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### Predicting the Support of Same-Sex Relationship Rights Among Social Work Students

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## **Predicting the Support of Same-Sex Relationship Rights Among Social Work Students**

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*Since the 1980s, the United States has seen several instances of legislative action on the topic of same-sex marriages and civil unions. As some studies explored public reactions to such laws, the perspectives of social workers and social work students have mostly been ignored. In addressing part of this oversight, this paper looks at the approval of same-sex relationship rights among 571 heterosexual social work students enrolled in 12 U.S. colleges. In having an explanatory scope, the article focuses a multivariate analysis of potential antecedents to these policy preferences. Consistent with attribution theory, the strongest associations were located in the belief that sexual orientations are voluntary. In addition, students who were surrounded by homophobic parents and peers, or had little contact with gays or lesbians, were against the expansion of broader gay and lesbian relationship rights. Conversely, individuals who ignored traditional gender roles and authoritarian principles, as well as did not attend regular religious services, were more amiable to extending the relationship rights of sexual minorities.*

**KEYWORDS** *attitudes toward lesbians and gay men, same-sex relationships, undergraduate social work students, attribution theory, religion*

Until recently the topic of same-sex marriages has generally been shunned or ignored by American institutions. This silence ended during the past two decades, and the ensuing debate over legalizing same-sex relationships

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has been quite rancorous. Both opponents and proponents of sanctioning lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) relationships have won support from the three branches of government at the federal and state levels. In 1995, Utah became the first state to enact legislation prohibiting same-sex marriage (Adam, 2003). The federal 1996 Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) sanctioned marriage only for heterosexual individuals (Soule, 2004) and, although it applied only to federal policies and programs, DOMA provided the impetus for similar action at the state level. By the end of 1996, 18 states had banned same-sex marriages. During the 2004 elections, citizens in 13 states voted to amend their state constitutions to ban same-sex marriage (Lewis, 2005). While those opponents of same-sex relationship recognition claimed numerous victories, proponents enjoyed success as well. Vermont legally sanctioned same-sex relationships with the creation of "civil union" relationship status through legislation passed in 2000 (National Center for Lesbian Rights, 2005). Massachusetts also legally authorized marriage for lesbians and gay men as did Connecticut, Iowa, Vermont, and Maine. New Hampshire is to do so in January 2010. California also did the same between June 16 and November 4, 2008.

While the idea of same-sex marriage is highly contested in the general public, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has taken an unequivocally supportive stance. Since the 1970s, the NASW has condemned any form of homophobia and called for an expansion of rights for gay men and lesbians. The current *Code of Ethics* asserts that social workers should not "practice, condone, facilitate, or collaborate with any form of discrimination on the basis of . . . sexual orientation" and that they should "prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class on the basis of . . . sexual orientation" (NASW, 1996, 4.02; 6.04d). Although these decrees exist, one cannot assume that current and aspiring social workers concur with such sentiments in that they may feel no obligation to oppose discrimination based on sexual orientation or they may not recognize that the lack of same-sex marital rights constitutes oppression or discrimination. Given that social work students are tomorrow's practitioners and the Council on Social Work Education mandates the inclusion of content on sexual orientation, it is especially important to examine social work students' support for the recognition of same-sex relationships. In addressing the reasons behind students' possible judgments, this research explores why some students in Bachelors of Social Work (BSW) classes do or do not support the expansion of same-sex relationship rights. To achieve this research goal, our multivariate analysis uses 13 factors that have been correlated with support of same-sex relationships in the U.S. populace.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Our theoretical model draws from two literatures. Initially, we employ recent empirical studies on the social and psychological determinants of attitudes

toward equal rights for gay men and lesbians in the general U.S. populace (e.g., Barth, Overby, & Huffmon, 2009; Brumbaugh, Sanchez, Nock, & Wright, 2008; Brewer, 2003; Crane, Martinez, Kane, & Gainous, 2005; Ellis, Kitinger, & Wilkinson, 2002; Lewis, 2003; Malaney, Williams, & Geller, 1997; Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2008; Pearl & Galupo, 2007; Tygart, 2000; Wilcox & Woplert, 2000; Wood & Bartkowski, 2004). Later we augment these studies with an analysis of homophobic and heteronormative attitudes among employed social workers and social work students (e.g., Cluse-Tolar, Lambert, Ventura, & Pasupuleti, 2004; Crisp, 2007; Newman, Dannenfelser, & Benishek, 2002; Oles, Black, & Cramer, 1999; Ryan, 2000). This inquiry began by identifying demographic, attitudinal, and contextual factors that may inspire the tendency to support or disagree with the expansion of same-sex relationship rights.

