Counselor and Social Worker Perceptions of Sexual Minorities Related to Religiosity and Political Ideology

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Abstract

Counseling and social work students, faculty, and practitioners ($N = 255$) participated in a cross-sectional study examining attitudes toward lesbians and gay men, religiosity, and political ideology. Regression analyses indicate that political ideology, religious orthodoxy, and intrinsic and social extrinsic religious orientation are important predictors of attitudes toward lesbians and gay men.

Keywords: sexual minorities, religious orientation, political ideology, counselor education, social work

Introduction

The current study is intended to extend existing research in the area of cultural bias and value conflict in the professional roles of counselors and social workers by exploring their perceptions of sexual orientation, religious identity, and political affiliation. A significant concern for many counselor and social work educators is to ensure multicultural competence in serving LGTBQIA+ clients; because, as research suggests, practitioners' reactivity to this population is influenced to a greater degree by religious, personal, and political beliefs than is their response to other minority groups (Diambra & Struder, 2010). We hypothesized there would be a significant difference between the fields of counseling and social work, and among students and educators/practitioners in perceptions of sexual minorities. We also posited there would be a correlation between more conservative religious orientation and political affiliation and higher rates of homonegativity and less positive attitudes toward sexual minorities.

Literature Review

Ongoing marginalization and oppression of sexual minorities generates chronic stress, contributing to many societal and mental health issues; such as homelessness, bullying, and sexual harassment (Bidell, 2014; Farmer, Welfare, & Burge, 2013; Lyons, Bieschke, Dendy, Worthington, & Georgemiller, 2010; McCabe, Rubinson, Dragowski, & Elizalde-Utnick, 2013; Pearson, 2003). They are at an increased risk for substance

abuse, depression, and suicide (IOM, 2011). Even when individuals have not directly experienced discrimination based on sexual orientation, they can still be adversely affected by living in an environment where they are viewed negatively. Herek, Gillis, and Cogan (2009) explain this as *"felt stigma"* (p. 20). While sexual minority members may or may not receive aggressive or hostile confrontation, they will not likely experience in-group favoritism, a bias commonly expressed in the valuation of others and distribution of resources, which is one contemporary view of how discrimination has evolved (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013).

Counselors and social workers are members of society and can be expected to have the same perceptions and biases of those in their community (Papadaki, Plotnikof, & Papadaki, 2013). Counselors must abide by the American Counseling Association's *Code of Ethics* (2014), which prohibits imposing one's own values, attitudes, and beliefs on and respects the diversity of clients (A.4.b), stresses the importance of acting as an advocate for those who face societal barriers (A.7.a), and forbids discrimination (C.5.). Likewise, the American School Counselor Association's *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (2010) addresses parallel concerns in the educational setting concerning responsibilities to students (A.1.c) and multicultural and social justice advocacy and leadership (E.2.). The National Association of Social Workers' *Code of Ethics* (2008) charges the profession to develop cultural competence (1.05), learn more about social diversity (1.05), engage in social and political action, so all have equal access to resources and services (6.04), and oppose discrimination (4.02).

Though ethical guidelines are in place for counselors and social workers, they serve only as broad professional standards and do not dictate what one values or believes; therefore, a range of individual assumptions and attitudes are expected within the fields (Corey, Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2015). Value conflicts can easily arise with a variety of practitioners serving a diverse clientele, especially in the areas of sexuality, religion, and politics. Research findings have been less than definitive when examining counselor and social worker perceptions of sexual minorities. Newman, Dannenfeiser, and Benishek, (2002) found social work students slightly more accepting than counseling students in frequency and intensity of attitudes toward sexual minorities. Similarly, Sabin, Riskind, and Nosek (2015) found both counselors and social workers to have the lowest ratings of heterosexual preferences among the healthcare providers they studied. In one recent study, social work students had "a slightly positive attitude towards lesbians and gay men" (Papadaki et al., 2013, p. 462) with lesbians receiving a more positive rating than gay men. Newman et al. (2002) surveyed 2,837 master's-level social work and counseling students about their attitudes toward lesbians and gay men, they found only a small minority of them (6.5%) held prejudicial or intolerant views. This body of research affirms an overall trend of increased acceptance of sexual minorities among counselors and social workers.

More specifically in the area of religion among counselors and social workers and its influence on perceptions of sexual minorities, the empirical findings are analogous, at least to an extent. The benefits of religion for extrinsically motivated people, defined as those driven by rewards outside of the self, include security, sociability, and status, while those who are intrinsic in their orientation, motivated by inner forces, internalize religious constructs and act according to them. Intrinsic religious orientation perceives faith as "a supreme value in its own right" (Allport, 1966, p. 455). Whitley's (2009) meta-analysis showed Christian orthodoxy and fundamentalism associated with intrinsic orientation and homonegativity. Rosik, Dinges, and Saavedra (2013) also found that more intrinsically religious people tend to have less accepting views of sexual minorities. In addition, Papadaki et al. (2013) found Orthodox religion religiosity to have a significant influence on social work students' attitudes toward lesbians and gay men, with participants indicating religion to be very important to them having more negative perceptions of sexual minorities.

