

RUNNING HEAD: A Half-decade Follow-up

College Students' Attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men: A half-decade Follow-up and  
the Insignificance of Spirituality.

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## Abstract

(Purpose) The purpose of the study was to assess changes in college students' attitudes towards lesbians and gay men over a five-year span. A secondary purpose of the study was to build a foundation for assessing the relationship between spirituality and observed attitudes. Previous studies have only used religiosity, which is one of the most significant predictors of negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. It is asserted here that spirituality is a different construct, and because of this, it was hypothesized that it would not be related to attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. (Methodology) The Attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men (ATLG) scale was administered to 544 college students at a midsize Midwestern University in late 1996, and followed up again in early 2002. The Spirituality Assessment Scale (SAS) was also administered in 2002. (Results) As expected, attitudes in 2002 were significantly more positive than in 1996, and as expected, level of spirituality was not significantly related to attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. (Conclusions) Results contribute to literature that indicates young adults are becoming increasingly more positive in their attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. Students at higher education institutions are perhaps now more willing to address issues related toward homosexuality because of a societal shift in attitudes. The importance of educators taking active stances to create successful academic learning environments is discussed. Furthermore, spirituality was not related to attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. (Recommendations) Because spirituality was not related to attitudes toward lesbians and gay men, results give credence to the theory that spirituality and religion are different constructs. Researchers must carefully and deliberately operationalize these constructs when considering them for inclusion in future research.

College Students' Attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men: A half-decade Follow-up and the Insignificance of Spirituality.

Although there is no shortage of data showing negative attitudes toward homosexuality (Kite & Whitley, 1996), recent research has indicated that attitudes are shifting in a more liberal direction, especially among young adults (Rostow, 2001). In a recent national poll of 1,000 high school seniors, 80% believed that society should accept gays and lesbians and two-thirds favor legal recognition of same-sex marriage (Rostow, 2001). In another national probability survey of 2,804 high school students, homophobia was found to have dropped 10% from 1998 to 2001 (PlanetOut News Staff, 2000). A current Gallup poll shows increased acceptance among Americans of homosexuality as well as an erosion in their reluctance to support the extension of marriage benefits to gay and lesbian couples (Johnson, 2001). Sixty one percent of young adults aged 18-29 were found to support gay marriage in 2003, which was a roughly 15-point increase since 1996 (Jones, 2003). Thus, with these recent findings, much of the classic attitudinal research being cited regarding the prevalence of negative attitudes should be re-examined.

Throughout the literature, one of the most consistent predictors of attitudes toward homosexuality has been religiosity (Herek, 1988; Herek & Capitano, 1996; Larsen, Reed, & Hoffman, 1980; Nyberg & Alston, 1976), however, the conceptual relationship of this variable with the construct of “spirituality” in determining attitudes toward homosexuality has yet to be examined. While the terms religiosity and spirituality may seem to be interchangeable, and some empirical evidence has shown weak (Howden, 1992) to moderate (Park, Meyers, & Czar, 1998) correlation between the two constructs,

a growing consensus has emerged in the theoretical literature regarding the differences between the two concepts. Hinterkopf (1994) defines religiousness as “adherence to the beliefs and practices of organized church or institution,” (p. 166) and spirituality as involving a meaningful personal experience. Grimm (1994) echoes that sentiment, describing spirituality as belonging to the personal domain, while religiousness is more social and institutional. Ingersoll (1994) fluidly asserts that “religion is conceptualized as a variety of frameworks through which spirituality is expressed” (p.106), and in perhaps the most succinct definition, Stander, Piercy, MacKinnon, and Helmeke (1994) make the distinction between religion as extrinsic and spirituality as intrinsic.

Clearly, at least on a conceptual level, spirituality is related to, but also separate and distinct from religiosity. Yet religiosity, not spirituality, has dominated the focus of attitudinal research toward homosexuality. This may be the case because, until relatively recently, there has been a lack of focus on the development of instruments to measure spirituality. One of the (most thorough) attempts to operationally define spirituality was Howden’s (1992) oft-cited study, in which her Spirituality Assessment Scale (SAS) was developed and tested. The SAS seeks to measure spirituality, defined as “an integrating or unifying factor which is manifested through unifying interconnectedness, purpose and meaning in life, innerness or inner resources, and transcendence” (p.5). Spirituality reflects a broader view than religiosity, which “may or may not expressed by the individual through religious belief” (Howden, 1992, p.18). Supporting the notion of related but separate constructs, Howden’s research found a relatively weak correlation ( $r = .24$ ) with religiosity.

Thus, with the key points outlined above in mind, the purpose of this research is twofold: first, to update attitudinal research toward lesbians and gay men with a more contemporary sample and compare attitude change over a 5-year (half-decade) time span, and second, to confirm the relative influence of spirituality on attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. The inclusion of spirituality as a new variable for consideration will help provide a literature base and may ultimately stimulate researchers to be more rigorous in operational procedures when investigating religious and/or spiritual variables. It was expected that attitudes toward lesbians and gay men would shift in a more positive direction after a 5 year time span (Hypothesis One). Furthermore, because spirituality has been shown to be weakly correlated with and qualitatively different from religiosity, it was not expected that spirituality would be significantly correlated with attitudes toward lesbians and gay men (Hypothesis Two).