## Demographic Factors

### GENDER, RACE, AND AGE

Maintaining certain social statuses seems to inspire a greater support of LGB rights. In studies on the general U.S. populace, greater acceptance of rights for gays and lesbians is often reported among female, white, and younger respondents (Brewer, 2003; Firestone, Harris, & Vega, 2005; Lewis, 2003; Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2005; Loftus, 2001; Olson, Cadge, & Harrison, 2006; Pearl & Galupo, 2007; Petersen & Donnenwerth, 1998; Schulte, 2002; Wilcox & Wolpert, 2000). However, such differences may not be as pronounced among social work circles. Some studies found gender, race, and youth cleavages for homophobia among social work students (Cluse-Tolar et al., 2004; Newman et al., 2002; Oles et al., 1999; Snively, Krueger, Stretch, Watt, & Chandha, 2004). Conversely, other studies involving both students and practitioners have found no substantial impact for demographic variables (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Cluse-Tolar et al., 2004; Cramer, 1997; Green, 2005; Ryan, 2000).

### EDUCATION

While social work programs generally try to eliminate prejudices among its students, the ability of college curriculums to lessen homophobia is far from clear. Universal measures of years in college sometimes find that junior and seniors are less homophobic than students who are just beginning their collegiate experience (Barth et al., 2009; Brumbaugh et al., 2008; Cluse-Tolar et al., 2004; Crisp, 2007; Firestone, Harris, & Vega, 2005; Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2005, 2008; Lewis, 2003; Oles et al., 1999; Olson et al., 2006; Pearl & Galupo, 2007; Petersen & Donnenwerth, 1998) while other studies find no such relationship (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Brewer, 2003; Crane et al., 2005; Ryan, 2000).

## Attitudinal Factors

### GENDER ROLE EXPECTATIONS

Gender roles reflect societal expectations of appropriate behavior for men and women. Every social setting includes conventional interpretations regarding how femininity and masculinity should be displayed. One aspect of traditional gender roles is that every adult will eventually date or marry a person of the opposite sex (assumed heterosexual coupling). Conversely, those who take same-sex spouses are often derided as people who practice an “alternative,” “deviant,” or “immoral” lifestyle. With the merging of conventional gender expectations into compulsory heterosexuality, many studies have found that people who embrace traditional gender-role attitudes are more likely to hold negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men (Basow & Johnson, 2000; Herek, 1988; Green, 2005; Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002; Schulte, 2002; Whitley & Ægisdottir, 2000) and be ambivalent about the rights of LGB parents (Brumbaugh et al., 2008; Crane et al., 2005; Spivey, 2006).

### AUTHORITARIAN ORIENTATION

Authoritarian perspectives embrace the dominant social order and disparage any nonconformists who do not comply with the dictates of official leaders (Whitley & Ægisdottir, 2000). This reverence for hierarchies seems relevant since authoritarianism has been significantly associated with prejudice against gays and lesbians (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Whitley & Ægisdottir, 2000; Wilkinson, 2004) and the type of laws that discriminate against gays and lesbians (Barth et al., 2009; Brumbaugh et al., 2008; Brewer, 2003; Crane et al., 2005; Wilcox & Wolpert, 2000).

