

Education Facilitating Students' Comfort with LGBT People

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Abstract

Intolerance for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community is often intensified by a lack of knowledge and understanding between heterosexuals and the LGBT community (Getz & Kirkley, 2006). The central question in this study was “What is the relationship between education on the college campus and one’s comfort level with LGBT people?” The researchers predicted that those students who have received education on LGBT issues would be more comfortable with the LGBT population than those students who did not. Participants were N = 55 students from a university in Wisconsin in this nonrandom pilot study. Survey data was statistically analyzed using frequencies, cross-tabulations, mean comparisons, and a reliability analysis. Results indicated and supported the hypothesis that receiving education on a college campus can make an individual more comfortable with the LGBT population. Specific implications for practitioners would be to include LGBT topics and/or issues into their curriculum to provide more information to students in order to increase their comfort levels of the LGBT population.

Intolerance for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community is often intensified by a lack of knowledge and understanding between heterosexuals and the LGBT community (Getz & Kirkley, 2006). Wright Jr. and Cullen's (2001) research shows that gay and lesbian individuals are the most frequent victims of hate-motivated violence. Is there a way to lessen hate motivated-violence to the LGBT population through education? The researchers planned to establish, through the reviewed literature, that education on the college campus has an impact on an individual's comfort level with LGBT people. A survey was then conducted using a sample of college students, ages 18 and older, regarding courses taken on their campus and their comfort level of LGBT people.

Literature Review

The following literature was reviewed to determine if there was a relationship between a college student's comfort level of LGBT people and any academic classes relating to the topic. College students enrolled in Psychology of Homosexuality and Prejudice courses were the main sample in the reviewed literature. Also sampled were students in Human Sexuality and other Psychology courses. The literature examined whether or not the educational courses decreased levels of homophobia in students. Results were similar throughout the literature with findings showing that the majority of students enrolled in these classes reported being more comfortable with LGBT people. Also, students enrolled in these courses reported a significant reduction in homophobia and higher acceptance levels of LGBT people.

Pettijohn II and Walzer (2008) researched individuals enrolled in college courses, such as Psychology of Prejudice and Introductory Psychology. They wanted to see if, at the completion of the course, students would report a decline in prejudice and negative attitudes toward the LGBT population. As predicted, the students did report a decline after taking the Psychology of

Prejudice course. However, there was no significant decline in the data reported for the students who completed the Introductory Psychology courses.

Getz and Kirkley (2006) explored the issue surrounding the lack of LGBT education on religiously affiliated college campuses. The study looked at the impact of presentations given to the campus through a program called the Rainbow Educator. Results showed that participants were more willing to be allies to the LGBT community after the program. Overall, the university community seemed to have less homophobic comments and fewer slurs, and people were more willing to challenge homophobia when it occurred.

Waterman et al. (2001) centered their research on heterosexual students and their outlook on sexual minorities while being enrolled in a Psychology of Homosexuality course. The goal of this research was to see how much of an impact (if any) this course had on the students' perceptions of LGBT people. Findings revealed that the majority of the students had a decreased level of homophobia at the conclusion of the class. The research also found that a student was more likely to support a peer coming out after completing this class instead of wondering why an individual was homosexual.

The purpose of Wright Jr. and Cullen's (2001) study was to determine students' levels of homophobia after participating in a human sexuality course. Students contributed in lectures, readings, panels, and watched a speaker. Results showed that students had a significant reduction in homophobia. When comparing the first to the last week of class, the students' homophobia levels were reduced from exposure to LGBT education.

Research on the acceptance of LGBT people is lacking significantly. It is known however, that taking courses on LGBT awareness may significantly change one's attitude to be more comfortable with the LGBT population. The present research sampled students at a rural

college to determine whether any classes they had taken discussed the LGBT community, and if their attitudes toward them had changed. When looking at the current literature, the gap the researchers hope to fill is to determine if any course on the college campus promotes higher levels of acceptance instead of one specific course such as Psychology of Prejudice. Lastly, the researchers hope to support that education can increase people's comfort levels of the LGBT community.

