(OUT)siders at the Gates: Administrative Aspirants’ Attitudes Towards the Gay Community

Leadership for Learning in the Context of Social Justice: An American Perspective
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ABSTRACT: Using the Attitudes Towards Lesbians and Gay Men Scale (ATLG) this study focused on two groups of graduate students in graduate level leadership preparation programs. Research questions that framed this study were: What are students’ who are aspiring to school leadership positions attitudes toward lesbians and gays? What are students’ attitudes concerning issues of equity as it relates to lesbians and gays? Findings for question one revealed that very few respondent were neutral on this issue with a majority of the population (61%) tending to have more tolerant attitudes toward members of the queer community. Regarding question two, survey responses showed a more even spectrum of responses. What is most interesting is that 35% of respondents were neutral about issues concerning equity.

Introduction

It was a typical Tuesday night in Room 107 of the College of Education, one of the oldest buildings on a large university campus in the Midwest. The aspiring school administrators enrolled in the graduate level “Women in Leadership” course were discussing issues surrounding power, oppression, and what it means to live as a member of a marginalized group. Bob, a White male in his twenties entered the conversation by saying, “Isn’t all the talk about feminism overrated at this point? I mean it’s the year 2005. I love women, I don’t have any issues with them, and it looks to me like they are doing well as compared to where they were in the sixties. I took this course because I don’t understand why there is this sort of whining about not being treated right. I think we have come a long way towards respecting women. Hasn’t everything changed in the last forty years?”

Wendy, a Black woman in her forties aspiring to open a charter school answered, “You have no idea about my plight because you are a White male. You have never experienced what it means to be marginalized. Of course you don’t get it; you can’t because you haven’t lived it. You don’t see the struggle that I have lived.” The professor interjected, at this point, her opinion, “The idea of unpacking privilege is what this course is all about. That’s why privilege is a difficult thing to grasp because it is something that is taken for granted. And there are different kinds of privilege because there are different kinds of oppression. So tonight we have touched on the fact that White males may not understand privilege in the way that Black females do. Can anyone think of any other marginalized groups that might be wrestling with the same sorts of issues in our culture?” Morgan, a White woman in her thirties offered, “What about gays and lesbians?” Before the professor could respond, she noticed that Wendy had crossed her arms on her chest and had a frown on her face. So the professor asked Wendy to explain her body language. Wendy said, “I just don’t get that. I mean the gay thing is different than an issue of race. I mean who does the dishes in a set up like that? And why do I have to be a part of that? That’s business I don’t need brought in my face.”

The professor responded, “Wendy do you realize you have just expressed the same kind of view towards a
marginalized group that Bob offered a few minutes ago? The same privileged and narrow sentiments that caused you to passionately respond to Bob are what you are now expressing about a different group of people that are not part of the dominant culture." Wendy thought for a minute and said, "Well yeah, but gay is different than Black. I don't understand them." And Bob then said, "You mean just like I don't understand you?"

The above story is an account of what one of the authors experienced in her class during the fall semester of 2005. We see this as a perfect example of the importance of addressing issues concerned with learning more about aspiring leaders attitudes towards members of the lesbian and gay community. As we continue to rethink how we train administrators to lead our schools, we must be cognizant of their intellectual experiences in terms of social justice and diversity issues. A step in this direction is to begin to understand the contextual frameworks aspiring leaders bring to their training experience in relation to a marginalized community that only recently has become part of the discussions centered on diversity.

The purpose of this study is to provide more information within the realm of leadership preparation by examining the attitudes of graduate students in school leadership preparation programs towards members of the queer community. Research questions that framed this study were:

A) What are students' who are aspiring to school leadership positions attitudes toward lesbians and gays?
B) What are students' attitudes concerning issues of equity as it relates to lesbians and gays?

**Literature Review**

In a historical context, attitudes towards gays and lesbians have varied. As Cabaj (1998) noted, there have been times when gay men and lesbians have been held in high esteem and other times when they have been feared and persecuted. This type of persecution has been termed homophobia (Herek, 1989. In ancient times, same sex marriages were not only tolerated but were sanctioned by the Roman state (Rainey, 2001). When the Roman Catholic Church became the officiating body to conduct marriage ceremonies, homophobia began increasing. Laws were enacted in Rome and England that began the criminalization of homosexual behavior. However, same sex marriages were still taking place as late as the fifteen hundreds. By the mid eighteen hundreds, psychiatry began to view homosexuality as a mental illness in direct confluence with the mores of Victorian England. This influence continues today in the form of social homophobia despite the new findings on sexuality, education of the public, and the political movements generated in the 1960’s (Cabaj, 1998).

