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## Undergraduate Attitudes Toward Sexual Minorities Based on Religious Beliefs

Category: Student Experience

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In the realm of higher education, sexual identity development has grown as a topic of interest over the past 40 years. Researchers such as Cass (1979) and D'Augelli (1994) have crafted theories of sexual identity development that can inform higher education practice when dealing with lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) students (or sexual minority students). Many factors can affect attitudes toward sexual minorities, including gender (Chonody, Siebert, & Rutledge, 2009) and previous interactions with LGB persons (Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002). Multiple studies have been conducted to examine the effect of personal religious beliefs on attitudes toward sexual minorities in college students (Batson, Floyd, Meyer, & Winner, 1999; Lottes & Kuriloff, 1992; McFarland, 1989).

This issue is important for college students in numerous aspects of their lives. College is more than a time for just education; it is a time for personal development. Many theories that examine the personal development have been created, developed, and discussed. Kohlberg's (1958) theory of moral development examines the development of moral reasoning in college students, specifically centering on the principle of justice. Perry's (1968) theory of ethical development portrays college students as moving from a dualistic mindset to a position of commitment while understanding and accepting other beliefs. And Chickering's (1993) theory of

identity development touches on the importance of environmental factors in the identity of college students, including institutional objective and size, student relationships with faculty, and teaching curriculum. All of these theories of student development can have an effect on student attitudes toward homosexuality.

In order to examine student attitudes toward sexual minorities in the context of religious beliefs, one must first have an understanding of the differing types of religious orientation. Allport and Ross' (1967) foundational model developed an orientation describing extrinsic religion in which religion is used for ulterior motives such as "security, comfort, status, or social support" (p. 441) and intrinsic religion in which a person's whole life and motivation is oriented on and centered around religion. Batson (1971) developed a model of religious orientation that included a quest orientation where religious beliefs are used as an open minded search for truth. Religious fundamentalism, another type of orientation, reflects "the belief that there is one set of religious teachings that clearly contain the...essential inerrant truth about humanity and the deity" (Altmeyer & Hunsberger, 1992, p. 118). These orientations shape how a person thinks about and interacts with the rest of the world, and this impact should be understood when considering how religious beliefs can affect attitudes toward and perceptions of sexual minorities.

McFarland (1989) and Rowatt et al. (2006) connected fundamental religious beliefs to greater discrimination against homosexual persons, while Batson et al. (1999) linked intrinsic religious beliefs with increased negative attitudes toward homosexuality. Additional research has shown that Protestants are more accepting of negative attitudes toward homosexuality than other religious groups (Lottes & Kuriloff, 1992). Wolff, Himes, Miller Kwon, and Bollinger (2011) conducted a study with approximately 320 college students at a faith based institution in

California to examine Evangelical Christian students' attitudes toward different issues involving sexual minorities (ex. job discrimination, gay marriage). The findings indicated that Evangelical students made a distinction between general issues like job equality and issues with a higher level of morality like gay marriage or adoption. Furthermore, the research discovered that "knowing a gay or lesbian person is also likely to soften their affective response and activate highly prized Christian relational values of love, charity, grace, and humility" (Wolff et al., 2011, p. 215).

Additional research has shown that some Christians are able to make a distinction between sexual identity and sexual activity. Bassett et al. (2000) conducted a study among Christian college students and discovered that there was a different evaluation between homosexual persons who were sexually active and homosexual persons who were celibate. These students cognitively separated identity from behavior. Rosik, Griffith, and Cruz (2007) surveyed 155 students at a Christian university to assess their attitudes toward celibate and sexually active homosexual men and women. They found that those who maintained a person-behavior distinction held more positive attitudes toward gay men than those who were comparatively more rejecting or did not emphasize a person-behavior distinction.

The purpose of this study is to examine how the personal religious beliefs of college students can affect their attitudes toward LGB persons. A phenomenological design will be utilized to examine a specific experience and "to determine what [that] experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). This design will aid in examining the wide breadth of experiences that accompany this issue. The study will be conducted in the coming fall semester at a faith-based residential liberal arts university located in the Midwest of the United States of America.

Qualitative interviews will be conducted with residential life student leaders in order to assess the connection between religious beliefs and attitudes toward sexual minorities. Residence life student leaders provide an effective convenience sample for the larger population of the university, and these students are more likely to have spent time dealing with and processing the issue of sexual identity.

These interviews will be one-on-one between the student and the researcher, and the questions will be primarily open-ended in order to allow students a greater deal of latitude in their responses. Interviews will be conducted with approximately eight to twelve students. The interviews will be recorded via audio by the researcher and transcribed at a later date. Finally, the researcher will code the interviews in order to identify the main points from each interview and subsequently combine and collapse these points into the key themes of the research (Creswell, 2007). These themes will be compared with themes in the research literature to determine the possible implications for higher education. It is the hope of the researcher that this data can provide information on how institutions of higher education can better understand how other students feel about sexual minority students.

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