

## College Students' Attitudes toward LGBT Individuals

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### **Abstract**

*Discrimination and oppression of the lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) community is still very prevalent in society, as well as on college campuses. This study investigated attitudes toward LGBT individuals by surveying 50 university students in five different majors on campus. It was hypothesized that males, in general, would have a more heterosexist attitude toward this community. Results indicated that majors with a higher male population supported the hypothesis and were more heterosexist than other majors overall. The findings from this study can be used to enhance knowledge and societal attitudes in an effort to neutralize any discrimination based on sexual orientation.*

### **Introduction**

Despite a society that is moving forward in acceptance of differences, many young people still maintain uncomfortable and confused attitudes towards non-heterosexual lifestyles (Sharpe, 2002). These attitudes lead to discrimination and oppression of the lesbian/gay/ bisexual/transgender (LGBT) community. According to Burn (2000), 77% of gay and lesbian college students in his study had experienced verbal insults due to their sexual orientation. Furthermore, 27% had experienced threats of physical violence, while 22% reported being chased or followed. Nearly all of the college students in this study had heard derogatory remarks on campus referring to LGBT individuals. The literature was examined regarding heterosexual's attitudes surrounding LGBT issues. Following the literature reviews, we surveyed the attitudes of UW-Stout undergraduate students in the following majors: Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS), Applied Science, Art, Engineering Technology, and Hospitality and Tourism (HT).

### **Literature Review**

In researching attitudes towards homosexuality, it is important to keep in mind that there are limited studies available. This may be because the issue of homosexuality is a more contemporary topic in today's society. Most of the studies found used the term homosexuality; however, we will be using homosexuality and LGBT interchangeably. The majority of the studies available seem to be correlational because they compare different populations and their attitudes towards homosexuality. Similarly, this study is attempting to show a relationship between college students' attitudes towards homosexual persons and which major that student is in. The articles that were reviewed gave some information on why people perceive individuals to be homosexual based on their characteristics. These four studies provided a basis for why more research is needed in this field. The research reviewed indicated that homosexuality is still something that is disapproved in society, even though it is more visible in the public domain (Wong, McCreary, Carpenter, Engle, & Korchynsky, 1999; Burn, 2000; Kim, D'Andrea, Sahu, & Gaughen, 1998; Herek, 1988).

Wong, McCreary, Carpenter, Engle, and Korchynsky (1999) examined why male and female college students thought some of their peers were of a sexual orientation other than heterosexual. This research suggests that a male will be looked down upon since he is lowering his social ranking by being more feminine, and that a female might not be "punished" for acting in an opposite gender role because the male role is considered superior.

In a study based on heterosexuals' use of the words "fag" or "queer," Burn (2000) found that harassment of gay students is common and that college students are frequently exposed to language that reminds them that LGBT individuals are seen as undesirable and abnormal by the dominant heterosexual society. Burn also found that anti-gay language is most common within the young male culture and is specific towards male homosexuality.

Kim, D'Andrea, Sahu, and Gaughen (1998) found that the issue of homosexuality in the past few decades has become a topic of greater discussion and is increasingly more public in the United States. This study focused on the knowledge individuals have about gay and lesbian persons in relationship to their attitudes toward the issue of homosexuality. Overall, having positive attitudes about homosexuals most likely implies that a person has more knowledge and understanding about the lifestyles of gay and lesbian persons. Furthermore, these positive attitudes lead to greater acceptance. A unique finding of this study indicated that students' knowledge and attitudes toward homosexuality changed significantly in relation to their chosen field of study. In particular, students in an education major expressed greater knowledge and acceptance of LGBT individuals than students majoring in business.

In 1988, Herek tried to show a relationship between heterosexuals' attitudes toward lesbians and gay men and gender. Herek attempted to uncover whether heterosexual male attitudes were more positive or negative than heterosexual women by rating their homophobia, or personal and institutional prejudice against lesbians and gay men. According to this study, heterosexual individuals with negative attitudes are more likely to express traditional, restrictive attitudes about gender roles. One of the most consistent findings in this study revealed that heterosexual males manifest more anti-gay hostility on average than do heterosexual females. One explanation for men feeling more negatively toward homosexuality is the idea that American society has placed such an emphasis on the importance of heterosexuality being linked to masculinity.

