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Attitudes towards lesbians and gay men and support for lesbian and gay human rights: does education have a liberalising effect?

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ABSTRACT

It would be easy to assume that individuals pursuing a career in professions, such as psychology, counselling and social work, possess accepting attitudes towards lesbians and gay men. Or if not, then university education can be relied on to have a liberalising effect on any negative attitudes held by such individuals. However, evidence to support this premise has been mixed. The aim of this study was to investigate whether university education has a liberalising effect on students' attitudes towards lesbians and gay men, and whether education increases students' levels of support for lesbian and gay human rights. A questionnaire was used to elicit the views of first and third (final) year undergraduate students ($N = 124$) studying psychology, counselling or social work courses. Results were compared and findings indicated no significant main effect of either year or course. Further statistical analysis revealed that participants who reported 'regular contact' with a lesbian or gay man had significantly more positive attitudes towards lesbians and gay men and higher levels of support for lesbian and gay human rights, than those participants who indicated no contact. Older participants were also found to be more positive than younger participants. The results show that education itself does not have a liberalising effect. However, factors such as a person having 'contact' with a group, or a person's 'age', may be better predictors of support for that group. Limitations of the study and avenues for further inquiry are discussed.

It should be noted, that due to the limits of the scope of this study, the research concentrates on lesbians and gay men, rather than the often referred to 'lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT)' community.

KEY WORDS:	ATTITUDES	HOMONEGATIVITY	HETEORSEXISM	LESBIAN	GAY

DEFINING TERMS

This work focuses on lesbian and gay issues, and accepts the view that ***sexual orientation*** exists along a continuum that ranges from exclusively homosexual (same sex attraction) to exclusively heterosexual (opposite sex attraction) and includes various forms of bisexuality. Sexual orientations can be considered to be socially constructed and are often categorised (Perlman, 2003). For example, the term 'lesbian' is commonly used to categorise a woman with a homosexual orientation and the term 'gay' is often used to categorise a man with a homosexual orientation. For sake of clarity individuals with a homosexual orientation will be referred to as ***lesbian*** (for women) or ***gay*** (for men).

There are also a number of terms used throughout the psychological literature and therefore within this text to describe the negativity, prejudice and discrimination aimed at lesbians and gay men. One of these terms, mostly evident in literature published prior to the last decade is ***homophobia*** which has been traditionally defined as irrational negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay men arising out of fear or dislike of homosexuality (Weinberg, 1972). More recently, ***homonegativity*** is a term that has been used as a replacement for homophobia. Homonegativity is described by Morrison & Morrison (2011, p2573) as "*negative affect, cognitions, and behaviours directed toward individuals who are perceived—correctly or incorrectly— to be gay or lesbian*". ***Heterosexism***, another term often used in the literature, refers to prejudicial attitudes towards lesbians and gay men, and is defined by Neal & Davies (1996, p.24) as "*the belief that heterosexuality is superior to, or more natural or healthy than other sexualities*". Similar to racism, heterosexism has been demonstrated in biased attitudes towards lesbians and gay men (i.e. the 'out-group'), whilst promoting privilege and power for heterosexuals (i.e. the 'dominant group' or 'in-group'). Heterosexism expresses both the individual and institutional nature of prejudice (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980). Social institutions can reflect cultural heterosexism by the denial of non-heterosexual existence. For example, when referring to 'marital status' on documentation excluding the mention of 'civil partnerships', results in the exclusion of official relationship recognition for lesbians and gay men. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) describes systemic bias (i.e. heterosexism, racism, sexism) as having the effect of creating conditions that restrict opportunity and entrench inequality (EHRC, 2010).

INTRODUCTION

Background to the study

Those individuals who seek to provide social and psychological services have professional mandates that call for a level of ethical competent practice with every person they encounter (regardless of the person's sexual orientation). Many students studying the disciplines of psychology, counselling and social work will become the future practitioners who will work with, and affect the lives of a diverse range of people, including lesbians and gay men. It would be expected that people drawn to these disciplines would either have an open view of the world before commencing the course, or that the course would prepare them to be open.

However, it should not be taken for granted that these students are immune from the negative attitudes and prejudice aimed at lesbians and gay men that exists throughout society. For example, negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay men have been found amongst student populations (e.g. Schellenberg, Hirt & Sears, 1999; Ellis, Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 2002; Morrison, Kenny & Harrington, 2005; Morrison, Morrison & Franklin, 2009a), as well as amongst mental health professionals (e.g. Annesley & Coyle, 1995; Ellison & Gunstone, 2009) and social work practitioners (e.g. Wisniewski & Toomey, 1987; Berkman & Zinberg, 1997). It is therefore crucial that whilst at university, mental health and social care students receive education that helps shape their attitudes and behaviours towards diversity and prepares them to practice with a wide range of individuals. This current study examines students' attitudes towards lesbians and gay men and levels of support for lesbian and gay human rights by comparing the views of first year and third year students, across the disciplines of psychology, counselling and social work. Ultimately, the aim of the research is to help identify whether undergraduate students in a large university in the north west of England studying psychology, counselling and social work are receiving adequate training in lesbian and gay issues.

Attitudes towards lesbians and gay men
Attitude research has been established in psychology for some time, but it was the removal of 'homosexuality' from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* in 1973 that led the way for psychologists to explore issues of prejudice and discrimination towards lesbians and gay men. As a result, scales were developed by psychologists to measure levels of homophobia within different groups of people, i.e. social workers, psychologists, medical professionals and students (Clarke, Ellis, Peel & Riggs, 2010). At the same time, surveys of public opinion towards homosexuals were being carried out in the UK and the US.

Over the past half a century, opinion polls consistently found that homosexuality was considered by the majority of the public to be morally wrong (Herek, 1991; Gaine, 2010). However, more recently, studies of public attitudes in the UK and the US have found that moral arguments against homosexuals, whilst still existing, appear to be in decline (e.g. Avery, Chase, Johansson, Litvak, Montero & Wydra, 2007; Stonewall, 2007; EHRC, 2010). For example, Stonewall (2007) found the majority of people in Britain to be supportive of action to address discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. Yet, opinion polls reflect contradictory attitudes across specific issues. For example, around 30% of the US public (Schwartz, 2010) and 60% of the UK public (Populus, 2009) support same-sex marriage, whilst 50% of the US public (Schwartz, 2010) and 40% of the UK public (EHRC, 2010) favour gay couples adopting.

Negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay men held within society are also reflected in other populations. Empirical evidence demonstrates a lack of knowledge, skills and sensitivity towards lesbians and gay men on the part of particular groups of individuals, within the 'caring professions', such as mental health professionals (e.g. Garnets, Hancock, Cochran, Goodchilds & Peplau, 1991; Annesley & Coyle, 1995; McFarlane, 1998) and social workers (e.g. Wisniewski & Toomey, 1987; Berkham & Zingberg, 1997). A study by Wisniewski & Toomey (1987) using Hudson and

Ricketts' (1980) 'Index of Homophobia Scale' found around a third of social workers were in the homophobic category. A more recent study by Berkman & Zinberg (1997), using the same scale, found that around 11% of social workers were homophobic, suggesting that there may have been a positive change in attitudes. Despite this apparent decrease in homophobic attitudes, a significant majority of the social workers sampled in the Berkman & Zinberg (1997) study, although not necessarily homophobic, expressed heterosexist views. Research also consistently documents that negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay men exist amongst student populations (e.g. D'Augelli, 1989; Schellenberg et al., 1999; Steffens, 2005; Brownlee, Sprakes, Saini, O'Hare, Kortes-Miller & Graham, 2005). Not only does this suggest that graduates hold negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay men, it also suggests that these individuals may carry their negative attitudes into the social care professions.

As with public opinion polls, results of research examining attitudes towards lesbians and gay men demonstrate contradictory responses when asked about certain issues (e.g. Annesley & Coyle, 1995; Schellenberg et al., 1999; Ellis et al., 2002; Morrison et al., 2005; Morrison et al., 2009a). For example, in the study by Annesley & Coyle (1995), the majority of psychologists surveyed agreed that *'a women's lesbianism should not be cause for job discrimination'*, but over a third were unsure or did not agree with the statement *'lesbians should be allowed to adopt children'*. Additionally, opinion polls and research may also be underestimating the negativity felt towards lesbians and gay men. A British survey found that 23% of the 33% of people who admitted feeling negative towards lesbians and gay men tried not to let it show, perhaps indicating that whilst they held these views they were mindful that it was socially unacceptable to express them (Abrams & Houston, 2006). Results from an anti-discrimination study entitled "Do we say what we think?" additionally demonstrated that participants tended to modify their responses in relation to attitudes towards out-groups (i.e. lesbians and gay men) to avoid making negative statements (Maison, 1995).

Human Rights and sexual orientation
In comparison to the study of attitudes, only a small number of studies have investigated support for lesbian and gay human rights, such as the right to life, the right to asylum, and the right to freedom of expression (e.g. Ellis et al., 2002; Ellis, 2002; Morrison, Speakman & Ryan, 2009b). Sexual orientation is a relatively recent notion in human rights, as well as in law and practice. The UN only recently issued (i.e. in December 2011) its first ever report on the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual people (United Nations, 2011).

Human Rights are defined as basic rights and freedoms that are considered to be universal and egalitarian (i.e. we all have them regardless of where we live or who we are). The United Nations (1948) Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 1) states that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Whilst the British Institute of Human Rights (2012) suggests they are *"a set of important principles that can be used in practical ways to create a fairer more decent society."* Partly as a result of the UK's 1998 Human Rights Act, there have been many positive legislative changes affecting lesbians and gay men. These include: lifting the ban on lesbians and gay men serving in the armed forces; equalising the age of

consent for gay men; introduction of adoption rights for same-sex couples; introduction of civil partnerships; protection from discrimination in the workplace; and protection under the goods and services act (Clarke et al., 2010). In addition, 2003 saw the repeal of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 which stated that *"a local authority shall not promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretend family relationship"* (Legislation.gov.uk, 1988).

Nevertheless, whilst there has been significant positive progress in implementing rights, currently lesbians and gay men still do not have full marriage rights in the UK (Stonewall, 2012). At the same time, within seventy-six countries around the world it is illegal to engage in same-sex conduct, and in at least five countries – Iran, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Yemen – the death penalty for homosexual conduct still exists (United Nations, 2011). This demonstrates that stereotypes and discrimination towards non-heterosexuals are still deeply ingrained. *"For many the expression of homophobic prejudice remains both lawful and respectable - in a manner that would be unacceptable for any other minority"* (Human Rights Education Associates, 2012).

Studies which have examined students' support for lesbian and gay human rights have tended to find high levels of support overall. Unsurprisingly, greater support for lesbian and gay human rights was strongly related to positive attitudes towards lesbians and gay men (Ellis, 2002). However, similar to the findings of attitude research, the levels of support for lesbian and gay human rights appear contradictory. For example, research found that students tend to be very supportive of the view that a person's sexual orientation should not block that person's access to basic rights and freedoms, but when asked about lesbians and gay men in relation to social issues (i.e. parenting or marriage rights for same-sex couples, and provision of books in schools positively promoting lesbian and gay perspectives) students tend to be unsupportive (Clarke et al., 2010).

Implications of the current situation

Negative attitudes - negative behaviours
Results from studies of attitudes towards lesbians and gay men and support for lesbian and gay human rights are cause for concern. The social psychologist Russell Fazio (1986) argues that, given that attitudes are represented in memory and are easily accessible, they have the potential to strongly influence behaviour. Whilst, Haddock & Maio (2007) have argued that attitudes are important because, not only do they affect how individuals perceive the world, but also how they behave within it. Research by Kite & Deaux (1986) found male participants who held negative attitudes towards homosexuality rated homosexuals more negatively. Also, when male participants, who held negative and positive attitudes towards homosexuality, became aware of a person's homosexuality, they were more negative towards them than when they were unaware. Morrison et al. (2005) found that individuals who held the most negative attitudes towards homosexuals also showed a greater tendency to avoid sitting next to a presumed homosexual. Whilst in a US study by Walter & Curran (1996) heterosexual couples were found to receive better, quicker and more polite service than gay couples. The results of these studies support Fazio's

suggestion that the attitudes people hold towards groups or objects can have a significant effect on their behaviour towards those groups or objects.

Potential consequences of homonegativity

The impact of negative attitudes, prejudice and discrimination, as well as harassment and violence aimed at lesbians and gay men (and lesbian and gay youth) can lead to isolation for members of that group, with some individuals experiencing a greater than expected prevalence of mental health issues (Ryan, 2001). It is documented by Stonewall (2008b) that in the last three years, 'one in five' lesbians and gay men experienced a homophobic hate crime (10% of which were committed by a work colleague). The psychological and emotional issues associated with these stress-inducing experiences faced by lesbians and gay men have lead to significant numbers presenting for counselling and therapy. A survey by the charity MIND found lesbians and gay men to be over represented in terms of anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicidal behaviour (Miles, 2011). It should be noted that being a lesbian or gay man is not in itself a cause of mental health problems (Bradford, Ryan & Rothblum, 1994; Gonsiorek, 1991). Rather, it has been consistently documented that exposure to hate crimes, as well as gay-related discrimination, rejection and perceived stigma is associated with psychosocial issues, such as poorer mental health, social isolation, depression, substance misuse problems and stress-related conditions for lesbians and gay men (e.g. Coyle, 1993; Dean, Meyer, Robinson, Sell, Sember, et al., 2000; Meyer, 1995; 2003; Herek & Garnets, 2007; Fingerhut, Peplau & Gable, 2010) and lesbian and gay youth (Lock & Steiner, 1999). With regard to mental health and social care practitioners, whilst the recent legislative changes do not force practitioners who think homosexuality is morally wrong to alter their views, it does require them to treat people alike.