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by the Bioecological theory (Papilia, Olds, & Feldman, 2004), which states that development happens through complex processes through the relationships of a developing person and their everyday environment. According to the Bioecological theory, a person is highly influenced by their environment.

The Bioecological theory includes four levels of environment that influence one's development. The two levels that apply to this theory are the micro and macro systems. The micro system includes the education that one would receive at home or in the schools about LGBT people. One's culture, or macro system, also plays a role in that person's comfort level of LGBT people. The Bioecological theory would predict that culture and education would have a significant impact on an individual's comfort level of LGBT people.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to examine if education on the college campus positively influenced an individual's comfort level with LGBT people. With a sample of college students from a Midwestern university, it was the researchers' hope that educators on a college campus would use the results to distinguish the importance of education on comfort levels and apply it to the curriculum. The researchers also hoped that the results of this study would have a significant

enough impact to be used at a lower level of education such as the middle or high school level. Education at any age can influence one's comfort level significantly. The central question in this study was, "What is the relationship between education on the college campus and one's comfort level with LGBT people?" The researchers predicted that those students who have received education on LGBT issues through a course taken in college would be more comfortable with the LGBT population than those students who did not. The previous literature determined that more education on LGBT issues increases comfort levels in students.

Method

Participants

The site of the study was at a university in northwestern Wisconsin. The participants in this study were N = 55 students (29 females and 26 males.) Of the female participants, 16 identified themselves as being comfortable with LGBT people, whereas 12 felt moderately comfortable and one felt uncomfortable with LGBT people. Of the male participants, ten identified themselves as being comfortable with LGBT people, whereas 14 felt moderately comfortable and two felt uncomfortable with LGBT people. Overall, 26 of the participants identified themselves as comfortable with LGBT people, 26 identified themselves as moderately comfortable and three identified themselves as uncomfortable with LGBT people.

Participants' age breakdown is as follows: 4 were between the ages of 18 and 19 (2 males and 2 females,) 24 were between the ages of 20 and 21 (10 males and 14 females,) 15 were between the ages of 22 and 23 (7 male and 8 female,) 7 were between the ages of 24 and 25 (4 male and 3,) and 5 were 26 years old or older (3 male and 2 female.)

Research Design

In this survey research, the researchers set out to generalize the findings to a larger, yet similar population (Babbie, 1990). This was done so that inferences could be made about characteristics, attitudes, or behavior of this population. The researchers wanted to determine individual student comfort levels with the LGBT community from our sample population, and then be able to use that data to generalize about a larger population of similar students on campus. The survey's intent was to obtain attitudes from a cross section of the population at one point in time, making it a cross-sectional study design. The form of data collection was self-administered surveys. The rationale for using this method was that it was the most efficient method to obtain data on campus with the rapid rate of the research course, a convenient location, and a fast return of data. The population was the university student population and the sample was male and female students. The research study used a non-random purposive and quota sampling design, collecting data in a popular dining facility on campus to obtain a large selection of students. The researchers used nonrandom sampling in order to acquire as many participants as possible in a short period of time. The ethical protection of human subjects was provided by completing the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (IRB) training. The study was approved by the IRB.

Data Collection Instrument

To discover student comfort levels regarding LGBT individuals, a survey was designed. Included in the survey was a cover letter with an implied consent form that described the study, definition of terms not commonly known, risks and benefits of taking the survey, time commitment, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and contact information of the researchers and the supervisor. There were also instructions for completing the survey.

The survey consisted of two demographic questions regarding age and gender. The survey also included statements regarding comfort levels that the researchers used to compare and analyze the data. The survey was comprised of nine closed-ended statements based on a 5-point Likert scale that measured student's knowledge and attitudes ranging from strongly disagree (one) to strongly agree (five). Questions were informed by the Bioecological theory and the reviewed literature that determined factors related to students comfort levels with LGBT individuals.