### RELIGIOSITY

Despite variability in the measurement of religiosity, a relationship between religiosity and negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians has been demonstrated (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Brumbaugh et al., 2008; Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2008; Newman, 2002; Newman et al., 2002). For example, Christian ideology has been found to be among the strongest predictors of homophobic attitudes among college students (Plugge-Foust & Strickland, 2000; Snively et al., 2004). Likewise, studies have found religious fundamentalism to be associated with negative attitudes toward members of the LGB community (Barth et al., 2009; Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Wood & Bartkowski, 2004), as has belonging to a conservative denomination and attending religious services more frequently (Cluse-Tolar et al., 2004; Brewer, 2003; Herek & Glunt, 1993; Lewis, 2003; Olson et al., 2006; Petersen &

Donnenwerth, 1998; Wilcox & Wolpert, 2000). Finally, simply being affiliated with a religion has been significantly associated with more negative attitudes and lower support of human rights for gay men and lesbians among undergraduates (Ellis et al., 2002; Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2005; Pearl & Galupo, 2007; Olson et al., 2006).

#### ATTRIBUTION OF CAUSE

Attribution theory explores the ways in which people try to explain why things happen. When looking at the “successes” or “failures” of groups, citizens often search for internal or external causes of inequalities. People seem to disrespect the stigmatized and disenfranchised when they think that their plight was generated by personal deficiencies (i.e., the poor garner less sympathy when they are characterized as lazy, irresponsible, drug dependent, violent, and promiscuous). In matters of sexuality, some people believe that sexual orientations are “biologically determined” and beyond a person’s control while others insist that gays and lesbians choose their sexual identity (Tygart, 2000). These attributions can be important, since individuals who believe in the immutability of sexual orientation have been found to be significantly more tolerant of gay men and lesbians (Eldridge, Mack, & Swank, 2006; Hegarty & Pratto, 2001; Schulte, 2002; Wood & Bartkowski, 2004) and significantly more supportive of sexual minority rights (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2008; Crane et al., 2005; Wood & Bartkowski, 2004), including marriage and domestic partnership (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2005; Tygart, 2000; Wilcox & Wolpert, 2000).

#### Contextual Factors

##### REFERENCE GROUP HOMOPHOBIA

Herek (1988) suggested that reference group members play a pivotal role in the formation of attitudes toward gays and lesbians. The belief that one’s friends hold negative attitudes was significantly associated with homophobia among undergraduates (Herek, 1988; Schulte, 2002). In addition, homophobic expressions by parents have produced children who dislike gays and lesbians (Kulik, 2004; O’Bryan, Fishbein, & Ritchey, 2004) and have less sympathetic reactions to AIDS patients (Cossman, 2004).

##### CONTACT WITH GAY MEN AND LESBIANS

Allport’s (1954) “contact hypothesis” asserts that prejudices toward stigmatized populations often lessen after people have face-to-face conversations with members of that stigmatized group. Allport adds that the effects of

interpersonal contact are stronger when the discussants are of equal status, the conversation is sanctioned by authority figures, and a mutual goal is being cooperatively pursued. In support of this claim, numerous studies reveal that individuals who report greater contact with lesbians and gays consistently express more positive attitudes (Crisp, 2007; Eldridge et al., 2006; Herek, 1988; Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002; O'Hare, Williams, & Ezoviski, 1996; Oles et al., 1999; Plugge-Foust & Strickland, 2000; Snively et al., 2004; Wood & Bartkowski, 2004). Moreover, a national study found that gay friendships were connected to a respondent's belief that LGB couples should have the same marital rights as heterosexual couples (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2008), and another study added that South Carolinians were inclined to vote against anti-gay marriage referendums when they had interpersonal contact with LGB acquaintances and couples (Barth et al., 2009).

## METHODOLOGY

This study explored the attitudes of undergraduate social work students from multiple colleges. In finding sample units, unique numbers were assigned to every accredited BSW program in the United States as listed on the Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors' Web site in May 2004. To establish a geographically diverse stratified sample, each college was placed into one of nine regions following the U.S. Census Bureau regional schemata. Two programs were then randomly selected from each regional stratum, resulting in a list of 18 possible schools.

