

Heterosexist Ideologies Present in Post-Secondary Agricultural Education Students

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 continually failed to address the developmental and social needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) 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 LGBTQIA+ 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 (Klein, 2006). Nationally, LGBTQIA+ students overwhelmingly report hearing derogatory remarks (95%) and being victims of homophobic harassment/assault (86%) in schools (GLSEN, 2019). Teachers were often participated in using homophobic slurs in schools and rarely intervened in instances of homophobic harassment and assault (GLSEN, 2019).

The lack of intervention of teachers is unalarming given the lack of training pre-service and in-service teachers receive (Page, 2017). Teachers in rural areas have noted feeling greater levels of discomfort when working with LGBTQ+ youth working with this population of students when compared to suburban and urban teachers (Page, 2017). School-based agricultural education (SBAE) programs have also been reported to be exclusionary to gay students, with straight students feeling uncomfortable with gay students enrolling in agriculture classes (Vincent & Austin, 2021). Literature clearly depicts that schools and SBAE programs can be extremely hostile environments for queer students, which led the researchers to assess postsecondary Agricultural 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 LGBTQIA+ 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 LGBTQIA+ community in various contexts and roles (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 LGBTQIA+ community given a mean score on the positive end of the scale for the support construct ($m = 3.98$, $SD = 1.23$). Additionally, respondents reported lower mean scores on the rejection of proximity ($m = 2.13$, $SD = 0.91$), pathologizing of homosexuality ($m = 2.49$, $SD = 1.08$), and modern heterosexism ($m = 3.15$, $SD = 1.14$) constructs.

Table 1

Undergraduate Agricultural Education Students' Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men

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

Note. Responses were measured on a six-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*).

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Overall, undergraduate agricultural education students express mixed attitudes toward individuals who hold lesbian and gay identities. Based upon the findings, participants support equal rights for lesbian and gay individuals (*support*), but do not want to personally be associated with or acknowledge the visibility of non-heterosexual sexualities in social settings (*modern heterosexism*). This lack of acknowledgement reflects heterosexist attitudes that public and social visibility of homosexual identities is immoral, abnormal, or unnatural (Gegenfurtner & Gebhardt, 2017). Therefore, it is recommended that the institution seek opportunities to expand students views to minimize heterosexist ideologies. Although participants reflected heterosexist ideals, they rejected statements related to avoidance of gay men and lesbian women (*rejection of proximity*) and the belief that homosexuality is a mental disorder (*pathologizing of homosexuality*). These two constructs infer a positive shift in mindset towards acceptance of lesbian and gay identities, compared to common mindsets of SBAE students (Vincent & Austin, 2021) and teachers (Page, 2017) in rural areas. With the constructs favoring the support of lesbian and gay identities, teacher educators are encouraged to challenge implicit heteronormative behaviors of their students to combat heterosexism.

Scholarship in our profession addressing LGBTQIA+ identities is minimal (Murray et al., 2020). The lack of knowledge about LGBTQIA+ students and teachers involved in agricultural education leaves teachers unequipped to work with students who hold these identities. Researchers further recommend to (a) expand pedagogical methodologies for LGBTQIA+ identities in teacher education courses and (b) advocate to policymakers and school administrators for affirming, supportive, and protective school policies and curricula regarding LGBTQIA+ students.

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