Most significantly, the potential damaging behavioural consequences of negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay men, or ignorance of lesbian and gay issues, can be seen clearly from the results of a recent study by Bartlett, Smith & King (2009). The results recently published in 'BMC Psychiatry' revealed that some therapists (i.e. members of the British Psychological Society, British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, UK Council for Psychotherapy, and the Royal College of Psychiatrists) still considered homosexuality to be pathological. Additionally, 17% of the therapists surveyed admitted to having attempted to help reduce the sexual feelings of their lesbian and gay clients - with three quarters of these therapists expressing a desire for a conversion service to be currently offered (i.e. where attempts are made to convert a person's homosexual orientation to a heterosexual orientation) (Bartlett et al., 2009). These attitudes and practices appear to be prevailing despite the counselling, psychological and psychiatric professional accrediting bodies (i.e. UK Council for Psychotherapy, Royal College of Psychiatrists, British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, British Psychological Society, American Psychiatric Association, American Psychological Association, National Association of Social Workers) being fully opposed to any form of conversion therapy.

The consensus of these professional bodies is that homosexuality is neither pathological nor changeable. Also, the fact that homosexuality was removed from the *DSM* almost three decades ago, and from the *International Classification of*

Disease (ICD) list in 1994, makes it surprising that some therapists still support these practices (Milton & Coyle, 1998). Nevertheless, it could be argued that it is unsurprising that these views still exist, given that homosexuality was defined as a psychiatric disorder and theories reflected a 'disease' approach to curing it, during most of the last century. A systematic review of the world's literature on lesbian, gay and bisexual people's experience of psychotherapy by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) shows that the mental health problems of this group of people is still open to misunderstanding on the part of the therapist, with some therapists regarding homosexuality as the root cause of their mental health problem (King, Semlyen, Killaspy, Nazareth & Osborn, 2007). This is despite the scientific evidence suggesting there is no reason to treat lesbians and gay men any differently from heterosexuals. Significantly, as this study was being undertaken the British Psychological Society (BPS) issued its first set of guidelines for psychologists working with sexual minority clients. The BPS state that these guidelines are an acknowledgment of the importance of supporting psychologists around their work with sexual minority clients, as well as highlighting the stigmatisation that these clients suffer (BPS, 2012).

Like mental health professionals, social workers are expected to engage with a diverse range of people with complex issues. The British Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2002) states: "*Social workers have a duty to ensure that they do not act out of prejudice against any person or group, on any grounds, including origin, ethnicity, class, status, sex, sexual orientation, age, disability, beliefs or contribution to society*". Due to such ethical codes, it is common for social work students to receive training in anti-discriminatory practice. However, despite the training that social workers receive, negative attitudes and heterosexism among social work students are still raising concerns (Bayliss, 2000; Krieglstein, 2003). For example, in a recent study, 19% of social workers surveyed did not support gay men adopting children (Newman, Damnenfelser & Benishek, 2002). This is despite evidence suggesting it is the quality of the parenting and not the sexual orientation of the parent that is most influential in a child's upbringing (Newman et al., 2002). In addition, Krieglstein (2003) argues that issues around lesbian and gay young people are not being addressed adequately within the social work curriculum, even though social workers are likely to have extensive contact with this group.

Social workers deal with lesbian and gay service users across a wide range of services, such as adoption and fostering, domestic violence, looked-after children and mental health. As Miles (2011) argues, whether gay or straight themselves, social workers need a critical awareness of heterosexist privilege and homophobic oppression along with an understanding which helps create the confidence to challenge prejudice. Jeyasingham (2008) suggests that knowledge about sexuality is excluded from the social work literature and that this has allowed certain ideas, behaviours and groups of people to be ignored. This is despite a recent estimate that at least 3.6 million people of the UK population define themselves as lesbian or gay (these figures are considered to be an under-estimation as it is inevitable that due to the stigma associated with being lesbian or gay there is still under-reporting in this area) (Miles, 2011).

The concerns about negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay men are further reflected in findings from a number of studies suggesting that lesbians and gay men on the receiving end of social care and mental health services still have low expectations of these services based on prejudice, stereotyping and exclusion (Brown, 1998; Fish, 2006; Hicks, 2008). Stonewall (2008a) reported that one in fourteen lesbians and gay men expect to be treated worse than heterosexuals when accessing healthcare for a routine procedure or an emergency procedure. These perceptions of negative care may be matched by experiences of accessing services. In interviews from a study by King & McKeown (2003) lesbians and gay men indicated that the types of problems encountered with mental health professionals, included overt homophobia and discrimination. Furthermore, the results of a recent study of lesbian and gay young people found the majority felt there was a need for practitioners to receive more training so they felt comfortable in talking about lesbian and gay issues (Sherriff, Hamilton, Wigmore & Giambrone, 2011). Lesbians and gay men require health and social care services just as heterosexuals do, and therefore it is essential that practitioners, whether counsellors, psychologists or social workers, do not reinforce the negative attitudes aimed at lesbians and gay men by society in general.

Attitude formation and attitude change

The behavioural consequences of homonegative attitudes presented in the above examples, leads to the question of what can be done to change such attitudes. Significant work on the study of attitudes and attitude change was carried out in the 1950s and the theories around attitude formation and change have continued to evolve. Attitudes represent overall evaluations (positive and negative) of people, groups, and objects in our social world. Traditionally, attitudes were regarded as having three components: *affective, behavioural and cognitive* (Eiser, 1986). On the basis of the affective, cognitive, and behavioural components, people may form a positive or negative evaluation that summarises their response (Eiser, 1986). For example, the *affective* component relates to a person's feelings about the attitude object (i.e. I feel uncomfortable around homosexuals); the *behavioural* component describes a predisposition to act towards the attitude object in a certain way (i.e. I will avoid homosexuals); and the *cognitive* component involves a person's belief about an attitude object (i.e. homosexuals are effeminate).

