

Homonegativity Among Alabama Counselors

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Abstract

Members of the Alabama Counseling Association were surveyed to examine the extent to which they demonstrate homonegativity (prejudicial attitudes toward homosexuality). The majority of the counselors did not appear to approach homosexuality from traditional prejudices, although almost one-third believed homosexuality to be immoral. The counselors appeared to have mixed views about current issues important to persons who are gay or lesbian, with many expressing homonegative beliefs about equality and social justice for persons who are gay or lesbian. Discussion of the findings focuses on the ethical obligations of counselors to respect diversity, promote the well-being of persons whom they serve, and to be advocates for social change.

Introduction

Never before has the issue of homosexuality been more in the forefront of the American public than in recent years. Practically every community in the United States has made homosexuality a part of political and religious discussions ranging from the morality of homosexuality to the rights of gay and lesbian persons to marry or form civil unions (Brewer, 2003; Ford & Priest, 2004). Kite and Whitley (1996) found that the attitudes of heterosexual adults were overwhelmingly negative toward gay men and lesbians. Current research indicates that negative attitudes toward gay men and

lesbians based on traditional or moralistic objections to homosexuality are diminishing, but that new understandings of homosexuality have not necessarily translated into a willingness to provide gay men and lesbians the social and civil rights afforded persons who are heterosexual (Brewer, 2003; Morrison & Morrison, 2002; Wood & Bartoski, 2004)

Homonegativity is prejudice against persons who are gay or lesbian (Morrison & Morrison, 2002; Morrison, Parriag, & Morrison, 1999). Negative beliefs about homosexuality exist at some level in most communities (Sullivan, 1998). Anti-gay sentiments are often expressed in school settings. For example, 84% of high school students hear the words faggot or dyke in their schools often or frequently as reported by The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2005). Young people who are perceived as being gay or lesbian are at risk of verbal and physical assaults (van Wormer & McKinney, 2003). Bullying is one prevalent form of abuse in middle and high schools and involves verbal harassment or physical violence directed toward individuals who are gay or lesbian (van Der Meer, 2003).

D'Augelli (1998) found that dropout rates, poor academic performance, and truancy among gay, lesbian, and bisexual students are direct results of verbal and physical abuse from other students. According to Gross, Aurand, & Adessa (1988, as cited in Carragher & Rivers, 2002), 50% of gay males reported being victimized by some

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form of aggression in middle school and 59% reported aggressive occurrences in high school. According to Mason and Palmer (1996), 40% of gay respondents reported having experienced some form of violence while in school.

Many gay and lesbian youth attempt suicide as a result of threats of abuse, difficulties in self-perception, acceptance from peers, strained family relationships, and school performance (Proctor & Groze 1994). In 1989, the United States Department of Health and Human Services reported that gay and lesbian youth are two to three times more likely to commit suicide than other youth. Proctor and Groze found that 40.3 % of 221 surveyed gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth across the United States and Canada had attempted suicide.

Negative views and attitudes towards gays and lesbians are apparent at the college level as well. A study of college freshman conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (2002) found that 41% believed that same-sex couples should not have the legal right to marry and 25% agreed with laws prohibiting same-sex relationships. Hinrichs and Rosenberg (2002) found that, among liberal arts college students, there was an association between having a positive attitude towards gay, lesbians, and bisexuals and having gay, lesbian, and bisexual friends, as well as having positive personal contacts with sexual minority persons. These researchers also found that women have less negative attitudes toward homosexuality than men, and persons who attend religious services more frequently have more negative attitudes than those who do not.

Understanding the attitudes of the general public toward gay and lesbian persons is important in order to create a more positive environment for this population in schools, colleges, and communities. The research indicates shifts in public opinion about homosexuality. In 1992, 71% of Americans believed that same-sex relationships were always wrong and 40% opposed anti-discrimination laws protecting gay men and lesbians in the workplace (Wilcox & Norrander, 2000). In 1998, these percentages had dropped to 54% and 33% respectively. Wood and Bartkowski (2004) found that gay rights opposition is more prevalent among conservatives, fundamentalist Protestants, persons with little or no favorable contact with gays, and among individuals who embrace negative stereotypes about gays. Wood and Bartkowski reported that Republicans are more homonegative and are least supportive of gay rights.

Efforts are being made in the counseling field to better prepare and educate counselors to address sexual minority issues in counseling. However, much needs to be done to ensure that biases and negative attitudes towards this population is effectively combated (Dillion, et al. 2004). Counselors are in a unique position to have an impact on attitudes and perceptions towards gay and lesbian persons in school and community settings. Their professional and appropriate responses can serve as a model for others to follow (Stone, 2003).