Research on how counselors' and social workers' political party affiliation and ideology influence views of sexual minorities is more limited than religious perspectives. In Satcher and Leggett's 2007 exploratory study of homonegativity among professional school counselors, frequent church attendees and Republican participants were found to have less positive attitudes toward sexual minorities. Whitley and Lee (2000) found right-wing authoritarianism and political-economic conservativism associated with less positive attitudes toward lesbians and gay men.

Individuals who identify as liberal tend to view the validity of rules based on how those regulations affect one's outcome and advocate for social justice so all are treated fairly and equally (Rosik, Dinges, & Saavedra, 2013). Generally, liberals see themselves as having an optimistic outlook on people and believe they should be as free as possible to direct themselves. Conservatives, on the other hand, describe themselves as having a more responsive approach and view people as largely individualistic, seeing the need for regulations to ensure a proficient society (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009).

This study explores attitudes toward homosexuality in counselors and social workers and tested two null hypotheses. First, that there would be no significant difference between students' and faculty members' attitudes toward homosexuality and second, that there would be no significant difference in the attitudes toward homosexuality between counselors and social workers. This study also explored the potential impact of religion and political ideology on attitudes toward homosexuality.

Method

Participants

Students, faculty, and practitioners in counseling and social work were invited to participate in this study. A total of 268 individuals started the survey. Data from 13 individuals were dropped because they provide data for less than 10 questions, resulting in a sample size of 255. The sample was predominantly female (65.1% female, 15.3% male, and 19.6% prefer not to answer), with an average age of 35.1 (SD = 12.9). Participants could select multiple racial identities. In this sample, 67.5% identified as White/Caucasian, 6.3% African American, 2.7% Hispanic, 2.4% Asian, 2.4% Native American, and 2.8% as 'Other.' As religious identity was relevant to the current study, participants were asked to identify their religious preference. The majority indicated Christianity (28.6% Protestant, 9.8% Catholic). Many reported that they were spiritual but not religious (18.0%) or not religious (14.1%). The majority of the participants indicated that they were associated with the field of counseling (n = 155), with 40 reporting that they were associated with social work, and 60 opting not to provide an affiliation. Overall, 153 individuals reported that they were students, 39 faculty, and 17 practitioners who were not currently pursuing further education, nor teaching. An additional 46 individuals did not report their professional status.

Procedures

Students, educators, and practitioners in the fields of counseling and social work were recruited to participate in this web-based survey study via postings on the Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors (BPD) listserv and the Counselor Education and Supervision Network (CESNET). A snowball sampling technique was utilized whereby faculty were invited to share the survey invitation with students. An estimate of response rate is not possible given the nature of the listservs and the snowball sampling technique but the respondent demographics were compared to those reported by the professional associations for the fields of social work and counseling and the respondents were similar in terms of gender and race. Data were collected using Qualtrics, an online survey software system (Provo, UT). Participants completed a demographic form, measures of attitudes toward lesbians and gays, facets of religiosity, and an impression management scale. As a token of appreciation for their time, participants

were informed that for each completed survey a donation to St. Jude Children's Hospital ($1 per survey was donated). All analyses were conducted with SPSS version 22. The study was reviewed and approved by the University of Mississippi Institutional Review Board. Informed consent was obtained electronically from each participant prior to completing the survey. There were no negative consequences for those who chose not to participate in the study and the identities of the participants, as well as the nonparticipants, were not unknown to the researchers.

Instruments

Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men Scale (Herek, 1988)

The Attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men Scale is the most commonly used instrument to measure heterosexuals' views of sexual minorities (Stoever & Morera, 2007), utilized frequently in social work research (Swank & Raiz, 2010). The 20-item instrument assesses emotional impressions of homosexuality (Chonody, Woodford, Brennan, Newman, & Wang, 2014; Herek, 1988). Two subscale scores are calculated, one each for attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. Previous research (Herek, 1988) reported that internal consistency reliabilities of the ATLG scores ranged from .90 to .95.