Whilst there are a number of attitude change theories, one of the most popular is the cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). According to Festinger, individuals seek to behave in a self-consistent manner. In other words, a person's actions should fit with both their words and their attitudes. However, tension occurs if, for example, two attitudes conflict. Festinger's theory suggests that people have a motivational drive to reduce the psychological discomfort (or cognitive dissonance) caused by conflicting attitudes. The way this theory works can be seen from the following example. Suppose a woman fears lesbians because she firmly believes that lesbians are mentally ill. Then on attending university, during a psychology class the woman is provided with evidence that this is not the case. At the same time, the woman comes into contact another woman on the course and they become friends. However, the woman then discovers her new friend is a lesbian. This creates a conflict (or cognitive dissonance) between the woman's existing belief (i.e. lesbians

are mentally ill) and the evidence she is presented with at university (i.e. lesbians are 'normal' and 'nice'). One possibility is for the woman to change her existing belief to accept that lesbians are not mentally ill, thereby reducing cognitive dissonance. Alternatively, the woman could choose to ignore the new information presented at university and decide that her new friend is atypical of lesbians. In this instance, it might be that the belief about lesbians being mentally ill is so strong that it will take meeting more than one lesbian to alter the woman's attitude.

Changing negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay men

Nunn, Crokett & Williams (1978) argue that by increasing cognitive skills, knowledge of diversity, flexibility and open-mindedness, university education helps students to develop an increased tolerance for people, ideas and customs. Within the field of racial equality, education has been postulated as a method for reducing prejudice (Peel, 2002). Similar to racial prejudice, it is clear that lesbians and gay men also face considerable prejudice due to negative attitudes held by many in society. It appears that universities are especially equipped to meet the challenge of liberalising such attitudes (Lambert, Ventura, Hall & Cluse-Tolar, 2006). A number of studies have found that students who have spent more time at university (final year students compared to first year students) have more positive views of lesbians and gay men (e.g. Seltzer, 1992; Eliason, 1995; Ohlander, Batalova & Treas, 2005). In addition, a study of psychology students found that those with more credits in psychology had more positive views of lesbians and gay men than the psychology students with fewer credits (Matchinsky & Iverson, 1997). However, not all the studies examining education as a liberaliser of attitudes are this clear-cut. Some studies found homonegativity was not affected by exposure to the university curriculum (e.g. Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Krieglstein, 2003; Brownlee et al., 2005).

Education may be a potential factor in influencing attitudes, but it has also been consistently documented that individuals who have regular contact with a lesbian or gay man are less likely to hold negative attitudes than those individuals who have no contact (e.g. Herek, 1984; D'Augelli, 1989; Klamen, Grossman & Kopaz, 1999; Green, Dixon & Gold-Neil, 1993; Morrison et al., 2009a). This supports Allport's (1954) contact theory (also known as Intergroup Contact Theory) that posits that contact with a minority group is one of the most effective ways of reducing prejudicial attitudes towards that group. This theory suggests that prejudice results from over-simplified assumptions and generalisations made about an entire group of people based on incomplete or mistaken information. The notion is that if the majority group is given the opportunity to communicate with the minority group, this will result in a new appreciation, liking and understanding of that minority, thereby reducing prejudice (i.e. since these factors are not compatible with hostility, their presence produces a decrease in prejudice). More specifically, Herek and Capitanio (1996) found that multiple contact experiences resulted in increased acceptance. Although having contact with one gay person was associated with more positive attitudes than having contact with no gay people, only respondents who knew at least two gay people held consistently more positive attitudes than those who did not know any gay people. It has been suggested that contact with multiple members of a group may reduce the likelihood that the group members' behaviour can be discounted as atypical (Herek and Capitanio, 1996).

Furthermore, the age of an individual has been found to affect attitudes towards homosexuality. Herek (1984) noted that older people were more likely to hold negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay men. However, in the student population the opposite has been found to be the case for age. For example, younger students have been found to hold more negative attitudes (Kurdek, 1988) and are less supportive of lesbian and gay human rights, than older students (Ellis et al., 2002).

Aim of the current study

The main purpose of the current study is to investigate whether attitudes towards lesbians and gay men and support for lesbian and gay human rights are liberalised as a result of time spent at university, and whether studying a specific course affects such views. Students' attitudes towards lesbians and gay men, as well as support for lesbian and gay human rights will be compared across year of study as well as between the disciplines of psychology, counselling and social work at university. Views will be elicited using a questionnaire, consisting of the 'Modern Homonegativity Scale' (MHS; Morrison & Morrison, 2002). The MHS was designed using a conceptual framework based on modern racism and modern sexism. The scale is intended to elicit views on issues of equality and social justice (i.e. the belief that lesbians and gay men make unnecessary or illegitimate demands or that discrimination against lesbians and gay men is no longer a relevant social issue). This scale was selected over the 'Attitudes Towards Lesbians and Gay Men, or ATLG' Scale (Herek, 1984) which measures more traditional moral issues. Support for lesbian and gay human rights will be measured using the 'Support for Lesbian and Gay Human Rights' (SLGHR) scale. This scale was designed by Ellis et al. (2002) and reflects articles from the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights which could apply to lesbians and gay men. In addition, the study will examine whether age or having regular contact with a lesbian or gay man are potential predictors of individuals who may be more inclined towards homonegativity.

The following predictions were made:

H1: Due to much of the research suggesting that university education *per se* has a liberalising effect on attitudes towards lesbians and gay men, it was hypothesised that there will be a difference in first year and third year participants' attitudes and support for human rights, with first years' expressing less positive attitudes towards lesbians and gay men and lower levels of support for lesbian and gay human rights, than third years.

H2: Given that social work students receive training about lesbian and gay oppression, and psychology and counselling students receive very little education regarding such issues, it was hypothesised that there will be a difference in attitudes and support for human rights between the participants studying the disciplines of psychology, counselling and social work. Participants from the social work group were hypothesised to express the most positive attitudes towards lesbians and gay men and highest levels of support for lesbian and gay human rights.

H3: Previous research suggests that individuals who have regular contact with a lesbian or gay man hold more positive views towards this group. It was therefore hypothesised that participants who had regular contact would express more positive attitudes and have a higher level of support for human rights, than those participants who did not have regular contact.

H4: Similarly, previous research examining attitudes has found that older students' are more positive in their views of lesbians and gay men. It was therefore hypothesised that older participants would express more positive attitudes and have a higher level of support for human rights, than younger participants.