Prior to the start of the 2004 academic year, the researchers identified each professor who taught the introductory and senior-level social work courses. The intent was to find students beginning and ending their undergraduate experience (we hoped for at least one lower-division and senior-level class from each institution). Every identified faculty member was contacted by telephone and asked to distribute surveys in one of their classes. They received an e-mail and a follow-up telephone call as well. In the end, faculty from 14 of the original 18 programs agreed to participate. A packet of questionnaires was mailed to each faculty member; we asked them to distribute the questionnaires within the first two weeks of the quarter/semester. Included in the packet was a script that informed students about the voluntary and anonymous nature of their participation. The professors left the room and returned the completed surveys.

Surveys were returned by 747 students from 12 institutions. Our analysis limits itself to all of the "completely heterosexual" students who answered every item on our same-sex relationship rights scale ( $N = 571$ ). Herek (1988) has argued researchers should study LGB and heterosexual populations separately since it is assumed that certain predictor variables will operate differently for each aggregate. More than three-fourths of the

sample was Caucasian ( $N = 450$ ) and female ( $N = 493$ ). The mean age was 24, with the range of 18 to 73. Eighty percent of the respondents were between the ages of 18 and 26. Lower-division students comprised the majority of the sample, with roughly 32% expecting to earn their BSW within the next academic year.

## Measures

Our dependent variable was measured through a cumulative same-sex relationship rights scale that consisted of three items. Item one called for a universal prohibition of LGB relationships: "There should be laws against gay, lesbian and bisexual relationships" (Malaney et al., 1997). Item two dealt with the appropriate genders of married couples: "Marriage should only happen between a man and a woman." Item three was concerned with marriage by same-sex couples: "Same-sex couples should have the right to legal marital status." Each item was measured using a five-point scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Items one and two were reverse coded. A higher score on each item represented greater support for sexual minority relationship rights as did a score of 15 on the composite index (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .868$ ), which was obtained by adding the score of each item (theoretical range 3 to 15).

The independent variables included a combination of ordinal and categorical questions. The Likert items were measured on a five-point scale that went from strongly disagree to strongly agree (see Table 1 for item wording and descriptive statistics). Acceptance of traditional gender roles was examined using three items, which focused on issues of gendered violence and female promiscuity (Patton & Mannison, 1995) as well as traditional divisions of labor in heterosexual nuclear families (Lye & Biblarz, 1993) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .670$ ). For authoritarianism three items on conventionality and submission to established authorities were taken from Altemeyer and Hunsberger's (1992) Right Wing Authoritarianism scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .797$ ). Religiosity was measured through the frequency of attendance at religious services, which included four possible categorical responses (Herek & Glunt, 1993; Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002; Olson et al., 2006; Tygart, 2000). Attribution of cause was represented by two items: one that insisted that homosexuality is a choice (Wood & Bartkowski, 2004) and another that stated that homosexuality is caused by biological forces (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .797$ ).

Friend support of homosexuality was measured by a single item on friends generally condoning homosexuality. Parental support of homosexuality was measured with two items on whether mother and father each thought that "homosexuality was wrong" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .735$ ). Interpersonal contact was measured by two dichotomous variables that asked

**TABLE 1** Items and Descriptive Statistics for the Predictor Variables

	Mean ( <i>SD</i> )	Percent Yes
<i>Authoritarianism</i>		
Obedience and respect for authority are the most important values children should learn.	3.36 (1.16)	
Authority figures usually know what is best for people.	2.35 (.99)	
One good way to teach people right from wrong is to give them a good stiff punishment when they get out of line.	2.51 (1.15)	
<i>Traditional Gender Roles</i>		
Women should have fewer sexual partners than men.	2.03 (1.01)	
If a guy spends a lot of money on a girl, he has the right to expect a few sexual favors.	1.25 (.64)	
It is much better for everyone in a family if the man earns the main living and the woman takes care of the home and family.	1.88 (1.05)	
<i>Parental Acceptance of Homosexuality</i>		
My mother believes homosexuality is wrong.	3.41 (1.34)	
My father believes homosexuality is wrong.	3.81 (1.19)	
<i>Attribution of Cause</i>		
Homosexuality is a lifestyle choice.	2.97 (1.32)	
Homosexuality is caused by biological forces beyond a person's control.	3.11 (1.22)	
<i>Friend Acceptance of Homosexuality</i>		
My friends are pretty accepting of homosexuality.	3.41 (1.11)	
<i>Know a Gay or Lesbian Friend</i>		33%
<i>Know a Gay or Lesbian Acquaintance</i>		64%
<i>Frequency of Religious Attendance</i>		
Never		19%
Less than once a month		36%
Several times a month		22%
Once a week or more		23%

whether respondents knew any gay or lesbian friends or school acquaintances (yes = 1 for each variable).