While there was a very small study showing a relationship between education majors being less heterosexist towards LGBT people than business majors, the purpose of our study is to take it one step further by including more diverse majors. We are exploring the relationship between choice of major and heterosexist attitudes towards LGBT people. The central research question in this study is "What is the relationship of male and female college student's attitudes toward LGBT individuals compared across the curriculum in the following majors at the University of Wisconsin-Stout: Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS), Applied Science (AS), Art (ART), Engineering Technology (ET), and Hospitality and Tourism (HT)?" It is hypothesized that male-dominated majors will exhibit more heterosexist attitudes overall.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theory used in this study is the Feminist Theory (Strong et. al., 2005). It was developed as a result of the feminist movement and it was used to study how each family was shaped by gender and gender roles. Historically, men were expected to display masculine attributes, while all women were expected to display femininity. This theory indicates that males and females have specific gender roles that they must conform to. While mostly gender related, this theory also extends to all oppressed groups based on age, class, ethnicity, race, disability, or sexual orientation. As applied to this study, the Feminist Theory would predict that the results would reflect that of society's assumptions towards males and females. This theory suggests that our

sample's attitudes would reflect heterosexual and traditional gender roles based on men possessing masculine traits and women exhibiting feminine traits. Also, this theory indicates that males are responsible for having established the gender roles in which all individuals, male and female, are expected to follow. This could imply that men, in general, have stronger feelings about staying within the gender role boundaries. Furthermore, because gender roles were socially constructed by men, we feel that males will probably have a more heterosexist attitude.

### **Methods**

#### *Participants*

This study took place at Midwestern Wisconsin University. The participants consisted of 50 undergraduate students, 10 of each in the following majors: Human Development and Family Studies, Applied Science, Art, Engineering Technology, and Hospitality and Tourism. Of these fifty, 21 of the participants were male and 29 were female. There were 26 participants between the ages of 18-21, 16 between the ages of 22-25, and the remaining 8 participants were 25 years or older. There were 8 female and 2 male respondents in the Human Development and Family Studies major, 6 female and 4 male respondents in the Applied Science major, 8 female and 2 male respondents in the Art major, no female and 10 male respondents in the Engineering Technology major, and 7 female and 3 male respondents in the Hospitality and Tourism major. In terms of academic status, there were 30 seniors, 14 juniors, 6 sophomores, and no freshmen.

#### *Research Design*

The purpose of this study is to reveal current attitudes from the sample group and be able to use that data to broaden the view about a bigger population of similar students on campus. This study is best described as a cross-sectional study design in that it was used to capture knowledge, or attitudes, at one point in time. The study used a non-random probability sample design, because we needed to gather information from students in specific majors. Students were approached who potentially had the information needed and would be willing to share it, therefore purposive sampling was used. Finally, data was collected using self-administered questionnaires, as this seemed to be the most efficient method due to the fast pace of our research course, overall convenience, the low cost of using surveys and gathering data directly on campus, and the quick return of data.

#### *Data Collection Instrument*

In order to address the attitudes of students regarding LGBT individuals, a survey was created, which was approved by the Institutional Review Board for distribution. The survey developed included a cover letter, which explained the purpose of the study, as well as the research topic. It also contained information regarding confidentiality, contact information of the research team and the supervisor, instructions for completing the survey, estimated time of completion, a statement clarifying that participation is voluntary, and definitions of any terms the participant might not know.

The survey consisted of four demographic questions relating to major, age, gender, and academic status. Participants were then given seven closed-ended statements, which were the dependent variables, and were then asked to circle the answer that best describes their attitudes based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). Questions were constructed from our understanding of the literature and what factors relate to attitudes regarding LGBT individuals. The questions covered information such as: familiarity with the term LGBT, knowing an LGBT individual, comfort level, spending social time with LGBT persons, LGBT information related to course content, LGBT rights in the US, and

marriage rights. There was also space available for anyone to include thoughts or comments. To be sure the survey was clear and valid, it was piloted on five UW-Stout undergraduate students. Through the feedback received, it was concluded that the survey was ready for distribution.

The survey instrument has both face validity and content validity. Face validity refers to the instrument questions having a logical connection to the concept and research question. Because the questions and concepts addressed in the survey are literature-inspired, it was determined that they clearly connected to the larger problem of discrimination against LGBT individuals. Content validity refers to the instrument statements' coverage of the full range of concepts under the larger topic. The questions addressed a broad range of issue regarding LGBT discrimination as well.