METHOD

Design

Comparisons of scale scores (MHS composite score and SLGHR composite score for each participant) were undertaken using an experimental design consisting of 2 independent variables and 2 dependent variables. The independent variables were: 'year' of study - with two conditions (first year and third year); and 'course' - with three conditions (psychology, counseling, and social work). The dependent variables were the 'MHS composite score' for each participant (ranging from 10-50) and the 'SLGHR composite score' for each participant (ranging from 25-125). Furthermore, group comparisons of composite scale scores were made based on two further independent variables: participant's 'age' with two conditions (under 25 years of age and 25 years of age and over); and participant 'contact' with two conditions (regular contact with a lesbian or gay man and no regular contact with a lesbian or gay man).

Participants

Participants consisted of a convenience sample of first year and third year undergraduate students (N = 124) from a large university in the north west of England studying psychology (first year: N = 19; third year: N = 20), counselling (first year: N = 22; third year: N = 22) and social work (first year: N = 20; third year: N = 21). There were 114 females and 10 males. Ages ranged from 18 to 50 years old with 55 older participants (25 years of age and above) and 69 younger participants (under 25 years of age). The majority of participants (89) identified as *exclusively heterosexual*, 24 participants identified as *predominately heterosexual* and 11 participants identified as *bisexual, lesbian, gay,* or *unsure*. Eighty one participants reported having regular contact with a lesbian or gay man, and 43 participants reported having no regular contact.

Materials

Participants completed a questionnaire (appendix 1) containing a number of measures. The questionnaire was made available to participants via the university's SONA computer system or via hard copy. The questionnaire began with a series of demographic questions regarding age, gender, sexuality, and whether the participant had contact with a lesbian or gay man. The MHS (Morrison & Morrison, 2002) was

used to measure modern attitudes towards lesbians and gay men, and the SLGHR scale (Ellis et al., 2002) was used to measure levels of support for lesbian and gay human rights. These two pre-existing scales have demonstrated reliability and validity: MHS (Morrison & Morrison, 2002; Morrison et al., 2009a; Rye & Meaney, 2010); and SLGHR (Ellis et al., 2002; Morrison & McDermott, 2009c). The MHS contains 10 items to be rated on a likert scale, ranging from 1=strongly agree to 5=strongly disagree. Possible composite scores ranged from 10 to 50 (the higher the score the more positive were the attitudes towards lesbians and gay men). The SLGHR contains 25 items to be rated on a likert scale, ranging from 1=strongly agree to 5=strongly disagree. Possible composite scores ranged from 25-125 (the lower the score the more support there was for lesbian and gay human rights). On both scales, negative items (1 item on the MHS and 8 items on the SLGHR) were reversed scored. Lastly, on the questionnaires supplied to third year students *only* there was a question asking the participants how well they felt their university education had prepared them for working with lesbian and gay issues. This item could be rated on scale as follows: 1=prepared, 2=somewhat prepared, 3=unsure, 4=somewhat unprepared, 5=unprepared.

Procedure

Participants were recruited via posters (appendix 2) advertising the study within the university and through lectures. The nature of the study was explained and it was emphasised that the taking part in the study was voluntary. Participants were given the option of completing the questionnaire via the SONA computer system or via hard copy. The questionnaire took approximately 10 minutes to complete. To ensure complete confidentiality, where hard copies of questionnaires were used, an envelope was supplied for the completed questionnaire to be returned in. Along with the questionnaire, the participant was also supplied with a 'Participant Information Sheet' (appendix 3) explaining the purpose of the study as well as ethical information (i.e. that the participant had 24 hours to consider taking part, that information supplied would remain anonymous, confidential and be stored securely, and that participants could remove themselves from the study at any time without a reason). An opportunity to ask questions about the study was given to the participants before they took part (either via email or face-to-face with the researcher during lectures). For further information, contacts (i.e. researcher, supervisor, support services) were also supplied on the participant information sheet. Finally, after completing the questionnaire, a 'Debriefing Sheet' (appendix 4) was made available for participants.

RESULTS

Once the questionnaires were completed, two composite score were calculated by the researcher - one score for the MHS and one score for the SLGHR - for each participant. The MHS and SLGHR scores were entered into SPSS and statistical tests were carried out. The raw data is shown in appendix 5.

As can be seen from Table 1, descriptive statistics show that first year students had a total MHS composite mean score of M 35.3, SD 8.7 compared with third year students' total MHS composite mean score of M 36.6 SD 7.7. Counselling students had the highest MHS composite mean score (M 37.4, SD 6.5) compared with psychology (M 35.0, SD 6.6) and social work students (M 35.3, SD 10.7).

Table 1
MHS composite mean scores (M) and standard deviations (SD)
of first year and third year students across course type

The higher the score on the MHS the more positive were the attitudes towards lesbians and gay men. Possible MHS composite scores range from 10 – 50.

	MHS								
	First Year			**Third (Final) Year**				**Totals**	
Course	*M*	*SD*	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*N*		*M*	*SD*
Psychology	34.0	7.4	19	36.0	5.7	20		35.0	6.6
Counselling	37.5	6.6	22	37.3	6.6	22		37.4	6.5
Social Work	34.0	11.4	20	36.6	10.2	21		35.3	10.7
Totals	35.3	8.7	61	36.6	7.7	63		36.0	8.2

As can be seen from Table 2, descriptive statistics found first year students had a SLGHR composite mean score of *M* 49.7, *SD* 16.6, compared to third year students' SLGHR composite mean score of *M* 47.5, *SD* 13.9. Counselling students had the lowest SLGHR composite mean score (*M* 46.1, *SD* 12.9) compared with psychology (*M* 52.3, *SD* 14.1) and social work students (*M* 47.6, *SD* 18.3).

Table 2
SLGHR composite mean scores (M) and standard deviations (SD)
of first year and third year students across course type

The higher the score on the SLGHR the lower the level of support there was for lesbian and gay human rights. Possible SLGHR composite scores range from 25 – 125.

SLGHR									
	First Year			**Third (Final) Year**				**Totals**	
Course	***M***	*SD*	*N*	***M***	*SD*	*N*		*M*	*SD*
Psychology	**55.2**	17.6	19	**49.6**	9.4	20		52.3	14.1
Counselling	**44.5**	12.8	22	**47.8**	13.1	22		46.1	12.9
Social Work	**50.1**	18.3	20	**45.1**	18.5	19		47.6	18.3
Totals	**49.7**	16.6	61	**47.5**	13.9	61		48.6	15.3

Two 2 (year) x 3 (course) ANOVAs were conducted; one for the MHS composite scores; and one for the SLGHR composite scores.