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents the responses to the items in our same-sex relationship rights scale. Actual frequencies and percentages are reported for each item and the means were coded to reflect greater support of rights. The sample as a whole had relatively mixed responses to these items. In terms of banning lesbian, gay, and bisexual relationships (item 1) and granting legal marital rights to same-sex couples (item 3), the total distribution leaned toward the expansion of relationship rights (means = 3.88 and 3.35, respectively). Roughly two-thirds of students opposed prohibitions of LGB relationships (item 1) and slightly more than half endorsed marriage rights for same-sex

**TABLE 2** Student Support for Relationship Rights for Members of the Gay Community ( $N = 571$ )

Item	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	Mean (standard deviation)
1. There should be laws against gay, lesbian, and bisexual relationships. (R)	252 (44.0)	136 (23.7)	96 (16.8)	40 (7.0)	49 (8.6)	3.88 (1.27)
2. Marriage should only happen between a man and a woman. (R)	138 (24.0)	103 (17.9)	83 (14.5)	70 (12.2)	180 (31.3)	2.91 (1.57)
3. Same-sex couples should have the right to legal marital status.	106 (18.4)	61 (10.6)	93 (16.2)	142 (24.7)	172 (30.0)	3.35 (1.46)
Full Composite Scale						10.12 (3.83)

couples (item 3). However, support was far from universal. While the modes for these two items suggest strong affirmation of broader relationship rights, 32% were either against or neutral toward LGB relationships and 45% expressed either negative or neutral support for same-sex marriage. Finally, we have a less liberal response to the “Marriage should only happen between a man and a woman” position. The distribution tilts in a negative direction in support of same-sex marriage with a mean of 2.91 and the mode is the least liberal response (31% of the respondents strongly agree with this statement). Moreover, with only 41% of the students disagreeing with this assertion, the possibility exists that a noticeable segment of the sample embraces civil unions rather than same-sex marriages.

The overall mean of the cumulative rights scale is 10.12 ( $SD = 3.83$ ; mode = 15). Clearly the central tendency slants toward a supportive stance since the mean is above 9 and the mode was the highest score of 15. Nevertheless, the support is far from universal and not the norm. Only 35% of the respondents had scores of 12 or higher (suggesting positive scores on all three items). More disconcerting is the fact that 6.7% of the respondents netted the lowest score of three and another 14.7% of these social work students had a total score of four through six (indicating negative scores on every item).

### Predictors of Support for Relationship Recognition

To ascertain the relationships between the independent variables and the same-sex relationship rights scale, an Ordinary Least Squares regression was run (see Table 3). This technique deciphers the direct association for each

**TABLE 3** OLS Regression for Supporting Relationship Rights ( $N = 571$ )

Predictor Variables	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	$\beta$
Gender	.32	.30	.03
Race	-.06	.25	-.01
Age	-.02	.01	-.04
Graduating Social Work Student	.39	.25	.05
Greater Authoritarianism	-.15	.05	-.09**
Support Traditional Gender Roles	-.20	.04	-.13***
Parental Acceptance of Homosexuality	.39	.05	.23***
Friend Acceptance of Homosexuality	.31	.11	.09*
Know a Gay or Lesbian Close Friend	-.40	.23	.05
Know a Gay or Lesbian School Acquaintance	.48	.23	.06*
Frequency of Religious Attendance	-.89	.11	-.24***
Attribution of Cause (Homosexuality Is a Choice)	-.57	.05	-.35***

$R^2 = .64$ .