Modern Homonegativity Scale (Morrison and Morrison, 2002)

The Modern Homonegativity Scale is composed of two 6-item subscales, rating attitudes toward gay men and lesbian women. Item development for this scale sought to generate items that may reflect prejudicial attitudes toward lesbians and gay men that liberal individuals may hold (Morrison & Morrison, 2002). The measure uses a Likert Scale of 5 (strongly disagree) to 1 (strongly agree). In a review of instruments that measure attitudes toward sexual minorities, Grey, Robinson, Coleman, and Bockting (2013), found an internal consistency reliability of .91. Higher total scale scores indicate greater negativity toward lesbians and gay men.

Religious Fundamentalism Scale-Revised (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004)

Fundamentalism was measured using the Religious Fundamentalism Scale-Revised developed by Altemeyer and Hunsberger (2004). The 12-item instrument measures participants' degree of commitment to four religious doctrines associated with fundamentalist principles and has been utilized in many studies across various cultures (Hunsberger, Owusu, & Duck, 1999; Rowatt & Franklin, 2004). The Likert Scale choices are: -4 (very strongly disagree), -3 (strongly disagree), -2 (moderately disagree), -1 (slightly disagree), +1 (slightly agree), +2 (moderately agree), +3 (strongly agree), and +4 (very strongly agree). The alpha coefficient in this study was .66.

Intrinsic/Extrinsic Religious Orientation Scale-Revised (Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989)

The Intrinsic/Extrinsic Religious Orientation Scale-Revised measures personal and social religiosity. It was developed and later revised by Gorsuch and McPherson (1989). The measure has 3 subscales, intrinsic, personal extrinsic, and social extrinsic religious orientation and utilizes a Likert Scale of 5 (strongly disagree) to 1 (strongly agree). In the current study the alpha coefficient was .84.

Religious Ideology (Putney & Middleton, 1961)

The Religious Ideology scale has 3 subscales—orthodoxy, fanaticism, and importance of religious ideology to self-conception. The measure uses a Likert Scale of 7 (strong disagreement) to 1 (strong agreement). Higher scores indicate greater orthodoxy, fanaticism, and importance. The alpha coefficients for orthodoxy, fanaticism, and importance subscales were .69, .22, and .84 respectively in the current sample.

Impression Management Scale (Paulhus, 1984)

The Impression Management Scale is an attitudinal assessment of social desirability and is

commonly used in sociocultural research (Paulhus & Martin, 1988; Paulhus & Reid, 1991). One point is given to each extreme response on the 12-item scale with higher scores indicating a greater desire to provide social desirable responses. The alpha coefficient in the current study was .78.

Results

We first explored the measures of attitudes toward homosexuality. The Modern Homonegativity Scale was developed to remedy what were considered potentially outdated concepts in the Attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men scale. While Morrison and Morrison (2011) found the new scale to be more reliable, we examined this in the current data to determine the best way to measure the dependent variable (attitudes toward lesbians and gay men) in this sample. The alpha coefficients for the subscales for attitudes toward lesbians and for attitudes toward gay men were quite high (.88 and .91 respectively), indicating strong reliability in our sample. The Modern Homonegativity Scale also demonstrated strong reliability in this sample (α = .93). There were significant correlations between the three scales (see Table 1).

were found. Given that the scales were highly correlated and similar results were found no matter which measure was utilized, we have reported the analyses utilized the Modern Homonegativity Scale as it captures attitudes toward both lesbians and gay men in a single score. Overall, there were very high rates of supportive attitudes toward lesbians and gay men reported on all three measures.

We then explored the potential differences between students' and faculty members' attitudes toward homosexuality. We hypothesized that there would be significant differences between students and faculty. Results revealed that there were no significant differences between these two groups on the Modern Homonegativity measure (Student M = 21.4, SD = 8.8, Faculty M = 23, SD = 9.7; $t(190)$ = -1.10; p = .275). Next, we examined potential differences between all respondents who were engaged in the field of social work compared to those who reported working or studying in the field of counseling. No significant differences between the fields were found on the Modern Homonegativity measure (Social Work M = 23.1, SD = 9.7, Counseling M = 22.2, SD = 9.1; $t(193)$ = 0.33; p = .74).

In order to examine the impact of religion and political ideology on attitudes toward homosexuality as measured by the Modern Homonegativity Scale, after checking appropriate assumptions and determining that they were met, we conducted linear regression analyses. As no group differences were detected, we developed one model that included all respondents. As this was an exploratory study examining the various components of religious perspectives, a forward variable selection method was utilized. This method enters variables sequentially into the model, starting with the variable with

Table 1

Scores and Correlations for Measures of Attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men

	Mean (SD)	Modern Homonegativity Scale	Attitudes toward Lesbians Scale	Attitudes toward Gay Men Scale
Modern Homonegativity Scale	21.88 (8.93)	1		
Attitudes toward Lesbians Scale	44.59 (6.50)	-0.747**	1	
Attitudes toward Gay Men Scale	42.74 (8.12)	-0.773**	0.883**	1

Note: **p<0.01.