The results of the 2x3 ANOVA for MHS found no significant main effect for the year of study ($F_{(1,118)} = 0.92$, $p = 0.33$), or course ($F_{(2,118)} = 1.06$, $p = 0.34$). There was also no significant interaction between year and course ($F_{(2,118)} = 0.35$, $p = 0.70$). The results of the 2x3 ANOVA for SLGHR showed no significant main effect for year of study ($F_{(1, 116)} = 0.77$, $p = 0.37$), or course ($F_{(2,116)} = 1.85$, $p = 0.16$). There was also no significant interaction between the year and course ($F_{(2,116)} = 1.11$, $p = 0.33$).

Results in Table 1 show that, all the overall mean scores for the MHS are above the scale midpoint of 30, and in Table 2 that all the overall mean scores for the SLGHR are below the scale midpoint of 75. There were no significant differences between the scores across the different groups, however there are specific trends within the data. Table 3 shows, that compared to the overall means for each scale, there were a small number of participant's MHS composite scores that fell below the scale midpoint (indicating negative attitudes), and a small number of participants' mean

scores for the SLGHR that are above the scale midpoint (indicating low levels of support for human rights).

Table 3
Percentage of individual MHS composite mean scores that are below the scale midpoint (indicating negative attitudes) by year of study and course

MHS	First Year		Third Year	
	%	*N*	*%*	*N*
Counselling	18.1	4	9.0	2
Psychology	31.6	6	10.0	2
Social Work	35.0	7	23.8	5
Total	13.7	17	7.2	9

Table 4
Percentage of SLGHR composite mean scores that are above the scale midpoint (indicating low levels of support for human rights) by year and course

SLGHR	First Year		Third Year	
	%	*N*	*%*	*N*
Counselling	4.5	1	0	0
Psychology	15.7	3	0	0
Social Work	15.7	3	10.5	2
Total	5.7	7	1.6	2

Comparisons were also made on the basis of whether a participant had regular 'contact' or not with a lesbian or gay man (contact vs. no contact) and, on the basis of 'age' of the participant (under 25 years vs. 25 years and over).

As can be seen from Table 5 below, results show that participants who had regular contact with a lesbian or gay man had a higher MHS composite mean score (*M* 38.9, *SD* 6.3), than participants who had no regular contact (*M* 30.5, *SD* 8.5). Similarly, results demonstrate that participants who had regular contact with a lesbian or gay man had a lower SLGHR composite mean score (*M* 44.3, *SD* 13.0), than the participants who had no regular contact (*M* 58.7, *SD* 18.6).

Table 5
MHS and SLGHR composite mean scores (M) and standard deviations (SD) by Contact

The higher the score on the MHS the more positive were the attitudes towards lesbians and gay men. The lower the score on the SLGHR the higher the level of support there was for lesbian and gay human rights.

	MHS		SLGHR		
Students indicating regular contact with a lesbian or gay man	*M* 38.9	*SD* 6.3	*M* 44.3	*SD* 13.0	*N* 81
Students indicating no regular contact	*M* 30.5	*SD* 8.5	*M* 58.7	*SD* 18.6	*N* 43

When comparing age groups, the results (see Table 6 below) show that older participants (25 years of age and over) had a higher MHS composite mean score (*M* 38.0, *SD* 8.7), than younger participants (*M* 34.2, *SD* 7.4). Similarly, results demonstrate that older participants had a lower SLGHR composite mean score (*M* 45.3, *SD* 16.4), than younger participants (*M* 52.4, *SD* 16.4).

Table 6
MHS and SLGHR composite mean scores (M) and standard deviations (SD) by Age

The higher the score on the MHS the more positive were the attitudes towards lesbians and gay men. The lower the score on the SLGHR the higher the level of support there was for lesbian and gay human rights.

	MHS		SLGHR		
Students aged 25 years and above	*M* 38.0	*SD* 8.7	*M* 45.3	*SD* 16.4	*N* 68
Students less than 25 years of age	*M* 34.2	*SD* 7.4	*M* 52.4	*SD* 16.4	*N* 55

The scores were then compared on each of the scales based on 'contact' and 'age' using independent t-tests.

A comparison of MHS scores on the basis of 'contact' showed a significant difference (t(122) = 6.165, p <0.001) with higher scores (indicating more positive attitudes) for students who have regular contact. A comparison of SLGHR scores on the basis of 'contact' showed a significant difference (t(62) = -4.479, p <0.001) with lower scores (indicating higher levels of support for human rights) for students who have regular contact.

A comparison of MHS scores on the basis of 'age' showed a significant difference (t(121) = -2.606, p <0.001) with higher scores (indicating more positive attitudes) for older students. A comparison of SLGHR scores on the basis of 'age showed a significant difference (t(119) = 2.361, p <0.05) with lower scores (indicating higher levels of support for human rights) for older students.

DISCUSSION

The main purpose of this study was to investigate whether students' attitudes towards lesbians and gay men and support for lesbian and gay human rights were liberalised as a result of time spent at university, and whether studying a specific course affected such views. In addition, it has been documented that individuals who have regular contact with a lesbian or gay man express less negative attitudes towards that group, than individuals who do not have contact. Whilst the age of an individual has also been found to play a part in affecting attitudes; in particular that younger students tend to hold less positive attitudes towards lesbians and gay men. In this study, both contact and age were considered as possible factors influencing attitudes. Finally, it was also relevant to examine important patterns in the data not revealed by the overall analysis.

As most previous research suggests that university education *per se* has a liberalising effect on attitudes, H1 predicted that there would be a difference in first year and third year students' attitudes towards lesbians and gay men and support for lesbian and gay human rights. First year students' were hypothesised to hold more negative attitudes, and lower levels of support for human rights, than third year students. The results of statistical analysis indicated no significant main effect between the first year and third year students' scores. However, results show a trend in the predicted direction, with third year students having higher MHS composite mean scores (indicating more positive attitudes) and lower SLGHR composite mean scores (indicating higher levels of support for human rights) than first year students. The non-significant main effect is inconsistent with the results of other studies which found a significant effect of education on attitudes towards lesbians and gay men (e.g. Seltzer, 1992; Eliason, 1995; Ohlander, Batalova & Treas, 2005). One reason for a non-significant main effect in this current study may be due to the small number of participants in each group measured. The results were in the predicted direction and had more participants been measured in each group this may have led to a significant effect. Alternatively, it could be that the education received had no effect on attitudes towards lesbians and gay men or levels of support for lesbian and gay human rights.

