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Brief Report

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## Attitudes Toward Homosexuals Among Students at a Canadian University<sup>1</sup>

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*We examined attitudes toward homosexuals among a broad selection of undergraduates (101 men, 98 women) attending a Canadian university, where a vast majority of the students are from working- or middle-class families of European descent. Attitudes toward gay men were more negative than attitudes toward lesbians. Compared to Science or Business students, students in the faculties of Arts or Social Science had more positive attitudes toward gay men, and women were more positive than men. Attitudes toward gay men also improved with time spent at college, but only for male students. Although attitudes toward lesbians improved with time at college, they were not associated with students' gender or faculty of enrollment. Thus, a college education may promote a reduction in anti-homosexual prejudice among young people, particularly among young men.*

Negative attitudes toward homosexuals are prevalent in American and Canadian societies (e.g., Herek & Glunt, 1993). Such attitudes can result in a lack of helping behaviour (Tsang, 1994) or in malicious comments, other forms of verbal harassment, and outright physical violence toward homosexuals (D'Augelli & Rose, 1990; Herek, 1989; Herek & Berrill, 1992). In the present investigation, we used Herek's (1988) Attitudes Toward Lesbi-

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ans and Gay Men scale to examine the influence of gender, faculty of enrollment, and time spent at university on Canadian college students' attitudes toward homosexuals. We were particularly interested in whether such attitudes would differ as a function of faculty of enrollment and amount of college education. Herek's scale also allowed for examination of differences between attitudes toward lesbians and attitudes toward gay men.

To the best of our knowledge, the present study is the first to examine attitudes toward homosexuals as a function of students' choice in faculty. We expected that students who chose majors in the Arts or Social Sciences would have more liberal views than their counterparts in Business or Science. The basis for this hypothesis was twofold. First, students who value traditional sex roles may be the most likely to select programs in faculties of Business or Science, where political attitudes in general are likely to be relatively conservative. By contrast, students with less traditional attitudes toward sexuality and gender, including gay- and lesbian-identified students, are likely to be drawn to departments thought to be more liberal. Second, programs in faculties of Arts and Social Sciences (e.g., Psychology, English, Social Work) tend to have a relatively high proportion of female students, and women tend to be more accepting than men of homosexuality. Thus, departments in these faculties may become relatively disassociated from typically masculine perspectives. We also expected that students' attitudes toward homosexuals would become more positive over the course of time spent at college, possibly as a result of exposure to a variety of people and beliefs. We were less clear, however, about whether such changes would be more pronounced in some faculties than in others.

Although men's attitudes toward homosexuals tend to be more negative than those of women (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1995; D'Augelli & Rose, 1990; Glassner & Owen, 1976; Herek, 1988; Herek & Capitanio, 1995; Herek & Glunt, 1993; Kite, 1984; Kite & Whitley, 1996, 1998; Kurdek, 1988; Luhrs, Crawford, & Goldberg, 1992; Pratte, 1993; Whitley & Kite, 1995), acceptance of homosexuality also varies as a function of the gender of the homosexual, with attitudes toward gay men being more negative than attitudes toward lesbians (Kite & Whitley, 1998). In some cases, a person's attitude is particularly negative toward homosexuals of their own gender, with males' attitudes toward gay men being the most negative (Herek, 1988; Kite, 1984, 1994; Whitley, 1987, 1988). Because socially constructed concepts of appropriate male behavior—or masculinity—are more narrowly defined than concepts of appropriate female behavior—or femininity (Feinman, 1981; Hort, Fagot, & Leinbach, 1990; Martin, 1990), departures from the norm (i.e., heterosexuality) tend to be judged more harshly by men than by women, and for male than for female homosexuals. We expected to replicate the gender differences reported in earlier studies,

and to find that effects of faculty and year at college would be apparent even when attitudinal differences due to students' gender were held constant. A secondary goal was to test the validity of Herek's (1988) scale when conducting direct comparisons between attitudes toward lesbians and attitudes toward gay men.