All analyses were repeated using the Attitudes toward Lesbians and the Attitudes toward Homonegativity scales and no differences

the largest correlation with the dependent variable and continues to add variables in order based on the largest partial correlation, examining changes in the F value to determine if the independent variable combination improves prediction of the dependent variable. Predictors considered included measures of intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation, religious fundamentalism, religious orthodoxy, importance, and fanaticism, political party affiliation, political ideology, and social desirability. The final model (see Table 2) included political ideology, religious orthodoxy, intrinsic religious orientation, and social extrinsic religious orientation. This model predicted 51.4% of the variance in the measure of Modern Homonegativity in this sample.

significant difference between the fields of counseling and social work, indicating education models may be somewhat similar in multicultural competence training. No group distinction was found between students and educators/practitioners in terms of perceptions of sexual minorities, demonstrating more acceptance from the professions, as well as those about to enter the fields. The study did show a correlation between more conservative religious orientation and political affiliation and higher rates of homonegativity and less positive attitudes toward sexual minorities, which suggests some attention is still needed in teaching tolerance and increasing empathy in counseling and social work education.

Table 2

Predicted Attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men as Measured by the Modern Homonegativity Scale

Variable	Modern Homonegativity Score				
	Model 1 β	Model 2 β	Model 3 β	Model 4 β	Model 4 95% CI
Constant	7.26***	2.91*	12.92***	6.92	-2.32 – 16.17
Political ideology	6.41***	4.98***	4.61***	4.63***	3.50 – 5.78
Religious orthodoxy		0.32***	0.218**	0.239***	0.10 – 0.38
Intrinsic religious orientation			-0.28**	-0.283**	-0.48 - -0.9
Social extrinsic religious orientation				0.443*	0.05-0.84
R^2	0.414	0.482	0.502	0.514	
F	144.308***	94.602***	67.835***	53.088***	
ΔR^2		0.068	0.019	0.012	
ΔF		49.706	26.767	14.747	

Note: CI = confidence interval. *$p<0.05$. **$p<0.01$. ***$p<0.001$

Discussion

Clients with differing sexual orientation, religious identity, and political affiliation may present a challenge for some counselors and social workers, who may experience cultural bias and value conflict. Negative perceptions from these helping professionals may lead to discriminatory attitudes and even unethical treatment. This study showed no

Limitation

While our study did not have a large number of participants ($N = 255$), the demographics of the group were congruent with those of Newman et al.'s (2002) study of counseling and social work students' attitudes toward sexual minorities. It should be noted that participants were a non-random sample and their choice to participate may be systemically different than those who choose not to share information for the study. Further, agencies may be more likely to employ and retain practitioners who demonstrate acceptance of diversity and tolerance for those with different lifestyles. In turn, working in the mental health field may also create more acceptance due to the repeated exposure to those with different backgrounds and worldviews (Van Den Bergh & Crisp, 2004). Likewise, as training programs screen potential students, they may also be selective about applicants who voice negative attitudes or display problematic behaviors towards sexual minorities. Mentorship, volunteering, or further education may be recommended prior to program acceptance.

Training Implications

According to a recent Gallup poll, over 4% of the U.S. adult population self-identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, which is more than 10 million people (2017), representing a large number of individuals who may seek counseling and social work services. In addition, an estimated twenty percent of millennials (ages 18-34) identify themselves as LGBTQ (GLAAD, 2017). Therefore, it is imperative that helping professionals receive adequate training on how to best serve the needs of sexual minority clients. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) Program Standards (2016) underline the importance of structuring graduate programs to give students information and experience in the area of social and cultural diversity. Students should be exposed to diverse groups, advocate for social justice, build multicultural counseling competencies, explore the effects of power and privilege, and work to eliminate barriers, prejudice, oppression, and discrimination (2.F.2).

Learning opportunities throughout curriculum should be provided to increase multicultural competence (Pearson, 2003). Philips (2000) suggests experiential learning activities, self-reflection exercises, and open dialogue with faculty and students to decrease intolerance toward sexual minorities. Exposure and awareness can be gained through documentaries, autobiographies, lectures, workshops, and conferences related to LGBTQIA+ issues (Lyons et al., 2010; Shallcross, 2011).

In summary, while the findings from this study reaffirm a current trend toward a more accepting view of sexual minorities among counselors and social workers, some religious and political values continue to be associated with negative perceptions of sexual minorities. These beliefs can damage the therapeutic relationship and keep some clients from receiving the quality of services they deserve. More education and training is needed, along with further research on how to best deconstruct, examine, and modify these problematic beliefs so that helping professionals will be equipped to best serve everyone in their community.

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