

Heterosexual Attitudes about Gay Men, Lesbians, and Bisexuals:
Descriptions, Explanations, and Implications

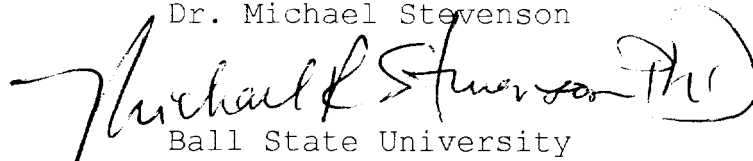
An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Ball State University

Muncie, IN

May 1998

May 9, 1998

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Abstract

This project deals with the various attitudes that heterosexual men and women hold about gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. A description of these attitudes, including information about various gender differences in the attitudes, is presented first. Following the description of the attitudes are explanations and possible sources for the attitudes, with specific attention given to the influence of traditional gender roles on attitudes about gay men, lesbians and bisexuals. Finally, the implications of heterosexual men and women's attitudes about sexual minority groups is examined and strategies for promoting tolerance of these groups are offered.

Introduction

The senior honors thesis represents the culmination of an undergraduate honor student's academic career. The thesis is often referred to as the "capstone" of the honor student experience. It should reflect the highest level of scholarship a student is capable of producing; however, to be a capstone of the honor curricula, the senior thesis must be more than just academic work of high caliber. The thesis must also be meaningful to the student on a personal level. It is this personal investment that differentiates a senior honor thesis from a detailed, well-written term paper. It is also this personal investment that makes the senior honor thesis such a rich educational experience.

My thesis has certainly been the capstone of my educational experience at Ball State University. I have matured as a student and as a person during the course of completing my project. My thesis is divided into three major sections, and each section illustrates a different aspect of how I have developed and matured personally as well as academically. Each section reflects a different aspect of my values and competencies, and I have interwoven my professional identity with my personal identity throughout my thesis.

The first section is mostly empirical in nature. In this section I describe what a sample of the existing psychological research shows about the attitudes heterosexual men and women hold about gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. This

particular part of my thesis reflects the scholarship aspect of a thesis. The decisions I made on which literature to include and how to interpret said research demonstrates my capabilities as a student of psychology. It is essential, as a student of psychology, to be able to understand and accurately interpret psychological research; therefore, demonstrating this capability is necessary for my project to qualify as a thesis.

The second section uses less empirical and more theoretical sources in its explanations for the various attitudes heterosexual men and women hold towards gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. This section also represents additional capabilities essential to a student of psychology: the ability to use empirical research to support psychological theory and the ability to use psychological theory to account for the findings of empirical research. Specifically, I will discuss how the ideas our society holds about traditional gender roles (the theory) account for the attitudes heterosexuals have (the findings of empirical research) about sexual minority groups.

The third and final section of my thesis illustrates how I have grown as a person as a result of the work I have done. This aspect of my project examines some of the implications of the attitudes heterosexual men and women hold towards gay men, lesbians, and bisexual individuals. I see this part of my thesis as most important, because it addresses issues which are applicable to everyone. With the exception of a hate crime survivor's story and a bit of research on the efficacy of

strategies for promoting tolerance of sexual minorities, this part of my thesis is truly mine. It reflects the personal investment I have in this project. What I think and feel about the information I have synthesized for the previous sections of my project dominates the final section. As much as the other pieces of this project reflect the scholarship necessary for a project to qualify as a thesis, this piece reflects the personal meaning that is equally necessary for a project to qualify as a thesis. Without the inclusion of my thoughts and ideas, this project would have been an excellent term paper and nothing more. By including a part of myself in this work, I transformed a term paper into a senior honor thesis of which I am very proud.

Part One: Descriptions of the Attitudes Heterosexual Men and Women Hold Toward Gay Men, Lesbians, and Bisexuals

Describing the attitudes that heterosexual men and women hold toward gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals is quite a complicated undertaking. To begin, it is important to explain some issues surrounding language. Several researchers have noted that using the term "gay" to refer to gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals is problematic, because when an individual hears the word "gays" he or she is likely to think only of gay men (Kite & Whitley, 1996; Kitzinger, 1996; Stevenson & Gajarsky, 1991). Therefore, the use of the word "gays" to refer to all people with any sexual identity other than heterosexual renders lesbians and bisexual individuals invisible. Similarly, using the word "homosexual" as a generic term for all sexual minority groups reduces people to nothing more than a sexual orientation, as well as perpetuating the stereotype of gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals as sexually promiscuous (American Psychological Association Publication Manual, 1994, p. 51).