#### Method

In late 1995, 544 students (236 male, 303 female, 4 unreported) enrolled in general psychology class at a small midwestern university completed the 20-item Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men (ATLG) scale (Herek, 1988). In early 2001, at the same university, the ATLG scale was again completed by 179 students (72 males, 106 female, 1 unreported) along with the Spirituality Assessment Scale (Howden, 1992). The ATLG includes ten items regarding attitudes toward lesbians (ATL) and ten items regarding attitudes toward gay men (ATG) using 9-point Likert-type scales with the anchors (1) *strongly disagree* and (9) *strongly agree* (range of each subscale: 10 - 90; range of total ATLG score: 20 - 180). Lower scores indicate more positive attitudes toward the construct. The SAS includes 28 items using 6-point Likert-type format with

the anchors of (1) *strongly disagree* and (6) *strongly agree*. SAS scores range from 28 - 168, with higher scores indicating stronger spirituality. Both scales have demonstrated reliability and validity. In both administrations, students were recruited to participate on a voluntary basis for course credit. Total time of completion was approximately 15 minutes. In 1995, average age of respondents was 18.78 (range 17 - 46), and in 2001, average age was 19.12 (range 17 - 28). Cronbach's alpha in the 1995 ATLG administration was .95, while the 2001 administration was .94 for the ATLG and .92 for the SAS.

### Results

A t-test for independent samples was conducted on the total ATLG scores of the 1995 and 2001 samples. Attitudes toward lesbians and gay men were found to be significantly more positive in 2001 ( $M = 76.18$ ,  $SD = 35.68$ ) than in 1995 ( $M = 91.39$ ,  $SD = 40.09$ ),  $t(721) = 4.52$ ,  $p < .0001$ . Analysis of attitudes toward each sex revealed similar effects. Attitudes toward gay men were more positive in 2001 ( $M = 42.52$ ,  $SD = 21.53$ ) than in 1995 ( $M = 50.97$ ,  $SD = 22.56$ ),  $t(721) = 4.23$ ,  $p < .0001$ . Levene's test for homogeneity of variance was significant for the ATLG samples ( $p < .004$ ), thus, a non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was calculated to better account for a possible violation of assumptions made salient by the unequal sample sizes. It was revealed that Attitudes toward Lesbians were more positive in 2001 ( $M = 33.65$ ,  $SD = 16.05$ ,  $Mean Rank = 307.8$ ,  $n = 179$ ) than in 1995 ( $M = 40.42$ ,  $SD = 19.32$ ,  $Mean Rank = 379.83$ ,  $n = 544$ ),  $U = 38986.0$ ,  $p < .0001$ .

A bivariate correlation was calculated using Pearson's  $r$ , and it was found that SAS scores were not correlated with ATLG scores,  $r(178) = .06$ ,  $p = .41$ . Additionally, a

median split was performed on the SAS scores and used as an independent variable on ATLG scores. Because Levene's test for homogeneity of variance again pointed to unequal variance between the two groups ( $p < .005$ ), a Mann-Whitney U test was performed. The mean rank of those defined as "low" (with scores 135 and below) spirituality, (*Mean Rank* = 89.28,  $n = 91$ ) was no different from the "high" (scores above 135) spirituality group (*Mean Rank* = 90.74,  $n = 88$ ),  $U = 3938.5$ ,  $p = .85$ .

### Summary, Conclusions and Implications

The results here add to a growing body of literature which reveal a current trend toward more positive attitudes toward lesbians and gay men (Jones, 2003; Rostow, 2001). Consistent with the most current national probability research, based on a college student convenience sample at the same institution, attitudes were found to be more positive after a half-decade follow-up. Following Kite and Whitley's (1996) advice to not neglect the importance of deconstructing attitudes by gender, this trend held for both attitudes toward lesbians and toward gay men. Thus, the prevalence of negative attitudes should not be assumed, a priori.

There are several implications of this finding. First, closeted educators can feel less pressure and be encouraged to "come out" and serve as role models for students, both heterosexual and homosexual. It has been asserted that young people, especially sexual minority youth (gay, lesbian, and bisexuals), are in dire need of everyday role models to achieve successful personal and academic outcomes (Smith & Whitney, 2001). Second, when educators, regardless of their sexual orientation, take steps to promote an educational climate that fosters acceptance toward lesbians and gay men, their efforts may now be more well-received than in the past. Educators are increasingly being called

upon to take active steps in promoting accepting educational environments (GLSEN, 2002; PFLAG, 2005), and the observed results here point toward advocacy being especially important to continue the trend of future acceptance.

Additionally, and intriguingly, the study demonstrated the non-significance of spirituality upon attitudes toward lesbians and gay men, which lends empirical support to the theory that religiosity and spirituality are different constructs. Because of this finding, which offers a literature foundation regarding the non-relationship between spirituality and attitudes toward homosexuality, researchers should carefully consider the differences between spirituality and religiosity when forming hypotheses and including these constructs in research.

Future researchers may want to consider using measures of both religiosity and spirituality to confirm differences in these two constructs that may have been discovered here. Diversity in the sample (e.g., geography, culture, age) would be encouraged as well as the construction and design of studies that are able to monitor ongoing changes over time. Rigorous longitudinal studies would also be encouraged to supplement and confirm cohort studies.



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