In general, increased levels of education tend to be predictive of relatively positive attitudes toward homosexuality (Bobys & Laner, 1979; Herek & Capitano, 1995; Herek & Glunt, 1993; Klassen, Williams, & Levitt, 1989). In a longitudinal study (Lottes & Kuriloff, 1994), college students in their fourth year were more positive than they were during their first year and generally more liberal on a number of attitude scales. Because this study was conducted with students at an exclusive, Ivy League school (University of Pennsylvania), however, one cannot generalize these findings to other universities. Moreover, because the students' attitudes were measured during a time when the AIDS crisis was rapidly accelerating (i.e., in 1987 and 1991), attitudinal changes could stem from changes in the historical and social context (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1995; Pratte, 1993) rather than higher education. By contrast, our cross-sectional design allowed for simultaneous examination of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Our sample was collected from a midsize, public, Canadian university (University of Windsor) located a few miles from downtown Detroit, which has a mandate of *accessibility* rather than selectivity.

Quinley and Glock (1979) contend that education reduces prejudice by: (1) teaching students "to understand prejudiced beliefs for what they are and to reject them," (2) training students "in the rules of evidence and inference," (3) introducing students "to the customs and practices of minority groups," and (4) teaching students "to make independent, critical judgments about societal norms and practices" (p. 52). This point of view suggests that greater levels of education will generally be accompanied by a reduction in prejudice toward any minority group, including homosexuals. But the experience of a college student in a Business program is likely to differ markedly from that of a student majoring in Sociology or English. Although courses that deal specifically with human sexuality have been shown to promote tolerance toward homosexuality (D'Augelli, 1992; Stevenson, 1988; Wells, 1991), it is unclear whether higher education in general results in similar increases in tolerance, or if there are systematic differences related to a student's choice of program. If increases in acceptance of homosexuality are confined to students in certain programs, specific aspects of programs would appear to play a crucial role. By contrast, if such changes are similar for all students regardless of their chosen faculty, this finding would provide support for theories claiming that a college edu-

cation improves tolerance of diversity in general (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Quinley & Glock, 1979).

## METHOD

### *Participants*

The participants in the main study were 199 undergraduates (101 men and 98 women between the ages of 18 and 35) attending the University of Windsor during the winter term of 1997, who were recruited to maximize the likelihood that they would be enrolled in various faculties (Arts, Business, Science, or Social Science). The students were given a lottery ticket for participating in the study, which took approximately five minutes. An additional 75 participants (32 men, 43 women between the ages of 19 and 45) were recruited for a subsidiary study (see Results). Sample demographics were assumed to mirror those of the University. The University draws most of its students from the surrounding area, which is largely industrial and working class, although the proportion of people of color at the University is estimated to be slightly higher than it is locally (8%).

### *Measures*

Participants were asked about their year at college, their faculty and major, and their age and gender. The Attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men scale—short form (Herek, 1988) was used to measure attitudes toward homosexuals. This scale includes 10 statements that yield two subscales: one measuring attitudes toward lesbians and another measuring attitudes towards gay men. Statements such as “Lesbians are sick” and “Male homosexuality is a perversion” are rated on 9-point scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree). The 10 items from the scale are provided in Table I. Positively worded items are reverse coded, such that higher scale scores indicate more negative attitudes. Several years of research confirm that the scale has good psychometric properties (Herek, 1994).