In order to avoid redundancy and increase clarity, the research findings of Kite and Whitley (1996) will be presented to describe the patterns of heterosexual men's and women's attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. The reasons for choosing this study to represent a considerable body of literature are twofold: first this research employed meta-analytic techniques, and second the organization used by the researchers facilitates presentation

of the specific findings which are relevant to the present discourse. Because Kite and Whitley employed meta-analytic techniques in their work, the findings of their research represent the findings of over 100 studies. This aggregation of data allows many conclusions to be drawn from this synthesis of many research projects.

Kite and Whitley (1996) conceptualized attitudes about gay men and lesbians as divided into three components: attitudes about gay men and lesbians as people, attitudes about homosexual behaviors, and attitudes about the civil rights of gay men and lesbians. Each of these components were examined separately to determine whether gender differences existed between the attitudes of heterosexual men and women, and whether the magnitude of the differences was great.

The analysis of heterosexual men's and women's attitudes about gay men and lesbians did uncover gender differences. Straight men evaluated gay men more negatively than they evaluated lesbians, and straight men held more negative attitudes about gay men than straight women did. Straight women held *slightly* more negative attitudes about lesbians than they did about gay men, but the discrepancy between how straight women view gay men versus lesbians is not as large as that for straight men (Kite & Whitley, 1996, pp. 340-342).

It is important to comment on the concept of gender differences as a whole, because many misconceptions exist about these differences. In general, gender differences on any given

variable are relatively small. Kite and Whitley (1996) discussed the slight magnitude of the gender differences they obtained, but not all researchers are as conscientious when reporting findings of their work. If it is true that not all researchers comment on the magnitude of gender differences, it is even more important to note the gross inaccuracy of the reporting of gender differences by the popular media. In short, most often gender differences are reported as being far greater than what is truly the case.

Another issue that bears directly on the findings of Kite and Whitley (1996) is that of the established methodology of psychological research. Psychology claims to be interested in studying the individual. However, due to many of the statistical analyses used in psychological research, it is not often that one obtains meaningful information about individuals. For example, psychological research--especially the attitudinal research being discussed here--uses means to describe groups of people. Therefore, when reporting that heterosexual men view gay men more negatively than heterosexual women view gay men (Kite & Whitley, 1996), it is essential to note that this is an average. It is certainly true to state that some heterosexual men hold negative attitudes about gay men, but it is equally true to state that some heterosexual men do *not* hold negative attitudes toward gay men. Additionally, it is true that some heterosexual women hold accepting attitudes toward gay men, but there are also

heterosexual women who do not hold accepting attitudes about gay men. It is important to always consider that reports of gender differences should be given with qualifiers such as, "straight men, on average," or "in general, heterosexual women."

Unfortunately, this is frequently not how gender differences are reported, especially in the popular media.

Having discussed the important caveats to consider when interpreting gender differences, the remaining findings of Kite and Whitley (1996) relevant to this discussion will be described. When measuring attitudes toward homosexual behavior, Kite and Whitley (1996) found that straight men held more negative attitudes than straight women did. Interestingly, when they measured attitudes toward the civil rights of gay men and lesbians, they found no gender differences and an encouraging degree of tolerance for the civil rights of sexual minorities. The researchers speculated that this tolerance of civil rights of gay men and lesbians was not linked to a tolerance of homosexuality, but rather to a global belief in American civil liberties. The researchers commented that this finding should be viewed as preliminary, as it has not been examined in the detail that the other attitudinal components have.

Thus far, this discussion has focused on attitudes about gay men and lesbians; however, no treatment of these issues is complete without including information about issues surrounding bisexual individuals. Empirical research specifically assessing the attitudes toward bisexuals will not be included in the scope

of the this discussion, but rather I will mention a brief, general description of some of the unique difficulties faced by bisexual individuals. Often people who claim bisexuality as their sexual identity feel as ostracized by the gay/lesbian community as they do by mainstream society, because there are some individuals in the gay/lesbian community who consider bisexual persons "traitors to the cause" (Tucker, 1995). There are also individuals in the gay/lesbian community, as well as mainstream society, who view bisexuality as a phase of sorts. These people assume that a bisexual individual will eventually "decide" and then adopt a gay, lesbian, or straight identity (Tucker, 1995). It is important to mention that not all members of the gay/lesbian community harbor intolerance towards bisexual individuals, just as not all heterosexuals are intolerant of gay men, lesbians, and bisexual individuals.

