer, oversee the committees (Speakers Panel, Special Events, Social, Outreach, Publicity, Fundraising). LGSA is advised by Sue Wanzer, Assistant Director of Student Activities. If you have any questions or concerns, contact Sue at Student Voluntary Services, 285-1094. She is very involved with LGSA and is happy to help out anyone however she can. You may reach us at any time through the VAX by sending electronic mail to D000LGSA.

Meetings

Meetings are 3:00 pm Sundays in the Student Center. Each meeting is filled with social activities and a program, such as a guest speaker or group discussion. The LGSA planning committee meets every Wednesday in the Bertha Orr room in the Student Center at 6:30 pm. Here we work with our advisor, plan the Sunday meetings, and develop other programs and events. Everyone is welcome to attend, especially those unable to make the Sunday meetings.
Works Cited