### *Procedure*

The experimenter was situated in various common areas at the university, which were chosen to maximize the likelihood of recruiting students from all faculties. Students were offered a lottery ticket for completing a one-page questionnaire on social attitudes. To ensure privacy, question-

**Table I.** Items in the Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men Scale—Short Form (Herek, 1988).<sup>a</sup>

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1. Lesbians just can't fit into our society.
  2. Laws regulating private, consenting lesbian behavior should be loosened. (R)
  3. Female homosexuality is a sin.
  4. Female homosexuality in itself is no problem, but what society makes of it can be a problem. (R)
  5. Lesbians are sick.
  6. I think male homosexuals are disgusting.
  7. Male homosexuality is a perversion.
  8. Just as in other species, male homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in human men. (R)
  9. Homosexual behavior between two men is just plain wrong.
  10. Male homosexuality is merely a different kind of lifestyle that should not be condemned. (R)
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<sup>a</sup>Items marked R are reverse coded.

naires were completed in election-style voting booths. Completed questionnaires were immediately placed in envelopes to reassure the students that their participation was anonymous.

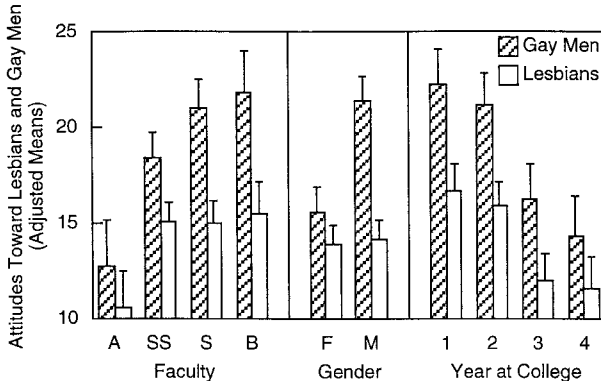
## RESULTS

Students were grouped by gender, faculty (4 levels: Arts, Business, Science, or Social Science), and year at college (4 levels: first/freshman, second/sophomore, third/junior, or fourth/senior). Students who failed to report their year ( $n = 4$ ) or reported being at college for more than 4 years ( $n = 14$ ) were excluded from the main analyses. Attitudes toward gay men and lesbians were analyzed separately using general linear models.<sup>3</sup> Such models were used initially to test the unique effects of students' gender, faculty, and year at college on their attitudes. Subsequent analyses examined the possibility of interactions between variables.

### *Attitudes Toward Gay Men*

A general linear model that included three categorical variables (faculty, gender, and year at college) was used to examine students' attitudes toward gay men. Because students' age varied as a function of their year

<sup>3</sup>The quasi-experimental design allowed for the possibility of empty cells. Indeed, our sample contained no fourth-year women in the faculty of Science, which precluded the possibility of conducting a completely factorial analysis of variance.



**Fig. 1.** Adjusted means on the scales measuring attitudes toward gay men (hatched bars) and attitudes toward lesbians (white bars) as a function of students' faculty of enrollment (left panel: A = Arts, SS = Social Science, S = Science, B = Business), gender (middle panel: F = female, M = Male), and year at college (right panel: 1 = freshmen, 2 = sophomores, 3 = juniors, 4 = seniors). For each variable, means are adjusted so that the other variables (plus age) are held constant. Higher scores indicate more negative attitudes. Error bars represent standard errors.

at college,  $F(3, 177) = 22.95, p < .001$ , a covariate for age was also included in the model to partial out any effects due to differences in age. Adjusted means are shown in Fig. 1 (hatched bars).

Attitudes toward gay men varied reliably as a function of students' faculty,  $F(3, 172) = 3.45, p = .018$  (Fig. 1, left panel). In line with our predictions, orthogonal contrasts revealed that students in the faculties of Arts or Social Science had more positive attitudes than their counterparts in Business and Science,  $F(1, 172) = 9.36, p = .003$ . Business and Science students did not differ. Unexpectedly, students in Arts were more tolerant than students in Social Science,  $F(1, 172) = 4.15, p = .043$ .