**Part Two: Explanations for the Various Attitudes about Gay Men,
Lesbians, and Bisexuals**

Describing the various attitudes that straight men and women hold towards gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals is a valid starting place, but in order to genuinely understand the phenomena, the explanations for the attitudes must be covered. The explanations attempt to account for the small yet reliable gender differences found in attitudes about homosexuality. The following explanations are by nature more theoretical than empirical,

though research does support many of the existing theories about the genesis of attitudes about sexual minorities.

In accounting for the gender differences in attitudes about homosexuality, scholars often point to the influence of gender roles (Blumenfeld & Raymond, 1993; Kite & Whitley, 1996; Stevenson & Medler, 1995). A gender role is simply a social role associated with being male or female (Blumenfeld & Raymond, 1993). Traditional gender roles dictate that men and women occupy very separate, different roles in society. Traditional gender roles often include stereotypic traits such as men as unemotional, masculine, and breadwinners and women as quiet, passive, and communal.

A relationship between the espousal of traditional gender roles and intolerance of homosexuality is well documented in the scientific literature (Blumenfeld & Raymond, 1993; Kite & Whitley, 1996; Stevenson & Medler, 1995). Although straight men tend to support traditional gender roles more strongly than straight women, both heterosexual men and women view gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals as violating proscribed gender roles (Kite & Whitley, 1996; Stevenson & Medler, 1995). Heterosexual men view gay men as committing a more serious violation of these gender norms than heterosexual women do for several reasons. First, as was mentioned previously, men endorse traditional gender roles more than women. Secondly, the male gender role is more restrictive and rigid than the female gender role (Kite & Whitley, 1996; Stevenson & Medler, 1995). Finally, violation of

the male gender role is seen as relinquishing status, because society confers a high degree of status on male roles (Stevenson & Medler, 1995). Of course, lesbians are viewed as violating gender role expectations, but due to the greater flexibility of the female gender role, this social transgression is not viewed as severely.

The religious beliefs of some individuals also account for some of the attitudes toward homosexuality present in society. There are individuals who believe that homosexuality is morally wrong in any and all forms. These people tend not to make distinctions among gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals, but instead see all sexual minorities as "sinful" people. Individuals who adhere to fundamentalist religious beliefs also tend to believe that homosexuality is learned and therefore malleable, whereas persons with more tolerant attitudes toward homosexuality tend to view the origins of homosexuality as biological (Blumenfeld & Raymond, 1993; Kite & Whitley, 1996).

Part Three: Implications of Heterosexual Attitudes about Gay Men, Lesbians, and Bisexuals

The most effective method to illustrate the implications of heterosexual attitudes toward gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals is quite simply to let the facts speak for themselves. What follows is an account of an incident written by Kathleen Sarris, who was the victim of the events that transpired.

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In June of 1982, I appeared in a press conference as the representative of Justice, Inc [of Indianapolis, IN]. The news conference was covered by all print and television media. The gay/lesbian community was embroiled in conflict and controversy with members of several right-wing ministries because Justice, Inc., had thwarted attempts by these individuals to block several of our speaking engagements and our annual Brunch. The press conference was convened to delineate our success over the past year, outline our future plans, and to counter the inflammatory statements being made about our community.

Within 24 hours of the aforementioned press conference, I began receiving threatening telephone calls and letters. The phone calls and letters were religious in nature; they spoke of acting in the name of God or Jesus and exacting retribution. They also spoke of my leading people to become sodomites, and that this person would put an end to my work. My initial reaction was that it was an annoying hoax, and it would die down and go away. Instead, the letters and telephone calls continued with systematic regularity. I decided to move out of my home; I moved in with a friend, and fellow Justice Board member, John Tofaute. Within days, the letters and phone calls resumed. It was very apparent that I was being tracked. John decided that I needed help from the police. We took the most recent letter with us and went to talk with the Indianapolis police. Their response was there was nothing they could do, and if I couldn't stand the heat, I should get out of the kitchen! After a couple of weeks, the letters and phone calls stopped. I assumed the person got tired of playing the game.

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Then, approximately 2 weeks after the letters stopped, I was leaving my office and as I turned to lock the door, I felt the barrel of a gun in the back of my head. He pushed me back into the reception area. For the next three hours, he beat me with his fists, his gun, and his belt. I was sexually molested and, ultimately, I was raped. Throughout the assault, he talked about how he was acting for God; that what he was doing to me was God's revenge on me because I was a "queer" and getting rid of me would save children and put an end to the movement in Indiana.