The survey instrument has face validity, which means there is a logical connection of the instrument's questions to the concept and research question. The questions were connected to students comfort levels with LGBT individuals because they were inspired by the literature. The survey instrument also had content validity, which means there are a variety of statements addressing the larger topic of LGBT education and student's comfort levels regarding the LGBT population. The questions asked included student comfort levels, experience with, and knowledge of LGBT individuals. The survey was piloted to two undergraduate students to increase validity. This feedback signified that the survey was understandable and could be given to the participants after the wording on a few questions was revised.

Procedure

The data for this study was collected on campus during November 3rd, 2008 and November 5th, 2008. The purposive sampling design directed the researchers to choose a dining facility where they could sample male and female students. The researchers did not randomize as they approached individuals sitting at tables in the dining facility, in order to be inclusive. Potential participants were asked if they were indeed students and if they had time to fill out a survey. The researchers read the implied consent to the students and explained that they could

keep the first two pages of the instrument. To maintain confidentiality it was explained to the participants that the researchers would be sitting at a table near the entrance of the dining facility, which is where they were to drop of the finished surveys into a large white envelope. The researchers did not stand near the participants to preserve confidentiality. The researchers kept the completed survey instruments in a desk drawer of a locked room at one of the researcher's homes until all the data could be analyzed.

Data Analysis Plan

The data used was first cleaned and checked for any missing data. One returned survey was lacking the participant's age so it was discarded and not included in the results of the study. Then, the cleaned surveys were coded using acronyms for each of the variables. The first two questions were demographic variables including gender and age. The researchers used one independent variable which asked the participants comfort level regarding LGBT people (*COM*). Each of the nine survey statements were treated as dependent variables and were given an acronym name. The survey statements and acronyms included: to determine if the participant felt it was important to receive education on LGBT issues (*EDU*), if they believed that taking a college course on LGBT issues could make an individual more accepting (*ACP*), if the participant had taken a course primarily based on LGBT issues (*CRS*), to determine if the participant was informed about LGBT Awareness Month (*LAM*) and to determine if the participant has ever attended an event during LGBT Awareness Month (*EVT*). Other statements included: if the participant was informed of National Coming Out Day (*COD*), to determine if the participant was informed of the campus gay straight alliance group (*OSG*), to determine if the participant has ever attended a gay straight alliance meeting (*OSM*) and finally to determine if the participant has a friend or acquaintance who identifies as an LGBT individual (*FRD*). The

computer program *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)* was used to analyze the data. The level of analysis in this study was the individual. Since the researchers compared groups based on comfort levels, the data analysis included frequencies, cross-tabulations, mean comparisons, and the reliability analysis Chronbach's alpha. Due to the small and nonrandom pilot study sample, significance testing was not performed.

Results

The researchers used the computer program *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)* to analyze the data that had been collected. The analyses that were performed on the variable were frequencies, cross-tabulations, mean comparisons, and a reliability analysis. The first analysis was a frequency distribution analysis, which indicated that there was no missing data from our surveys, but it did show that one of the independent variable categories, comfort level (*COM*), was significantly skewed so the researchers decided not to apply this information to the results.

Cross-tabulations were run with the independent variable, *COM*. For *EDU* and *ACP* there appeared to be a difference between groups, with the majority of the participants that identified as comfortable agreed or strongly agreed, whereas the majority of those that identified as moderately comfortable were undecided. For *CRS*, *LAM*, *EVT*, *COD*, *OSG*, *OSM* and *FRD*, there again appeared to be a difference between groups with the majority of the comfortable participants agreed or strongly agreed and the majority of the moderately comfortable participants either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

A reliability analysis was run to indicate if our variables were a reliable index to measure our major concept—college students' comfort levels with the LGBT population relating to education previously received. Chronbach's alpha is a measure of reliability and in our analysis

was computed to be 0.885. This value indicated that our survey items were a reliable measure of our major concept.