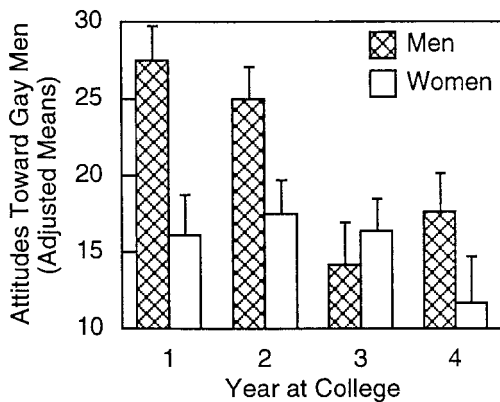
A significant effect of gender confirmed that female students had more positive attitudes than males toward gay men,  $F(1, 172) = 11.82, p < .001$  (Fig. 1, middle panel). The effect of year at college was also significant,  $F(3, 172) = 3.66, p = .014$  (Fig. 1, right panel); a linear trend validated our hypothesis that attitudes toward homosexuals improved with time spent at college,  $F(1, 172) = 9.69, p = .002$ . Higher-order trends were non-significant. Thus, attitudes toward gay men were associated with year at college even when differences in age were held constant. By contrast, the covariate for age was not significant.

Interactions between factors were examined by adding each of the three possible two-way interaction terms to the model one at a time to see

whether it made a significant contribution. The interaction between gender and year at college was reliable,  $F(3, 169) = 3.07, p = .030$ ; adjusted means are illustrated in Fig. 2. The figure shows that male students' attitudes toward gay men improved with time spent at college,  $F(1, 86) = 14.78, p < .001$ , but females' attitudes did not. Other interactions, including the interaction between faculty and year at college, were not significant. Thus, increases in tolerance of gay men over the course of time spent at college were similar across faculties.

### *Attitudes Toward Lesbians*

A general linear model that included variables for faculty, gender, year at college, and age was used to explain students' attitudes toward lesbians. Adjusted means are illustrated in Fig. 1 (white bars). Although effects of faculty and gender were not significant (Fig. 1, left and middle panels, respectively), year at college made a significant contribution to the model,  $F(3, 172) = 2.96, p = .034$  (Fig. 1, right panel). A linear trend confirmed that students' attitudes improved over time at college,  $F(1, 172) = 7.10, p = .008$ ; higher-order trends did not emerge. None of the two-way interactions was significant, which indicates that attitudes toward lesbians im-



**Fig. 2.** Adjusted means (faculty and age held constant) on the scale measuring attitudes toward gay men as a function of students' gender and year at college (1 = freshmen, 2 = sophomores, 3 = juniors, 4 = seniors). Higher scores indicate more negative attitudes. Error bars represent standard errors.

proved with time spent at college regardless of students' age, gender, or faculty of enrollment.

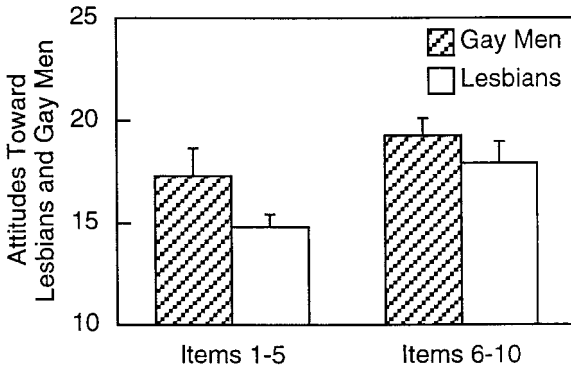
### *Comparison of Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men*

Although attitudes toward lesbians were correlated with attitudes toward gay men,  $r = .696$ ,  $N = 199$ ,  $p < .001$ , attitudes toward gay men were more negative than attitudes toward lesbians,  $t(198) = 7.30$ ,  $p < .001$ . This finding was expected, but it could be due, at least in part, to differences in responding evoked by particular scale items (Herek, 1994). In other words, the wording of the five items used to measure attitudes toward gay men may have evoked more negative responding than the wording of the five items concerning lesbians (see Table I). Accordingly, we tested another sample of students in a subsidiary study with a modified version of Herek's (1988) scale, altered so that the terms "gay men" and "male homosexual" were interchanged with the terms "lesbian" and "female homosexual," respectively.