### *Procedure*

To collect the data for this study, we approached students on campus between March 8, 2006 and March 21, 2006. Students were asked what their major was; if the students fell into one of the majors needed, then they were asked if they would be willing to fill out one of the surveys. For convenience purposes, we went into the buildings where the classes for these specific majors were normally held. Specifically, the targeted locations included the Home Economics building for HDFS and HT students, Jarvis Hall Science Wing for Applied Science students, Jarvis Hall Technology Wing for Engineering Technology students, and the Applied Arts building for the Art students. More so, the students in the Memorial Student Center and Micheels Hall were also asked. In order to maintain the most confidentiality possible, and in the hopes of more accurate surveys, participants were provided with an envelope along with the survey so they could seal it in the envelope when they were finished. They were then asked to place the envelope into a larger envelope. In order to get the most accurate information possible, we did not stand near the participants while they filled out the survey. Since the information in the surveys could be considered sensitive subject content, it was believed that standing near the participant might increase the socially acceptable responses instead of the true attitudes. None of the surveys were opened until all were collected. To ensure the sample number, we distributed more surveys than needed in case of missing data.

### *Data Analysis Plan*

To enhance data validity, the research data was "cleaned" and checked for any missing data. The "cleaned" surveys were then "coded" using acronyms for each variable. The first questions on the survey were meant to describe characteristics of the participants such as: age, academic status, gender, and major. Of these four questions, the only independent variable was major (*MAJOR*). The other three questions were meant only to describe the participants. Each attitude statement was also given an acronym name. Refer to the table below for each variable's name and meaning. To analyze the data, a data-analyzing computer program called Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used. The individual was used as our level of analysis, and then frequencies, cross-tabulations, and a reliability analysis were conducted. The statistical reliability check used was Chronbach's Alpha.

### **Results**

All variables were subjected to a frequency distribution analysis. The frequency distribution results revealed that there was no missing data. Using the cross-tabulation analysis, we were able to compare results between the specific majors (*MAJOR*,) which are the independent variables, with the dependent variables.

College Students' Attitudes toward LGBT Individuals

Table 1

*Cross tabulations*

| Category               | FAMILIAR |       |       |       |       | Total  |
|------------------------|----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|
|                        | SD       | D     | U     | A     | SA    |        |
| HDFS                   | 0.0%     | 0.0%  | 0.0%  | 40.0% | 60.0% | 100.0% |
| Applied Science        | 10.0%    | 10.0% | 0.0%  | 50.0% | 30.0% | 100.0% |
| Art                    | 10.0%    | 0.0%  | 10.0% | 20.0% | 60.0% | 100.0% |
| Engineering Technology | 10.0%    | 0.0%  | 10.0% | 60.0% | 20.0% | 100.0% |
| Hospitality & Tourism  | 10.0%    | 30.0% | 10.0% | 30.0% | 20.0% | 100.0% |

| Category               | KNOW  |       |       |       |       | Total  |
|------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|
|                        | SD    | D     | U     | A     | SA    |        |
| HDFS                   | 0.0%  | 0.0%  | 10.0% | 30.0% | 60.0% | 100.0% |
| Applied Science        | 0.0%  | 10.0% | 10.0% | 30.0% | 50.0% | 100.0% |
| Art                    | 20.0% | 0.0%  | 0.0%  | 20.0% | 60.0% | 100.0% |
| Engineering Technology | 10.0% | 0.0%  | 0.0%  | 70.0% | 20.0% | 100.0% |
| Hospitality & Tourism  | 10.0% | 10.0% | 0.0%  | 50.0% | 30.0% | 100.0% |

| Category               | COMFORT |       |       |       |       | Total  |
|------------------------|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|
|                        | SD      | D     | U     | A     | SA    |        |
| HDFS                   | 0.0%    | 10.0% | 10.0% | 30.0% | 50.0% | 100.0% |
| Applied Science        | 0.0%    | 0.0%  | 10.0% | 40.0% | 50.0% | 100.0% |
| Art                    | 0.0%    | 0.0%  | 10.0% | 20.0% | 70.0% | 100.0% |
| Engineering Technology | 0.0%    | 20.0% | 30.0% | 30.0% | 20.0% | 100.0% |
| Hospitality & Tourism  | 0.0%    | 0.0%  | 20.0% | 40.0% | 40.0% | 100.0% |