Table 1

Percent Responses for Survey Item by Comfort Level with LGBT

EDU: It is important to receive education on LGBT issues

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Comfortable	11.5%	19.2%	3.8%	19.2%	46.2%	100.0%
Moderately Comfortable	46.2%	23.1%	15.4%	3.8%	11.5%	100.0%

ACP: I believe taking a college course on LGBT issues could make an individual more accepting of the LGBT population

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Comfortable	0.0%	11.5%	15.4%	34.6%	38.5%	100.0%
Moderately Comfortable	3.8%	15.4%	46.2%	30.8%	3.8%	100.0%

CRS: I have taken a course primarily based on LGBT issues

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Comfortable	69.2%	23.1%	3.8%	0.0%	3.8%	100.0%
Moderately Comfortable	80.8%	15.4%	3.8%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%

LAM: I am informed about LGBT awareness month

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Comfortable	15.4%	30.8%	3.8%	19.2%	30.8%	100.0%
Moderately Comfortable	34.6%	30.8%	23.1%	7.7%	3.8%	100.0%

EVT: I have attended an event during LGBT awareness month

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Comfortable	38.5%	30.8%	0.0%	7.7%	23.1%	100.0%
Moderately Comfortable	80.8%	15.4%	0.0%	0.0%	3.8%	100.0%

COD: I am informed about national coming out day

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Comfortable	23.1%	19.2%	3.8%	19.2%	34.6%	100.0%
Moderately Comfortable	46.2%	26.9%	11.5%	11.5%	3.8%	100.0%

OSG: I am informed about the gay straight alliance group on campus

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Comfortable	11.5%	19.2%	3.8%	19.2%	46.2%	100.0%
Moderately Comfortable	46.2%	23.1%	15.4%	3.8%	11.5%	100.0%

OSM: I have attended a gay straight alliance group meeting

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Comfortable	69.2%	23.1%	0.0%	0.0%	7.7%	100.0%
Moderately Comfortable	80.8%	19.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%

FRD: I have a friend or acquaintance on campus that identifies as an LGBT person

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Comfortable	23.1%	15.4%	0/0%	11.5%	50.0%	100.0%
Moderately Comfortable	46.2%	15.4%	7.7%	7.7%	23.1%	100.0%

Table 2*Descriptive Statistics of Survey Items by Comfort Level with LGBT**EDU: It is important to receive education on LGBT issues*

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Comfortable	4.2	1.0	4.0
Moderately Comfortable	3.0	0.9	4.0

ACP: I believe taking a college course on LGBT issues could make an individual more accepting of the LGBT population

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Comfortable	4.0	1.0	3.0
Moderately Comfortable	3.2	0.9	4.0

CRS: I have taken a course primarily based on LGBT issues

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Comfortable	1.5	0.9	4.0
Moderately Comfortable	1.2	0.5	2.0

LAM: I am informed about LGBT awareness month

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Comfortable	3.2	1.5	4.0
Moderately Comfortable	2.2	1.1	4.0

EVT: I have attended an event during LGBT awareness month

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Comfortable	2.5	1.6	4.0

Moderately Comfortable	1.3	0.8	4.0
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COD: I am informed about national coming out day

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Comfortable	3.2	1.7	4.0
Moderately Comfortable	2.0	1.2	4.0

OSG: I am informed about the gay straight alliance group on campus

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Comfortable	3.7	1.5	4.0
Moderately Comfortable	2.1	1.4	4.0

OSM: I have attended a gay straight alliance group meeting

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Comfortable	1.5	1.1	4.0
Moderately Comfortable	1.2	0.4	1.0

FRD: I have a friend or acquaintance on campus that identifies as an LGBT person

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Comfortable	3.5	1.7	4.0
Moderately Comfortable	2.5	1.7	4.0

Discussion

Overall, the results supported the hypothesis that receiving education on a college campus can contribute to an individual being more comfortable with the LGBT population (Pettijohn II & Walzer, 2008; Getz & Kirkley, 2006; Waterman, et al., 2001; Wright Jr. & Cullen, 2001). The researchers will begin by discussing each dependent variable in relation to the independent variable, in terms of how the results agreed with the theoretical framework and/or the literature. Other topics addressed will include limitations, implications for practitioners, implications for future research, and concluding remarks.