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

variable when controlling for the other independent variables (coefficients) and discerns the amount of variance explained by all of the variables included in the model (R-squared). No problems of multicollinearity and homoscedasticity occurred with our variables.

All 12 of the independent variables predicted approximately 64% of the variance of student attitudes toward same-sex relationship rights. When exploring specific variables, seven of the attitudinal and contextual factors were significantly connected with the relationship rights scale. Attribution offered the largest coefficient, with the students who insisted that sexual orientation is a “choice” criticizing same-sex relationships more often (beta = .35,  $p < .001$ ). The coefficients for religious attendance (beta = .24,  $p < .001$ ) and parental acceptance (beta = .23,  $p < .001$ ) were among the next most important predictors. The support of traditional gender roles (beta = .13,  $p < .001$ ) and authoritarian worldviews (beta = .09,  $p < .01$ ) had significant weak associations. Finally, the factors of friend acceptance (beta = .08,  $p < .05$ ) and acquaintance contact (beta = .06,  $p < .05$ ) displayed the weakest but still significant relationships. The other five variables in this model failed to reach the significance threshold.

In a bit of a surprise, contact with gay or lesbian friends was not statistically significant. With friend’s acceptance being significant one may conclude that a friend’s comments on homosexuality are more important than the actual sexual orientation of the friend making the comment. Gender, race, and age were also not significantly associated with the dependent variable. Subsequently, it seems reasonable to assume that a student’s interpretation of gender roles and the attitudes of significant others are more important than their ascribed social statuses (i.e., perceptions of proper gender roles are more important than the gender a person is assigned). Finally, completing a greater number of college classes (i.e., being a graduating social work student) does

not appear to be associated with a student's stance on same-sex relationship rights. This suggests that the entire curriculum by itself does not inspire any liberalizing effects on social work students.

## DISCUSSION

All of the attitudinal variables were aligned with the approval of same-sex relationship rights. In confirming attribution theory the respondents were less likely to accept sexual minority relationship rights when they believed that sexual orientation was a choice. Similarly, future social workers were more likely to withhold support for same-sex relationship rights when they embraced authoritarian orientations and expressed conventional beliefs regarding wifely duties and female sexuality.

A host of contextual factors also were associated with attitudes toward same-sex relationship rights. In highlighting the importance of social milieus, disapproval of same-sex relationship rights was partially associated with the attitudes of people in respondents' immediate social circles. Students also seem to devalue same-sex relationship rights when they encounter parents and friends who opposed homosexuality. That is, students who felt that their peers and parents were hostile to gay men and lesbians were the same people who rejected same-sex relationship rights. The data also suggest that greater involvement in religious activities is associated with greater opposition to same-sex relationship rights. This suggests that greater integration into religious communities fosters less respect of LGB rights.

The findings partially support the "contact hypothesis." Meeting gay or lesbian peers at college boosted greater acceptance of rights while interactions with gay and lesbian close friends did not (see Barth et al., 2009). This could be due to what Granovetter (1983) calls the "strengths of weak ties" hypothesis. That is, Granovetter argues that people usually gain more political knowledge from people they vaguely know than from closer intimates who would be considered close ties. In addition, the smaller effects of these contact variables may be due to measurement shortcomings. For example, our contact measure focused on knowing gay men or lesbians, but ignored the type of content that was shared in these interpersonal connections.

None of the demographic factors (gender, race, and age) reached significance. The importance of gender could have been usurped by our attitudinal variables, and it is possible that BSW programs draw more gay-friendly males than other university majors (we do assume that the "gender gap" stills exists at the general undergraduate populace). Earlier studies agree that the significant link between race and support of LGB rights is confined to only bivariate analysis (Cluse-Tolar et al., 2004; Newman et al., 2002; Oles et al., 1999; Snively et al., 2004). That is, race is only significant in simple correlations but loses importance when researchers control for other contextual

and attitudinal factors. The ramifications of age could have been minimized by the truncated age pyramid of a college-student sample; most participants were less than 25 years old and therefore the study contains a very small proportion of people who belong to earlier cohorts of more homophobic people (see Loftus, 2001).