#### *A Subsidiary Study*

The questionnaire in this subsidiary study was identical to the one used in the main study, except that the five items that previously referred to gay men (Table I: Items 6-10) now referred to lesbians, whereas the five items that previously referred to lesbians (Table I: Items 1-5) now referred to gay men. A  $2 \times 2$  repeated-measures ANOVA with the combined data sets (main and subsidiary studies) was used to analyze students' attitudes toward homosexuals as a function of the gender of the homosexual and the particular set of items used to measure attitudes. Means are illustrated in Fig. 3. A significant main effect was evident for gender of the homosexual,  $F(1, 272) = 12.10$ ,  $p < .001$ , which confirmed participants' bias against gay men. The effect of scale items was also significant,  $F(1, 272) = 22.37$ ,  $p < .001$ , which revealed that items 6-10 evoked more negative responding than items 1-5 for *both* lesbians and gay men. There was no interaction between gender of the homosexual and which set of items was used to measure attitudes. In short, although items 6-10 evoked more negative responses for both lesbians and gay men, regardless of which items were used, respondents had more negative attitudes toward gay men than they had toward lesbians.





**Fig. 3.** Means of the scales measuring attitudes toward gay men and lesbians as a function of the particular set of items used (see Table I). Higher scores indicate more negative attitudes. Error bars represent standard errors.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the present study support the hypothesis that attitudes toward homosexuals among college students vary as a function of faculty of enrollment and number of years spent at college. The results further suggest that these effects are more consistent for attitudes toward gay men than they are for attitudes toward lesbians. Indeed, although attitudes toward lesbians improved over time spent at college, they did not vary reliably as a function of students' faculty or gender. By contrast, attitudes toward gay men were more positive among students registered in the faculties of Arts or Social Science than they were for students in Science or Business. Moreover, improvements in attitudes toward gay men as a function of time spent at college were evident among male students but not among females. Attitudes toward gay men also differed as a function of students' gender, with male students having more negative attitudes than their female counterparts. Finally, attitudes toward gay men were more negative than attitudes toward lesbians.

Changes over time witnessed among male students in their attitudes toward gay men were identical regardless of faculty of enrollment, as were improvements in attitudes toward lesbians among all students. In other words, attitudes toward homosexuals appear to change as a by-product of higher education and related life experiences. Thus, this study provides grounds for optimism that negative attitudes toward homosexuals can be challenged successfully. Such optimism is consistent with recent changes in

the broader social context that have witnessed the rise of prominent and positive representations of lesbian and gay life in popular culture (e.g., television shows such as *Ellen* and *Spin City*; films such as *In and Out* and *As Good as It Gets*).

The finding that attitudes toward lesbians were relatively positive and did not vary as a function of students' gender or faculty of enrollment (see also D'Augelli & Rose, 1990) is consistent with the idea that such attitudes stem from a combination of factors that often conflict (Kite & Whitley, 1998). For example, despite the fact that men typically respond more negatively toward homosexuality than women do, many heterosexual men find the idea of sex between two women appealing (Louderback & Whitley, 1997; Nyberg & Alston, 1977). Indeed, the bias in heterosexual males' attitudes toward gay men relative to lesbians disappears when differences in respondents' perceptions of lesbian eroticism are held constant (Louderback & Whitley, 1997). Alternative ways of measuring attitudes toward lesbians (e.g., with items about lesbian motherhood) might be more sensitive to individual differences than Herek's (1988) scale. Our results also highlight the importance of using *identical* scale items when making comparisons between attitudes toward lesbians and attitudes toward gay men.