| Category               | SOCIAL |       |       |       |       | Total  |
|------------------------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|
|                        | SD     | D     | U     | A     | SA    |        |
| HDFS                   | 10.0%  | 10.0% | 30.0% | 20.0% | 30.0% | 100.0% |
| Applied Science        | 0.0%   | 30.0% | 30.0% | 20.0% | 20.0% | 100.0% |
| Art                    | 0.0%   | 0.0%  | 20.0% | 40.0% | 40.0% | 100.0% |
| Engineering Technology | 40.0%  | 10.0% | 20.0% | 10.0% | 20.0% | 100.0% |
| Hospitality & Tourism  | 0.0%   | 20.0% | 20.0% | 40.0% | 20.0% | 100.0% |

| Category               | CONTENT |       |       |       |       | Total  |
|------------------------|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|
|                        | SD      | D     | U     | A     | SA    |        |
| HDFS                   | 0.0%    | 10.0% | 30.0% | 20.0% | 40.0% | 100.0% |
| Applied Science        | 20.0%   | 10.0% | 70.0% | 0.0%  | 0.0%  | 100.0% |
| Art                    | 0.0%    | 10.0% | 50.0% | 30.0% | 10.0% | 100.0% |
| Engineering Technology | 30.0%   | 30.0% | 40.0% | 0.0%  | 0.0%  | 100.0% |
| Hospitality & Tourism  | 10.0%   | 10.0% | 40.0% | 40.0% | 0.0%  | 100.0% |

| Category               | EQUAL |       |       |       |       | Total  |
|------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|
|                        | SD    | D     | U     | A     | SA    |        |
| HDFS                   | 10.0% | 0.0%  | 20.0% | 0.0%  | 70.0% | 100.0% |
| Applied Science        | 0.0%  | 10.0% | 0.0%  | 30.0% | 60.0% | 100.0% |
| Art                    | 0.0%  | 0.0%  | 0.0%  | 30.0% | 70.0% | 100.0% |
| Engineering Technology | 10.0% | 10.0% | 20.0% | 40.0% | 20.0% | 100.0% |
| Hospitality & Tourism  | 10.0% | 0.0%  | 20.0% | 40.0% | 30.0% | 100.0% |

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| Category               | <b>MARRY</b> |          |          |          |           | <b>Total</b> |
|------------------------|--------------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|--------------|
|                        | <b>SD</b>    | <b>D</b> | <b>U</b> | <b>A</b> | <b>SA</b> |              |
| HDFS                   | 0.0%         | 20.0%    | 0.0%     | 30.0%    | 50.0%     | 100.0%       |
| Applied Science        | 10.0%        | 10.0%    | 10.0%    | 40.0%    | 30.0%     | 100.0%       |
| Art                    | 0.0%         | 0.0%     | 10.0%    | 20.0%    | 70.0%     | 100.0%       |
| Engineering Technology | 40.0%        | 0.0%     | 30.0%    | 10.0%    | 20.0%     | 100.0%       |
| Hospitality & Tourism  | 10.0%        | 0.0%     | 50.0%    | 30.0%    | 10.0%     | 100.0%       |

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*Note.* (MAJOR)= HDFS, Applied Science, Art, Engineering Technology, Hospitality and Tourism; (FAMILIAR)=Familiarity with the term LGBT; (KNOW)= Knowing an LGBT individual; (COMFORT)= Being comfortable in the presence of an LGBT individual; (SOCIAL)= Spending social time with LGBT individuals; (CONTENT)= Importance of having LGBT content in all courses; (EQUAL)= LGBT individuals should have all the same rights as heterosexuals in the US; (MARRY)= LGBT individuals should be allowed to marry.

A reliability analysis was run to indicate if the seven variables (*FAMILIAR*, *KNOW*, *COMFORT*, *SOCIAL*, *CONTENT*, *EQUAL*, *MARRY*) were a reliable index to measure our concept (college students' attitudes toward LGBT individuals). Chronbach's Alpha is a measure of reliability. In this analysis, the reliability statistic was 0.830 out of a possible 1.0. This value indicates that the survey questions are a reliable measure of our central concept and were inspired from theory and literature.