School counselors, in many ways, are obligated to be social activists for gay and lesbian students because these

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students are one of the more stigmatized groups in school settings. Gay and lesbian students are often cut off from lines of family or community support to which most other minority groups have greater access (Stone, 2003). This stigmatization places even more of an emphasis on the need for counselor education programs to offer training on how to promote an environment in schools and communities which supports an attitude of respect and equality for individuals who are gay or lesbian.

The *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* (2005) of the American Counseling Association clarify the ethical obligations of counselors to respect diversity, to promote the well-being of persons, and to be advocates at the societal level on the behalf of persons with whom they work. Yet, little is known about how counselors perceive homosexuality. The counseling literature provides counselors with much information about how to work with persons who are gay or lesbian, but does not explore the attitudes of counselors toward homosexuality. The purpose of the current study was to examine homonegativity among counselors in Alabama.

Method

Procedures

All counselors ($N = 1,687$) who were members of the Alabama Counseling Association and who had Alabama addresses during the early fall, 2005, were invited to participate. The members were mailed a survey packet, as well as a self-addressed, stamped return envelope and instructions for how to return the survey.

Participants

Five hundred and ninety eight responses were returned, for a response rate of 35%. Of these participants, 571 self-identified as heterosexual and 27 self-identified as sexual minority: gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Only the responses of heterosexual counselors were used. The range of the counselors' ages was between 22 to 82 years ($M = 47.54$, $SD = 12.12$). Seventy nine percent were White and 16.8% were African American. Other racial designations were Hispanic (.07%), American Indian (1.1%), Asian (1.4%), and other (.04%). Four counselors (.07%) did not specify their race. The majority (87%) of the counselors was female; 13% were male. With regards to education, 4.9% were students seeking master's degrees in counseling, 69.5% had master's degrees, 11.4% had educational specialist degrees, and 14.2% had doctorates. Slightly more than one-half (53.8%) of the counselors indicated that their specialization was in school counseling, and 28.8% reported their specialization as mental health/community counseling. Other specializations represented were as follows: (a) marriage and family, 5.5%; (b) career, 1.4%; (c) student personnel, 3.4%; (d) rehabilitation, 2.1%; (e) other, .02%. Some counselors (4.8%) indicated that they had multiple specializations and 1.4% did not provide information about specialization.

Instrumentation

Two instruments were used. One was an adapted version of the Homonegativity Scale (HS) developed by Morrison, Parriag, and Morrison (1999). The HS measures prejudices

against homosexuality based on traditional or moralistic beliefs. Morrison et al. (1999) examined the reliability of the HS and reported reliability coefficients ranging from .84 to .88. They also assessed the construct validity of the instrument using principal components factor analysis and found the instrument to be a unidimensional measure of homonegative attitudes. The HS is comprised of six items to which participants respond using the following response categories: *Strongly Disagree*, *Disagree*, *Neutral*, *Agree*, *Strongly Agree*...

The original HS used the word homosexual in its items (e.g., "Homosexuals should not be allowed to work with children"). In the current study, the wording was changed to "gay men and lesbians." Using data from the current study, the reliability of the adapted instrument was examined and yielded an alpha reliability coefficient of .82.

The construct validity of the adapted instrument was explored using principal components factor analysis, which revealed a single factor structure accounting for 55% of the variance (eigenvalue = 3.55), supporting the revised instrument as a unidimensional measure of traditional homonegativity.

The second instrument used was the Modern Homonegativity Scale (MHS) (Morrison & Morrison, 2002). The items of the MHS were generated by members of gay and lesbian organizations and reflect equality and social justice issues. Morrison and Morrison reported reliability coefficients ranging from .91 to .93. Morrison and Morrison explored

the factor structure of the instrument using principal components factor analysis, yielding a 13 item unidimensional instrument.

Participants respond to the items of the MHS using the following response categories: *Strongly Disagree*, *Disagree*, *Neutral*, *Agree*, *Strongly Agree*.

The reliability of the MHS was further explored using data from the current study, yielding an alpha reliability coefficient of .93. Principal components factor analysis was used to further investigate the construct validity of the instrument. The results of this factor analysis indicated a single-factor structure accounting for 64% of the variance (eigenvalue = 8.30), further supporting the MHS as a unidimensional measure of modern homonegativity.

Results

The data is reported descriptively, with percentages of responses to each item that were either homonegative, neutral, or positive. For both instruments, agree or strongly agree responses were considered homonegative, except for items 1 and 3 of the HS scale and items 3, 8, and 10 of the MHS. For these items, disagree and strongly disagree responses were considered homonegative. Overall, it appeared that the counselors did not respond to homosexuality on the basis of traditional prejudices (see Table 1).