H2 predicted that that there would be a difference in attitudes towards lesbians and gay men and support for lesbian and gay human rights between students studying the disciplines of psychology, counselling and social work. Given that social work students receive training about lesbian and gay oppression, it was hypothesised that social work students would hold the most positive attitudes and highest levels of support for lesbian and gay human rights. The prediction was not supported as statistical analysis found no significant main effect between the three courses. This seems surprising given that there is an emphasis on anti-discriminatory practice within the social work curriculum. It would be expected that the extra teaching around lesbian and gay oppression that exists in the social work curriculum, compared to psychology and counselling curriculum, would positively impact social work students' attitudes towards lesbians and gay men and their support for lesbian and gay human rights. Having said that, it does appear that lesbian and gay issues are specifically limited to one lecture on the social work curriculum, and it is possible participants may not have actually attended that particular lecture. Other studies

have provided varied results when comparing the populations working in social and psychological professions. For example, a study by DeCrescenzo (1984) found that social workers were more homophobic than psychologists. However, a study by Newman et al., (2002) found counselling students to be less positive towards lesbians and gay men than social work students. It could be that individuals attracted to these professions hold very similar attitudes towards lesbians and gay men and therefore a significance difference in attitudes between the disciplines does not exist. Alternatively, another reason for a non-significant main effect may be due to the small number of participants (approximately 20 participants) in each group measured.

The possibility that contact with lesbians and gay men might influence participants' views was also investigated. Descriptive statistics found that 65% ($N = 88$) of students surveyed in the current study had regular contact with a lesbian or gay man. This group were compared with those participants who indicated that they had no regular contact. Analysis of MHS composite mean scores supported H3; a significant difference was found between participants who had regular contact with a lesbian or gay man and participants that had no contact. Participants having regular contact held more positive attitudes. Similarly, a significant difference in SLGHR composite mean scores was found between participants who had regular contact with a lesbian or gay man and participants who had not contact. Participants having regular contact expressed higher levels of support for the human rights. This is consistent with Allport's (1954) contact theory and previous research. Allport argued that if the majority group is given the opportunity to communicate with the minority group, this will result in a new appreciation, liking and understanding of that minority, thereby reducing prejudice (i.e. since these factors are not compatible with hostility, their presence produces a decrease in prejudice). Previous research has demonstrated that individuals who had contact with a lesbian or gay man had more positive attitudes towards that group, than did individuals who had no contact. (e.g. Herek, 1984; D'Augelli, 1989; Klamen, Grossman & Kopaz, 1999; Green, Dixon & Gold-Neil, 1993; Morrison et al., 2009a). Additionally, research by Brown and Hegarty (2005) found that individuals reporting previous contact with lesbians and gay men are more likely to support the human rights of this group. In a study by Lambert et al. (2006) it was found that final year students had more positive attitudes to lesbian and gay men on some measures than did first year students. But, more significantly the findings showed that the final year students reported having a lesbian or gay close friend or family member more often than the first year students. This supports the notion that socialisation experiences (i.e. such as having contact with lesbians and gay men) may be playing a part in reducing homonegativity.

Furthermore, 65% of the participants in this current study indicated they had regular contact with a lesbian and gay man. This is a greater percentage than in previous studies. For example, a few years ago, two studies (Brownlee et al., 2005; Lambert et al., 2006) found that approximately 50% of the participants had contact with a lesbian or gay man. This is in contrast to two earlier studies (Gillman, 1999; Yang, 1997) that found around 22% of participants had contact with a lesbian or gay man. The results of this current study suggest an increase in the number of individuals having contact with lesbians and gay men over the past decade. This corresponds with the apparent decrease in homophobic attitudes within society in general. It could

be that as lesbians and gay men become more accepted within society, they will feel 'safer' and will be more likely to 'come out', thus leading to increased visibility for this group. As a result, it is increasingly likely that heterosexuals will come into contact with a lesbian or gay man more often – this may then lead to further acceptance of this group.

In respect to the age of the participant having an influence on the participant's views, the predicted H4, that older students would have more positive attitudes towards lesbians and gay men and higher support for lesbian and gay human rights than younger students, was supported. Results of the analysis showed a significant difference in MHS composite mean scores between participants aged 25 years plus and participants under 25 years of age. Older participants were found to have more positive attitudes. Similarly, a significant difference in SLGHR composite mean scores was found between participants aged 25 years plus and participants under 25 years of age. Older participants were more supportive of human rights. These results support research that found younger students to be more negative towards lesbians and gay men (Kurdek, 1988) and less supportive of their human rights (Ellis et al., 2002) than older students. Over half of the participants in the current study are over the age of 25 years (i.e. mature students). As these mature students tend to hold more accepting views, they may be impacting the overall mean scores on both scales.

As well as the four main hypothesis of this study, also of interest are the results of an item on the questionnaire that asked third year students '*to what extent did your academic experience prepare you to address sexuality issues?'* The results indicated that 80% of social work participants felt they were prepared, or somewhat prepared, by their academic experience to address sexuality issues (compared to 46% from counselling and 60% from psychology). These findings seem to reflect the extra teaching received by social work students relating to lesbian and gay oppression and anti-discriminatory practice. However, the confidence the social work students appear to have about dealing with issues around sexuality are in contrast to the numbers of the social work participants who were found to hold negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay men. For example, the majority of the participants expressing negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay men were from the social work group. So, whilst it *appears* that anti-discriminatory practices are being dealt with, negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay men are still held by a minority of social work students.   Whilst homonegativity does not always lead to anti-discriminatory practice, Fazio (1986) argues that, given that attitudes are represented in memory and are easily accessible, they have the potential to strongly influence behaviour. Assuming that the social work students sampled in this study become the future practitioners working with and affecting the lives of lesbian and gay people, the results of this study are cause for concern.

Finally, despite the non-significant findings, there are some important patterns in the data that were not revealed by the overall analysis; in particular some of the scores on individual questions (see appendices 6 and 7). Firstly, a significant percentage of participants were 'unsure' whether they supported specific human rights. For example, 26% of the participants held uncertain views as to whether lesbians or gay men should be granted asylum in another country when homosexuality is persecuted

in their own country, and 29% were uncertain about whether society has a right to prevent lesbians and gay men who want to speak in schools from actively promoting homosexuality as equivalent to heterosexuality. Although these responses cannot be said to reflect negative attitudes it is of some concern that these participants did not endorse human rights more positively. This uncertainty appears to leave open the question of whether the participant supported the human right or not.

