

Analyzing Predictors of Postsecondary Agricultural Education Students' Attitudes Toward the LGBTQ+ Community

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Introduction

Although there are recent signs toward an acceptance of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) community in the United States, LGBTQ+ individuals still face prejudice and discrimination (Herek & McLemore, 2013; Hubbard et al., 2013).

Specifically, LGBTQ+ individuals (a) remain as one of the main targets of hate crimes in the United States (FBI, 2019), (b) face challenges for equal access to healthcare and pay (Herek & McLemore, 2013), and (c) are denied access to adoption and/or fostering children in numerous states (Herek, 2009). Rural areas pose greater challenges for the LGBTQ+ community with minimal resources, like healthcare, and a lack of anonymity to protect themselves from victimization (Movement Advancement Project, 2011; Gottschalk & Newton, 2009).

Additionally, LGBTQ+ youth experience homophobia in education, sharing experiences of verbal harassment and physical assault in school due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Kosciw et al., 2014). Religious groups continue this cycle of stigma, as they often advocate for overturning policies that protect LGBTQ+ individuals from discrimination (Herek & McLemore, 2013). These unique challenges in education and rural areas led researchers to explore the attitudes of post-secondary Agricultural Education students toward the LGBTQ+ community.

Conceptual Framework

Chevrette (2020) termed straight fragility as, “fears, discomforts, and shame produced when those who align with straightness [heterosexuality] encounter queerness” (p. 106). Fragility surrounding sexualities is evident in (1) the refusal of heterosexual individuals to enter queer spaces (e.g., gay bars, LGBTQ-owned businesses); (2) the need of heterosexual individuals to reaffirm their sexuality before speaking about sexuality issues; and (3) in heterosexual individuals fear of being approached/hit on by queer individuals (Chevrette, 2020). The concept of sexual prejudice relates to fragility as Herek (2009) describes *sexual prejudice* as, “internalized sexual stigma that results in the negative evaluation of sexual minorities” (p. 74). Sexual prejudice allows for an explanation of motivation behind negative behaviors toward sexual minorities (Herek, 2009).

Methodology

The population for this study consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in the Fall semester agricultural education (AED) courses at the University of Kentucky. Participants in this study responded to a 27-item questionnaire developed by Gato et al. (2012; 2014) titled the *Multidimensional Scale of Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men* (MSATLGM). The instrument yielded 45 usable responses that consisted of four constructs that evaluated perceived attitudes toward lesbian women and gay men. More specifically, the constructs measure the: (1) rejection of proximity – rejecting the presence of/avoidance of gays and lesbians; (2) pathologizing homosexuality – believing that homosexuality is a mental disorder/disease; (3) modern heterosexism – heterosexist opinions of parenting, marriage and visibility of lesbians and gays; and (4) support – attitudes of support for equal rights and visibility of various sexual orientations. In addition to the MSATLGM instrument, additional questions were asked that addressed the individual’s characteristics. Regression modelling was used to determine the relationships between the constructs and characteristics.

Findings

It was revealed in the data that degree of religion was a significant predictor the variance of responses in each construct (See Table 1). Religion predicted twenty percent of variance to rejection of proximity ($\beta = .40$; $p \leq .01$), twenty-three percent of variance to pathologizing homosexuality ($\beta = .43$; $p \leq .01$), thirty percent of variance to modern heterosexism ($\beta = .38$; $p \leq .01$), and twenty percent of variance to support ($\beta = -.44$; $p \leq .01$).

Table 1

Regression of Demographic Variables to Predicting Construct Responses (n = 45)

Variable	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>b</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Rejection of Proximity	.44	.20				
Credit Standing ^a			-.12	-.15	-1.00	.31
Home Residence ^b			.12	.71	.48	.63
Degree of Religion ^c			.38	.40	2.70	.01*
Pathologizing Homosexuality	.47	.23				
Credit Standing			-.15	-.15	-1.04	.30
Home Residence			.09	.05	.33	.74
Degree of Religion			.48	.43	2.82	.01*
Modern Heterosexism	.55	.30				
Credit Standing			-.33	-.31	-2.31	.03*
Home Residence			-.05	-.03	-.19	.85
Degree of Religion			.45	.38	2.71	.01*
Support	.45	.20				
Credit Standing			.11	.09	.65	.52
Home Residence			-.16	-.07	-.48	.63
Degree of Religion			-.56	-.44	-2.88	.01*

Note. ^aCoded: Freshman = 1, Sophomore = 2, Junior = 3, Senior = 4; ^bCoded: Rural = 1, Suburban = 2, Urban = 3; ^cCoded: Not Religious = 1, Slightly Religious = 2, Moderately Religious = 3; Very Religious = 4. * $p \leq .05$

Conclusions, Implications, & Recommendations

The perception of how convicted the post-secondary students evaluated their devotion to faith revealed significance of attitudes that support distancing and attribution toward homosexuality. The more religious the respondents identified themselves, the more likely they were to respond with attitudes that reflect a desire for (a) proximal distance from LGBTQ+ individuals, (b) belief that homosexuality is a disease, and (c) heterosexist ideologies. Although significance was undetermined, the older students responded with more accepting views.

Creating an environment that is comfortable for students is critical to learning. Comfortability is tied to exposure, beliefs, and environmental conditions; thus, it is pivotal that teacher educators encourage students to engage in critical conversations that promote behaviors of acceptance. This study is limited to a convenient sample of participants in one semester of an institution; thus, it is recommended that research explore motivations behind sexual stigmas and work that decrease sexual prejudice (Herek & McLemore, 2013).

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