Inflated levels of prejudice toward gay men in relation to lesbians are particularly revealing when considered in combination with the result showing that male students' attitudes were more negative than those of females toward gay men but not toward lesbians. These findings—and the corresponding improvement of anti-gay attitudes over time only among male students—suggest that contemporary attitudes toward homosexuality are closely linked to cultural ideals of masculinity (see also Harry, 1995; Kinsman, 1996; McCreary, 1994). Negative attitudes toward gay men among college students might be the outcome of circumscribed ideals of masculinity that predominate during grade- and high-school years, when tests of manhood are a crucial component of male social relations (Frank, 1994). Ideals of masculinity vary across subgroups that differ in social class, educational environment, and other cultural factors (Connell, 1989), yet key themes recur, including: (1) the refusal of vulnerability and fear; (2) mastery over things, tasks and people; and (3) bodily prowess that might be expressed in sports, sex, or fighting (Kaufman, 1994; Kimmel, 1994; Simpson, 1994). In fact, negative attitudes toward homosexuals can be a crucial component of high-school concepts of masculinity because they make same-gender bonding in sports and social activities safely heterosexual (Frank, 1994; Simpson, 1994). In other words, anti-homosexual prejudice helps to police the boundaries of male bonding by ensuring that deviance is held at bay, and by providing a focus for the violence that is linked to mastery and bodily prowess (Herek, 1990; Kaufman, 1992). Thus, the shift in anti-

gay attitudes with time spent at college could be the result of developmental changes in concepts of masculinity.

Regardless, our results confirm that some aspects of college life are associated with changes in students' understanding of gender and sexuality. This finding was evident when differences in age were held constant, which rules out the possibility that the association could stem from increasing maturity or length of time since leaving high school. The results from our study—the first year-by-year cross-sectional examination of changes in attitudes toward homosexuals among college students—converge nicely with those in the longitudinal study by Lottes and Kuriloff (1994). Indeed, such convergence makes it extremely unlikely that the observed trends are due to cohort effects or to shifts in the historical context. Moreover, differences between universities in the Lottes and Kuriloff study and the present study (US vs. Canada, selective vs. accessible, private vs. public) suggest that the findings could generalize across a wide range of North American universities. Lottes and Kuriloff's results also imply that an increase in acceptance of homosexuality is part of a larger set of changes in attitude that take place over the course of a college education. Perhaps college students become increasingly aware of the negative effects of prejudice. When such awareness is combined with an increased ability to think critically, students may begin to reevaluate their own prejudices and form new, more accepting and tolerant attitudes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Quinley & Glock, 1979).

It is also possible that the decrease in negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians witnessed over time is due, at least in part, to simple exposure to a wide and diverse group of people (which would include gay people) rather than to education *per se*. For example, interpersonal contact with gay men and lesbians is associated with improved attitudes toward homosexuals (Glassner & Owen, 1976; Herek, 1988; Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Herek & Glunt, 1993; Lance, 1987; Walters, 1997). In fact, contact with gay people can be the best predictor of positive attitudes toward homosexuals, and, moreover, people with higher levels of education are the most likely to have such contact (Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Herek & Glunt, 1993). Nonetheless, whereas all students became more positive towards lesbians over time, only male students showed a marked improvement in attitudes toward gay men. Men may have much to learn from their educational experience about tolerance toward homosexuality, and, perhaps, diversity in general. By contrast, young women attending college in some parts of North America may now be exhibiting something close to a "floor effect" in anti-homosexual prejudice, at least with Herek's (1988) measure. Future research could explore the possibility that a new, more

sensitive measure might have greater success at uncovering individual differences among women.

The past decade has witnessed improvements in attitudes toward homosexuals (Adam, 1995), yet the relatively high suicide rates among gay and lesbian youth in Canada (Bagley & Tremblay, 1997) and the US (Gibson, 1989) make it clear that anti-homosexual prejudice continues to take a devastating toll on North American society. Although our results show that time spent at college is associated with a reduction in harmful prejudices, further clarification about the direction of causation will have to await the findings of future research. In the meantime, we tentatively suggest that young people, particularly young men, should be given access whenever possible to environments such as college that may enhance acceptance of human diversity.

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