Secondly, comparable with other studies (e.g. Annesley & Coyle, 1995; Ellis et al., 2002; Morrison et al., 2005), support varied across questions with regard to the human rights. For example, although access to basic rights and freedoms for lesbians and gay men was very well supported (97%), just under a third (31%) of participants agreed with (and an additional 17% were unsure they agreed with) the statement *"lesbians and gay men should only be allowed to express their views as long as they don't offend or upset the majority",* whilst 69% agreed with statement, *"lesbian and gay couples should have all the same parenting rights as heterosexuals".* The overall level of support for human rights suggests that the notion of equality for lesbians and gay men is well supported, but these results are somewhat weakened by the uncertainty of support for certain rights and the variable support across specific issues. Participants' lack of support for lesbian and gay men parenting is in line with other research and public opinion. For example, 25% of students from a US university favoured same-sex couples adopting children (Lambert et al., 2006), and 40% of the UK public favoured same-sex couples adopting (EHRC, 2010). Whilst, the percentage of participants supporting lesbian and gay parenting rights within the current study is higher (69%) than in previous studies, this received less support than other human rights items. This may suggest fears still exist around the social and psychological implications of lesbian and gay parenting. Yet this fear is not supported by research, which has consistently found no significant difference between children raised by lesbians and those raised by heterosexual parents (Clarke et al., 2010). In addition, in 2002, the Adoption and Children Act passed into UK law and for the first time allowed same-sex couples to adopt children (Stonewall, 2012).

There were also some additional positive changes in the level of support compared to previous studies. For example, previously, 63% of students (Ellis et al., 2002) and 68% of the public (Stonewall, 2007) indicated support for gay marriage rights, whereas 82% of the students in this study supported this issue. And, whereas 78% of the students sampled in a previous study (Ellis et al., 2002) thought it was inappropriate for lesbians and gay men to serve in the armed forces, the results of this current study indicate this view has completed switched direction, with 92% of participants expressing support for lesbians and gay men to serve in the armed forces. Interestingly, these positive increases in support for these particular issues may have been influenced by recent legislative changes. For example, the ban on lesbians and gay men serving in the armed forces was lifted in the early part of the last decade, and civil partnerships rights for same-sex couples came into effect in the mid-2000s. Alternatively, the results could simply be a reflection of the slow trend in society towards increased acceptance of lesbians and gay men (Stonewall, 2007).

As a result of the negative attitudes towards minority groups found within student populations, some universities are not relying on education *per se* to change such

attitudes, but are including specific modules examining diversity issues (Kitzinger, 1996). Findings by Case & Stewart (2009) demonstrated that students who attended a general diversity module exhibited less prejudice towards lesbians and gay men, compared to students who did not attend. And, the impact of a two-year action research project exploring diversity (including sexual orientation) in the psychology curriculum at Keele University included changes in teaching content, as well as positive changes in attitudes towards diversity (Priest, Hale & Jacobs, 2010). However, it has been consistently argued by academics that rather than homosexuality being compartmentalized to an individual sexuality or diversity class, it would be far more effective if universities included lesbian and gay perspectives *throughout* the curriculum (DeCrescenzo, 1984; Rosser, 1986; Rothblum, 1994; Cain, 1996; Ellis et al., 2002). Simoni (1996) argues that failure to include lesbian and gay perspectives can devalue lesbian and gay students' experience and suggests that these individuals are not worthy of mention. Given that in this current study more than a quarter of participants indicated they were not exclusively heterosexual, it could be argued that the current curriculum needs to be more inclusive of the non-heterosexual population.

Limitations of the study

One limitation of the study is that it uses a self-report questionnaire. Whilst it was stressed to participants that the questionnaires were confidential, participants may have been mindful that it is not socially acceptable to express negative views towards minority groups. In previous research participants admitted to not letting their negative feelings towards lesbian and gay people show (Abrams & Houston, 2006). Whilst, Ellis et al. (2002) argue that, given the liberal ethos of today's society, it is not considered generally acceptable (particularly among university educated individuals) to express discriminatory attitudes. A second, and potentially significant limitation of the study was the small number of participants in the groups being compared. The results of this study may have been impacted by the small sample size, as the results showed a non-significant effect, but trending was in the predicted direction. Small sample sizes tend to reduce the chances of demonstrating an effect or a significant difference. Finally, the study was a cross-sectional design (i.e. there was a different group of students sampled in the first year and the third year, and tested at the same point). Given available time, a longitudinal design based on following the same sample of students as they progress through university, would have been more suitable.

Avenues for further research

One way to determine the influential factors in education that potentially affect attitudes towards lesbians and gay men, is to examine whether interventions (such as, introducing sexuality or diversity modules, or including lesbian and gay perspectives on the curriculum) impacts attitudes. Future research should concentrate on following the same sample of students as they progress through university (i.e. via a longitudinal study), as well as increasing participant numbers. For example, if lesbian and gay perspectives were introduced throughout the second year of study on psychology, counselling and social work courses, students' attitudes towards lesbians and gay men could be measured in the first, second and third year

of the course to see whether there are any significant changes in such attitudes. Along with academic experiences, social experiences of the students should be measured. For example, the type of contact students have with lesbians and gay men as they progress through university could be measured to help ascertain what type of contact impacts attitudes.

Conclusion

What has been found from this research is there are no significant differences in first and third student's attitudes towards lesbians and gay men and support for lesbian and gay human rights, across the disciplines of psychology, counselling and social work. This could indicate the education received is not having an impact on students' attitudes towards lesbians and gay men. Psychology, counselling and social work students who may become the future practitioners working with a diverse range of clients, such as lesbians and gay men, need to be appropriately trained to do so. Universities are in a unique position to provide students, with more and better education about sexual minorities, and human rights, in order for them to respond in a sensitive and fair way when working with this 'at risk' group. This can be done, for example, by creating a more 'inclusive' curriculum; by introducing sexuality/diversity modules, or, more importantly, by including lesbian and gay perspectives throughout the curriculum. This will require training for lecturers in lesbian and gay issues in order for them to feel comfortable and knowledgeable when discussing these issues, or the recruitment of lecturers specialising in sexual minority issues.

In addition, a significant number of students in this study indicated that had not been prepared by their academic experience to work with issues around sexuality. This is not surprising, given the general lack of coverage of lesbian and gay issues on the curriculum (even within social work, it appears the coverage of lesbian and gay issues is contained in one lecture). This lack of confidence on the part of students suggests more work needs be done in this area.

Furthermore, given that personal contact with lesbians and gay men has been shown to correlate with positive attitudes towards that group, universities could encourage opportunities for students to interact with lesbian and gay individuals, such as, through discussions in lectures of lesbian and gay perspectives. Students in these classes can get acquainted with lesbians and gay men, which can lead to greater understanding and acceptance of this group, as well as helping to reduce homonegativity. Finally, lesbian and gay students (and lecturers) need to feel that university is a 'safe' place to 'come out' and be more visible. As Ryan (2001) suggests, it has been common for lesbian and gay young people to 'come-out' in their early 20s when working or attending university. Having a 'safe' environment where lesbian and gay issues are 'normalised' and not excluded is therefore essential in helping them develop a positive self-identity.

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