

**Describing Postsecondary Agricultural Education Students' Attitudes Toward the
LGBTQ+ Community**

Eric M. Moser

University of Kentucky
(517) 652-2034
moser.eric@uky.edu

Stacy K. Vincent

University of Kentucky
(859) 257-7588
stacy.vincent@uky.edu

325 Cooper Drive
Garrigus Building, Room 307
Lexington, KY 40546

Introduction

For decades, research has found evidence that homophobia systemically exists in the United States educational system (Kosciw et al., 2014; Klein, 2006; Walters & Hayes, 1998). Schools have failed to address the developmental and social needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) youth (Walters & Hayes, 1998). Additionally, post-secondary programs fail to (a) adequately prepare pre-service teachers and (b) provide in-service teachers with support to address the needs of LGBTQ+ youth in schools (Page, 2017). Homophobic school environments have been found to drastically decrease students' mental health and academic achievement (Kosciw et al., 2014) and has been linked to instances of extreme violence, including school shootings (Klein, 2006). In a national survey of over 16,700 students nationwide over 95% reported hearing derogatory remarks and over 86% reported being harassed and/or assaulted in school because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (GLSEN, 2019). Additionally, teachers in rural areas have noted feeling greater levels of discomfort when working with LGBTQ+ youth and had amplified levels of fear when compared to suburban and urban teachers (Page, 2017). Given the homophobia expressed in education, with greater challenges in rural areas, researchers explored postsecondary Agriculture Education students' attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community.

Conceptual Framework

Sexual prejudice refers to the negative evaluation toward an individual whose sexual orientation holds a minority status in society (Herek, 2009; Herek & McLemore, 2013). Sexual prejudice is unique from other forms of prejudice as (a) prejudice toward LGBTQ+ individuals is more socially accepted when compared to ethnic or sexist prejudice, and (b) sexual prejudice is rooted in discomfort with visibility of sexual minority identities (Gato et al., 2012). Herek and McLemore (2013) further note that, "because heterosexuals' prejudice against sexual minorities is founded on cultural stigma, it reinforces – and is reinforced by – power and status differences between the groups [sexual minorities and heterosexuals]" (p. 312). Negative emotions and stigmas that underline sexual prejudice result in heterosexual individuals' desires to reject and/or avoid individuals in the LGBTQ+ community in various contexts and roles (Gato et al., 2012; Herek, 2009).

Methodology

A convenient sample of students ($n = 45$) enrolled in fall undergraduate agricultural education courses at the University of Kentucky completed the *Multidimensional Scale of Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men* developed by Gato et al. (2012; 2014). The scale evaluated four constructs: (1) rejection of proximity (i.e., prejudice is related to rejection of/avoidance of gays and lesbians), (2) pathologizing of homosexuality (i.e., belief that homosexuality is a disease), (3) modern heterosexism (i.e., heterosexist opinions related to marriage, parenting, and visibility), and (4) support (i.e., support of equal rights and visibility of sexual orientation). The purpose of the study is to determine the comfortability, attitudinal, and reciprocal distancing levels of the program's undergraduate students within the realm of homosexuality. Constructs were summated and measures of central tendencies assisted in understanding the results.

Findings

Participants in the study overall reported positive levels of support to the LGBTQ+ community given a mean score on the positive end of the scale for the support construct ($m = 3.98$). Additionally, respondents reported lower mean scores on the rejection of proximity ($m = 2.13$), pathologizing of homosexuality ($m = 2.49$), and modern heterosexism ($m = 3.15$) constructs.

Table 1

Undergraduate Agricultural Education Students' Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men

Constructs	<i>n</i>	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Rejection of Proximity	45	1.00	4.40	2.13	0.91
Pathologizing of Homosexuality	43	1.00	4.60	2.49	1.08
Modern Heterosexism	45	1.14	5.46	3.15	1.14
Support	45	1.40	6.00	3.98	1.23

Note. Responses for each item for the four constructs was measured on a six-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*).

Conclusions and Discussion

This exploratory study sought to describe the perceptions of future SBAE teachers toward lesbian women and gay men. Findings in this study suggest that, overall, undergraduate agricultural education students show some support for members of the LGBTQ+ community, given a positive response to the *support* construct. It should also be noted that the *support* construct was the only construct to receive a full score of 6.00. Additionally, many respondents rejected statements related to heterosexism, pathologizing homosexuality, and rejecting proximity to lesbian women and gay men in the *rejection of proximity* and *pathologizing of homosexuality* constructs – further showing overall support for the community. The neutral mean score for the *modern heterosexism* construct suggests that there is a need for improvement of more accepting views toward LGBTQ+ parenting and marriage rights as well as visibility.

Implications, Recommendations, and Impact on Profession

This research study is one of few in the school-based agricultural education (SBAE) profession explicitly exploring the LGBTQ+ community and the perceptions of LGBTQ+ individuals. The dearth of research in our profession surrounding the LGBTQ+ community and their experiences in SBAE leaves numerous gaps in knowledge when cultivating inclusive pedagogy and teachers. Little is known about the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth and teachers involved in SBAE and the biases and perceptions pre-service and in-service SBAE teachers have toward the LGBTQ+ community. In addition to expanding research on the LGBTQ+ community in SBAE authors support further research related to sexual prejudice. These recommendations align with those of current research surrounding sexual prejudice which includes: (a) exploring underlying motivations for sexual prejudice, (b) ways to decrease sexual prejudice and sexual stigma, and (c) shifting heterosexual individuals' prejudice into advocacy for the LGBTQ+ community (Herek & McLemore, 2013).

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