### Discussion

Overall, the results did support the hypothesis that majors with more males than females would have a more heterosexist attitude toward LGBT individuals. The current statistics on the male to female ratios in these majors are as follows: HDFS has 10% males and 90% females, AS has 49% males and 51% females, ART has 39% males and 61% females, ET has 96% males and 4% females, and H&T has 39% males and 61% females. Participants in the ET major had more "strongly disagree" or "disagree" answers to all variables than did any other major. According to Herek (1988), heterosexual males manifest more anti-gay hostility on average than do heterosexual females. One example of this was demonstrated in the LGBT marriage (*MARRY*) question. Only 30% of ET participants agreed that LGBT individuals should have the right to marry, while the remaining majors had higher percentages in this area. Regarding the content (*CONTENT*) variable, no ET participants felt that LGBT content in their courses was needed. This could be interpreted as a gender issue, or whether they feel LGBT content is relevant to ET coursework. Moreover, ET participants had significantly lower levels of comfort (*COMFORT*) around LGBT individuals.

It has been suggested that there is a correlation between positive attitudes toward homosexuals and having knowledge about these individuals (Kim et al., 1998). Knowledge on this issue is best gained through experience, not necessarily a classroom setting. This idea is supported in our study because it found that all of the majors except for ET had a high comfort level (*COMFORT*) with LGBT individuals. This is related to the amount of social time (*SOCIAL*) spent with LGBT individuals. Students in the ET major spent the least amount of social time with homosexuals, whereas the other four majors (HDFS, AS, ART, HT) spent more time and had higher levels of comfort.

People in majors that work directly with people are generally more receptive and understanding of human diversity (Kim et al., 1998). Since the HDFS major focuses on working with diverse individuals, we predicted this study would show this. However, when analyzing the results, it was found that while HDFS had high levels of comfort (*COMFORT*) and equality (*EQUAL*), AS and ART majors had even higher levels. Interestingly, when comparing equal

rights (*EQUAL*) to the idea of LGBT marriage (*MARRY*), all groups had higher percentages towards equal rights (*EQUAL*) and lower percentages toward marriage (*MARRY*), except for HDFS. While 70% of HDFS agreed to equal rights (*EQUAL*), 80% agreed to this issue of marriage (*MARRY*). This was surprising because we felt that marriage was a part of the rights of US citizens, yet when marriage was set as a separate variable from equal rights, many people's responses changed.

Burn (2000) found that more positive beliefs and attitudes towards LGBT individuals are connected with knowing a lesbian or gay person. However, 90% of ET participants claimed they knew a homosexual individual (*KNOW*), yet their responses to the remaining variables suggests they have the most negative attitudes within our study. This raises the question of whether how well you know an LGBT individual matters in how you feel about them.

As stated earlier, Feminist Theory (Strong et al., 2005) asserts that men are responsible for socially constructing gender roles. This theory indicates that males and females have specific gender roles they must conform to. Because of many historical factors, men have stronger feelings about staying within their gender role boundaries. According to this theory, it was predicted that men would have more heterosexist attitudes. The results indicated this to be true.

### *Limitations*

The most significant limitation of this study was the sample size. Due to the small sample size, we are unable to generalize the findings to other populations. Another limitation was the use of our non-random sampling. This also restrained us from generalizing beyond college students within the majors we surveyed. An additional limitation could be the sensitive nature of our topic, which may have caused some respondents to answer in a socially acceptable manner.

### *Implications for Practitioners*

It is important for all family practitioners to recognize their own biases, prejudices, and opinions and not allow these to interfere with their work. The findings of our research suggest that more education is needed on this topic. Since teachers are the primary educators of children these days, we feel it is imperative for teachers to be more educated on issues regarding LGBT people. This education could be provided in many forms, such as professional development workshops and/or conferences and on the job training could help to educate family practitioner and other educators. When educators have a better understanding of LGBT issues, they are better able to teach and relay information needed to help students achieve acceptance. Acceptance is learned at an early age.

### *Implications for Future Research*

It seems that most of the research studies investigated conducted their studies with college students, much like this study. We would like to suggest a research study be conducted with people that have never attended a secondary school. A study such as this would determine if education plays a role in attitudes, or if gender really is the main factor.

### **Conclusion**

As a result of this study, it is our hope that attitudes towards LGBT people are better understood. Overall, we feel this study was important and valuable in addressing this societal issue. The results from this study should be used for enhancing knowledge and attitudes of society in an effort to neutralize any discrimination based on sexual orientation. We would like to see the social stigma attached to homosexuality disappear, and feel education is the best way

to make that happen. Gender seems to be the constant within the research, and this is important to know when attempting to educate and make changes in society.

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