Finally, this study found little differences between freshmen and seniors on the relationship rights scale. Thus, the general social work curriculums did not seem to reverse heterosexual biases on their own accord. However, a conclusion of this sort needs several stipulations. Since the study was limited to social work majors, it is still unclear as to whether social work curriculums change the minds of non-social majors who enroll in BSW classes. Also, the insignificance of "year in college" does not mean that all educational interventions are irrelevant. Simply taking social work classes may not dampen sexual prejudices, but the content in a specific class might indirectly lessen homophobia (see next paragraph). Accordingly, a different measure of educational process might yield stronger associations. Studies that explore specific classroom experiences may find that certain pedagogies and classroom materials may be better suited for attitudinal change.

These findings are important for educational practices. Social work professors can promote the support of same-sex relationships, including their legal recognition, through various indirect avenues. The importance of attribution of cause of sexual orientation reinforces the need for human behavior courses to include information on sexual identity development (Fletcher & Russell, 2001; Van Den Bergh & Crisp, 2004). In addition, it is clear that social work professors should continue their efforts at detailing the negative consequences of patriarchy (i.e., the extent of domestic violence, gender gap imbalances in salaries, and the growth of poverty among children who reside with their single mothers). Likewise, faculty members should promote greater critical and independent thought since the students who unconsciously defer to authority figures expressed less support for same-sex relationship rights. While tackling sexual prejudices through the above indirect means seems reasonable, it is equally important to explicitly discuss issues of homophobia and heterosexism in the classroom as well. Faculty in practice courses can introduce readings on how homophobic and heterosexist feelings of social workers interfere with effective assessment and counseling of LGBT clients (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Hayes & Gelso, 1993; O'Hare et al., 1996; Ryan, 2000). In policy or ethics classes, faculty should also try to convey the human costs of denying marital rights to coupled gay men and lesbians. Faculty can refer to the General Accounting Office (GAO) report that identified more than 1,100 "federal statutory provisions classified to the United States Code in which marital status is a factor in determining or receiving benefits, rights, and privileges" (Shah, 2004, p. 1). Professors might want to introduce the analytical distinction between the religious and legal perspectives on marriage. Students should understand that civil unions are legal documents that ensure

fairness and equality of social provisions (i.e., conferring many of the same tax, health, and legal protections that are available to married heterosexual couples).

This study also highlights the importance of out-of-the-classroom interactions. Due to the relevance of the contact hypothesis, it seems wise to increase the frequency of conversations between people of different sexual orientations. To foster these scenarios, schools can sponsor guest lectures on campus, the creation of discussion groups among students, and the formation of LGB and ally support groups. Schools should also establish “gay-friendly” campuses, since affirmative conditions are beneficial to LGB campus members and improve the chance of students meeting individuals who are publicly “out.”

Some methodological caveats about these findings are warranted. The sample may contain some selection bias since professors from six schools did not distribute surveys in their classrooms. Although we received surveys from colleges in each region, it seemed that professors from religious and research tier 1 programs were less inclined to accept or return the surveys. Due to a possible “false consensus effect,” our measures might overemphasize the strength of peer attitudes. Respondents sometimes erroneously assume that their own attitudes are normal or typical in the general populace. Also, without longitudinal data, it is impossible to determine the directionality of this and other relationships. Since the choice of friends is mostly voluntary, students may have internalized negative attitudes during childhood and simply befriended peers who endorse such sentiments. This intentional segregation into homophobic settings reverses the temporal ordering of causality. Finally, the finding regarding greater involvement in religious activities being associated with more opposition to same-sex marriages needs to be interpreted with some caution because of issues of temporal ordering. That is, the teachings of religious institutions do not always serve as the precursor to homophobic values. Progressive stances of students may come before a withdrawal from religious events.

The legal recognition of civil unions and same-sex marriages will dramatically improve the lives of many Americans. Social workers should advocate for such policies. We hope that this study furthers this goal, as it identifies attitudinal and contextual factors that lead to student acceptance of same-sex relationship recognition. Future research should investigate how college environments change student perspectives and how these perspectives might translate into the professional careers of the students who graduate.

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