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A large majority did not agree that someone who is gay or lesbian has a mental disorder, or that gay men and lesbians should be avoided. Most did not agree that gay men and lesbians should not be allowed to work with children or that those who support the rights of gay men and lesbians are probably gay or lesbian themselves. The results of two items were more mixed. Almost 30% of the counselors agreed that gay men and lesbians are immoral and almost two-thirds disagreed that gay men and lesbians should have the same rights as heterosexual men and women.

The counselors were more variable in their responses to the MHS (see Table 2). For most items, the majority of responses demonstrated either positive or neutral attitudes, yet substantial percentages of counselors demonstrated homonegative beliefs. On items related to being public about sexual identity, more than 40% agreed that the media devotes too much attention to the topic of homosexuality, that celebrations such as Gay Pride days are ridiculous, that gay men and lesbians should stop shoving their lifestyle down other people's throats, and that gay men and lesbians should stop making a fuss about their sexuality. Over one-third disagreed that gay men and lesbians should be considered courageous for coming out of the closet. With regard to social justice, over 40% disagreed that gay men and lesbians still need to protest for equal rights. More than 40% agreed that gay men and lesbians have all the rights they need and that gay men and lesbians should stop complaining about the way they are treated in society and simply get

on with their lives. Over one-third of the counselors agreed that gay men and lesbians have become too confrontational in their demand for equal rights.

Slightly over one-fourth of the counselors agreed that gay men and lesbians focus on ways that they differ from heterosexuals, rather than ways in which they are similar. With regard to public support for gay and lesbian organizations, over one-half of the counselors disagreed that tax dollars should be spent to support such organizations. Almost one-half agreed that providing undergraduate degrees in Gay and Lesbian Studies is ridiculous.

Discussion

Counselors are ethically obligated to respect diversity and to promote the welfare of the clients whom they serve, including clients who represent sexual minorities. Yet, little is known about counselors' beliefs about homosexuality. This research suggests that, for the most part, the counselors who participated in this study did not adhere to traditional homonegative prejudices about homosexuality founded in myths, stereotypes, and misinformation. For persons seeking the assistance of counselors because they may be gay, lesbian, or questioning their sexual identity, the findings suggest that they may not be confronted with counselors who enter into the counseling relationship with biases against homosexuality with two notable exceptions. First, almost one-third of the counselors believed that gay men and lesbians are immoral.

Despite the rejection of most traditional prejudices about homosexuality among the counselors in the study, value judgments about the morality of homosexuality remain. Second, over two-thirds of the counselors did not believe that gay men and lesbians should have the same rights as people who are heterosexual. The implication of these findings for persons who are gay, lesbian, or questioning their sexual identity is clear—the odds are great (almost 1 out of 3) that the counselors from whom they seek assistance may view them to be immoral and, if so, it is unlikely that these counselors can promote their welfare. Furthermore, the odds are overwhelming (almost 2 out of 3) that the counselors from whom gay or lesbian persons seek assistance will not likely be affirming about issues that are important to the gay and lesbian community, such as equal rights.

Counselors are ethically obligated to be advocates for societal change on the behalf of persons whom they serve. If counselors doubt the importance of social justice for persons who are gay or lesbian, then they may be unwilling to act as agents of change. The conflicted views about social and civil equality for persons who are gay or lesbian that exist in the larger society seemed to be represented among the counselors in this study. While the counselors seemed, for the most part, to have accepted new understandings of homosexuality, many demonstrated homonegative beliefs regarding the more abstract issues (e.g., homosexuality as a source of pride, being “out,” equal rights) which their sexual minority clients face in their daily

lives. Despite ethical obligations to be agents of social change and to promote the welfare of the clients whom they serve, many counselors may be reluctant to address current issues of importance to clients or students who are gay or lesbian. The implication of this finding for gay or lesbian persons is that many of the counselors from whom they seek assistance may be reluctant to explore with them social justice issues, thereby limiting their growth and development.

The results of this study have implications for the preservice and post-service training of counselors in Alabama. Counselor education programs must be aware that many of the students whom they are preparing to become counselors may believe homosexuality to be immoral. Furthermore, many students may disagree with social justice issues important to persons who are gay or lesbian. According to the *ACA Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*, counselor education programs are obligated to address diversity in all their courses. Emphasis, therefore, should be placed on students’ personal values and beliefs about working with persons who represent sexual minorities. While counselor educator programs cannot guarantee that their graduates will not hold homonegative beliefs, these programs are obligated to expose students to knowledge which challenges them to critically examine the beliefs to which they adhere.

Professional associations serving counselors at the national, state, and local levels have the duty to provide training opportunities for members that enhance their skills and

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knowledge. A part of this obligation is to address the roles and ethical responsibilities of counselors when working with individuals who represent sexual minorities through relevant content sessions at professional conferences. Professional associations can also sponsor workshops specific to understanding issues which are central to persons who are gay or lesbian. If counselors are obligated to be social advocates on behalf of their consumers, then this obligation extends to the professional organizations to which counselors belong.