At the end of his torture, he had me stand up; I was facing the desk in the reception area, and he again put his gun to the back of my head. I heard him draw back the hammer, and the chamber clicked into position. It was at that point it occurred to me that I had nothing to lose. I picked up an object from the desk and swung around and hit him in the head. While he was stunned, I kicked him and he lost the gun. We struggled for about 10 minutes until he finally knocked me unconscious. When I regained consciousness, about an hour later, he was gone. I called the Marion County Sheriff's department and then a friend. The deputies could not find the gun. They assumed that my attacker thought he had killed me with a blow to the head. One of the deputies took me to the hospital where I was met by detectives from the Sheriff's department. I was in the emergency room for 8 hours; I suffered a concussion, hair line fracture of my right cheek bone, dislocation of my jaw, and damage to my left knee.

While I was in the emergency room, the detectives were able to piece together the whole scenario of the past few months. It was then

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that I learned the Indianapolis Police department could have attempted to get fingerprints and conducted a paper and ink analysis on the letters; also, they could have ordered a tracer on my telephone. The Indianapolis Police chose not to give me any help.

I spent 4 weeks healing physically. For several months after the attack, I gradually isolated myself by choosing to work 16 hours per day. I lost 20 pounds and refused to see friends and family.

Eventually, I learned to cope with the pain, anxiety, and confusion, but I had damaged my relationships with people and had to spend time rebuilding my life.

It has been 4 years since the assault, and the pain is still very real.

I still do not have unrestricted freedom; my significant other and I live in constant fear that it will happen again. I also live with the knowledge that because of my orientation, because I chose to exercise what I believe are my constitutional rights, my life has no value to certain people (Sarris, excerpted from Herek, 1992, pp. 201-203).

Mercifully, not all hate crimes are this violent in nature, many of them fall into the category of harassment (Herek, 1992). However, the inescapable fact is that intolerance of gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals is the basis for hate crimes, and if we find these crimes distressing, then we must attempt to promote tolerance for these groups. Antigay prejudice is like any other prejudice, be it racism, sexism, or ageism. It is just as

morally reprehensible, and society should take steps to eradicate it.

Some individuals would argue that they do not identify with people who have a sexual identity other than heterosexual, because they have nothing in common with "those" people. This is an irrelevant (and likely erroneous) observation. One does not have to have anything in common with a group to empathize with their struggle. For example, there are many Christians who are not intimately acquainted with Jewish people and really have little in common with Jews. These same Christians are rightly horrified by the events of the Holocaust. In the same way, one does not have to be a gay man, lesbian, or bisexual--or even be intimately acquainted with a member of one of those groups--to empathize with the oppression these people face.

If we conclude that antigay prejudice should be eliminated, then we must offer ways to do just that. Several researchers have examined the efficacy of various methods of increasing tolerance for gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. Stevenson and colleagues (Stevenson, 1988; Stevenson, 1990; Stevenson & Gajarsky, 1990) found that individuals who take a college course in human sexuality tended to report more tolerant attitudes after the completion of the course than when they began the course. Critics of this research have argued that this tolerance is due to self-selection-- that is, the individuals who register for a human sexuality course are more liberal--and therefore more

tolerant--in general. However, regardless of how liberal those students were at the beginning of the term, it is clear that their attitudes *did* become more tolerant over the course of the semester (Stevenson, 1990).

Another factor which affects heterosexual's attitudes toward sexual minorities is personal contact. Herek and Glunt (1993) found that straight men and women who had personal contact with gay men and lesbians reported more positive attitudes than straight men and women who did not have personal contact with gay men or lesbians. The researchers suggested that this contact led heterosexuals to see gay men and lesbians in more personalized and individualized ways--not as nameless members of a social group.

Probably the best way to increase tolerance for gay men, lesbians, and bisexual individuals is to be tolerant ourselves, and to teach our loved ones to do the same. Nearly every human being has some contact with children, even if he or she does not have his or her own children. We can capitalize on our interactions with all children in an effort to keep them from developing negative attitudes towards sexual minorities. We can ask our friends and family members not to use derogatory terms for gay men, lesbians, and bisexual individuals in our presence. Perhaps by asking them not to use those terms, we will cause them to reflect on why they feel comfortable using them at all.

A very dear friend of mine was the victim of a hate crime due to his sexual orientation, and it changed my life. I decided that it simply was not enough for me to be accepting of him. I realized that nothing will ever change if more people do not actively combat antigay prejudice the way individuals have combated racism and sexism. Until more people decide that this is a worthwhile cause, more innocent people will fall victim to hate crimes, and that is, quite simply, unacceptable.

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