Results indicated a difference between the groups *comfortable* and *moderately comfortable*. Those participants that identified as comfortable with the LGBT population were more likely to: agree that it is important to receive education on LGBT issues, agree that taking a college course on LGBT issues would make an individual more accepting of the LGBT population, have taken a course primarily based on LGBT issues, be informed about LGBT Awareness Month, National Coming Out Day and the gay straight alliance group on their campus, have attended an event during LGBT Awareness Month and/or attended a gay straight alliance meeting, and have a friend or acquaintance on campus who identifies as an LGBT person. These findings were supported in the literature which reviewed if LGBT educational courses on the college campus decreased levels of homophobia in students. Results were similar throughout the literature, with findings being that the majority of students enrolled in these classes reported being more comfortable with the LGBT population. Also, students enrolled in these courses reported a significant reduction in homophobia and higher acceptance levels of LGBT people (Pettijohn II & Walzer, 2008; Getz & Kirkley, 2006; Waterman, et al., 2001; Wright Jr. & Cullen, 2001).

Those participants who identified as moderately comfortable with the LGBT population were more likely to be undecided or disagree on the previously mentioned survey statements. The researchers believe this may be because they indicated not having education on LGBT issues, whereas those who identified as being comfortable with the LGBT population were more likely to have had some education on these issues.

The Bioecological theory indicates that an individual is highly influenced by his or her environment and education (Papilia et al., 2004). Our findings indicated that having received education on LGBT issues and being exposed to different events and programs on campus influenced a person's comfort level with the LGBT population.

Limitations

The researchers had a small sample size to generalize and compare to the larger population of college students at a Midwestern university. Researchers were unable to randomize their sample in order to acquire as many participants as possible. Also, significance testing was not performed due to the study being small and nonrandom.

Implications for Practitioners

The results indicated that education on a college campus can improve an individual's comfort level with the LGBT population. Professionals can use this information to increase LGBT awareness by adding it to course curriculum on the college campus. LGBT awareness on a college campus can be increased not only through more content of LGBT issues in course curriculum but creating more classes based solely on LGBT issues. Awareness can also be improved through gay straight alliance groups hosting more events throughout the entire school year on the college campus instead of primarily during LGBT Awareness Month. Not only can LGBT content be included in courses, but colleges can provide educational brochures and

pamphlets for their students and even professors and other faculty members. Getz and Kirkley (2006) support that the more education one has, the less likely they will be to verbally harass an LGBT individual by using homophobic slurs and/or resort to other forms of violence against the LGBT population. This research can also be applied to students' education at all ages, not just at the college level. Through this, we can start teaching acceptance at a younger age.

Implications for Future Research

The researchers believe that if this study were to be replicated, it would be beneficial to use a random sample that is larger in size in order to generalize to all college students. To gather richer data, it would be useful to conduct qualitative interviews with students regarding what helps or hinders their feeling comfortable with LGBT people.

Conclusion

As a result of this study, the researchers hope that more professionals will recognize the importance of LGBT awareness through education and apply it to their field of study. The LGBT population is one that is often overlooked and deserves to be respected and accepted, not just tolerated. In the field of Family Studies, it is important to be educated and knowledgeable on these issues in order to support and advocate for LGBT people and their equal rights as citizens. The researchers hope that education and awareness is not only taught at the college level but also throughout the entire educational career of a student, beginning at the elementary level.

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