At the individual level, counselors should explore their values and beliefs about homosexuality. This critical examination is incomplete, however, without also exploring the extent to which homonegative beliefs may conflict with ethical obligations. If counselors are unable to respect diversity, promote the welfare of gay or lesbian clients, and be advocates for social change because of homonegative beliefs, then they may be in violation of the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*. Counselors who have homonegative beliefs should seek knowledge in order to better serve this population. The acquisition of knowledge can be achieved through participation in workshops and other training activities, reading about sexual minority identities and issues, and becoming involved with sexual minority persons through participation in organizations such as Parents, Family, and Friends of Gays and Lesbians (PFLAG). Counselors who do not believe that they can meet their ethical obligations to sexual minority clients should, perhaps, reconsider their decision to be a counselor.

It should be noted that several respondents commented that they believed the wording of many items of the MHS to be biased and inflammatory. In particular, some objected to the use of the word ridiculous. The items of the instrument are intended to measure strongly held negative beliefs, and negative beliefs about homosexuality are often strongly held. Within the historical context of social equality, including civil and legal rights for other minority persons in the United States, it is likely that, at historical milestones, many in the majority found it to be “ridiculous” that women would wish to work outside of the home; that public schools should be integrated, rather than segregated; and that persons with disabilities should have legal protections against employment discrimination. We suspect that the wording of some items of the MHS was considered inflammatory by some respondents because of current controversies regarding highly debated civil and legal protections for persons who are gay or lesbian.

Summary and Conclusions

Counselors are ethically obligated to respect diversity, to promote the welfare of persons whom they serve, and to advocate for change at individual and societal levels when barriers and obstacles inhibit the growth and development of consumers of counseling services. Counselors are also obligated to examine their own cultural identities and values and how they may affect the counseling process. With regard to persons who are gay or lesbian, the counselors who participated in this study did not appear to adhere to traditional prejudices about

homosexuality, although many considered homosexuality to be immoral and few believed that equal rights should be afforded to persons who are gay or lesbian. Substantial percentages of the counselors demonstrated homonegative beliefs about social justice issues which are currently important to persons who are gay or lesbian. Counselors in Alabama are encouraged to explore their values and belief systems and to critically examine the impact of those values and beliefs on ethical obligations when working with persons who are gay or lesbian. ◆

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Table 1.

Results for Old Fashioned Homonegativity

<u>Item</u>	<u>Homonegative</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Positive</u>
1. Just because someone is gay or lesbian does not mean that he or she has a mental disorder	3.7%	6.1%	90.2%
2. Gay men and lesbians are immoral	28.5%	23.3%	48.1%
3. Gay men and lesbians should have the same rights as straight (heterosexual) men and women	63.7%	13.8%	22.5%
4. Gay men and lesbians should not be allowed to work with children	16.0%	13.3%	70.8%
5. Those who support the rights of gay men and lesbians are probably gay or lesbian themselves	5.8%	15.9%	78.3%
6. Gay men and lesbians should be avoided whenever possible	2.8%	7.2%	90.0%

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Table 2.

Results for Modern Homonegativity

Item	Homonegative	Neutral	Positive
1. Many gay men and lesbians use their sexual orientation so that they can obtain special privileges	12.3%	24.7%	63.0%
2. Gay men and lesbians seem to focus on the ways in which they differ from heterosexuals and ignore the ways in which they are the same	25.7%	29.4%	44.8%
3. Gay men and lesbians do not have all the rights they need	40.9%	22.8%	36.2%
4. The notion of universities providing students with undergraduate degrees in Gay and Lesbian Studies is ridiculous	44.1%	25.0%	30.8%
5. The media devote far too much attention to the topic of homosexuality	47.7%	23.6%	28.7%
6. Celebrations such as “Gay Pride Day” are ridiculous because they assume that an individual’s sexual orientation should constitute a source of pride	43.4%	23.6	32.9%
7. Gay men and lesbians should stop shoving their lifestyle down other people’s throats	45.3%	29.4%	25.2%
8. Gay men and lesbians still need to protest for equal rights	42.4%	21.9%	35.7%
9. If gay men and lesbians want to be treated like everyone else, then they need to stop making such a fuss about their sexuality/culture	45.7%	22.2%	32.0%
10. Gay men and lesbians who are “out of the closet” should be admired for their courage	35.9%	35.6%	28.5%
11. Gay men and lesbians should stop complaining about the way they are treated in society and simply get on with their lives	42.8%	23.8%	33.5%
12. In today’s tough economic times, American’s tax dollars shouldn’t be used to support gay and lesbian organizations	52.1%	24.2%	23.6%
13. Gay men and lesbians have become too confrontational in their demand for equal rights	34.0%	24.7%	41.3%