Educators all over the world continue to grapple with issues of diversity within their community. Issues of tolerance and accountability in terms of ethnicity can be traced in the American educational system to the 1954 Brown decision in which schools were desegregated. In terms of higher education, institutions have been called upon to recognize that a university is comprised of many different communities that must be intertwined in order to meet the needs of students from different backgrounds. Moses (1990) suggested that it is necessary to apply a model of cultural pluralism "in which diversity is valued to structure the university in a way that facilitates cross cultural learning among the many segments of the university…” (p. 403). And while the student population of school has become increasingly diverse, the teacher population has remained relatively homogenous (Butler, 1994). Zimpher (1989) described the typical teacher education student as a White middle class female, who grew up in a rural or small town, attends a school which is close to home, and has limited geographic aspirations for the future. Furthermore, Alston (2004) noted that in 2001, there were nearly 3 million teachers in the public schools with approximately 2 million at the elementary level and 1.5 million at the secondary level (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2001). The majority of these teachers were White, female, and English-only speakers (Hodgkinson, 2000, 2001; Garcia, 1999). In 2001, the National Education Association (NEA) reported that among K-12 new teachers 7% were African American, 1% were Asian American, 4% were Hispanic, 5% were First Nations, and 83% were White. This is the pool of educators that become leaders in schools. Thus, many of the teachers who will become administrators have little to no experience with other cultural groups.

Moreover, our society continues to struggle with the idea that diversity speaks to issues beyond ethnicity. Sears (1992) encouraged educators to borrow from the work and experiences of those involved in anti-racism workshops who engage professionals in three to five day tolerance workshops. He stated,
There has been a tendency for those engaged in homophobia education not to collaborate with those engaged in other types of anti-oppression work, such as racism and sexism. This lack of communication contributes to the splintering of educational efforts to end prejudice and violence directed at lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (p.60).

Because of this inability of our culture to embrace the idea that oppression transcends ethnicity, gender, and sexual preference, we see that the manifestations of homophobia and heterosexism experienced by gays, lesbians, and bisexuals serve as sources of conflict between the heteronormative culture that permeates the pool of administrative aspirants. An even stronger rationale for educating future school leaders about the issues surrounding homosexual oppression is that unlike gender or race, sexual orientation may not be obvious or revealed (Garnet, Hancock, Cochran, Goodchilds, & Peplau, 1991). So in essence by ignoring the issues, we continue to produce school leaders who may not seek to recognize populations that are oppressed within their own schools.

While there is body of literature that speaks to the broad topic of gay and lesbian issues in education, there is almost no empirical research that focuses specifically on lesbian/gay issues as it is related to school administration. Sears (1992) recommended four goals for research with sexual minority administrators: a) chronicle their lives, b) document institutional experiences, c) attempt to understand the heterosexist/homophobic mind, and d) through the combination of the first three, transform schools society and ourselves. Furthermore, Sears (1992) found that some gay and lesbian youth perceived school counselors and teachers to be ill-informed and unconcerned about issues centered on their sexual development. There is a reluctance to address the issue of sexual orientation in schools due in part to the fact that gay men and lesbians are often not considered to comprise a particular cultural group (Marcus, 1993). In other words, they are not considered to have developed unique values, attitudes, ways of knowing, and ways of living as a result of identifying themselves as gay or lesbian.

**Conceptual Frame**

Social Oppression has been defined as “the systematic, socially supported mistreatment and exploitation of a group or category of people by another” (WebRef.Org, n.d.). Forms of social oppression include (but are not limited to) racism, sexism, classism, ableism, ageism, and heterosexism. All of these “isms” are based on social constructions and are internalized and reinforced by family, friends, and neighbors (Schmitz, Stakeman, & Sisneros, 2001). Additionally, Herek, D’Augelli, and Patterson (1995) noted that “heterosexism is manifested at both the cultural and the individual levels. Cultural heterosexism, like institutional racism and sexism, pervades societal customs and institutions. It operates through a dual process: homosexuality is usually rendered invisible and, when people who engage in homosexual behavior or who are identified as homosexual become visible, they are attacked by society” (p.26).

Audre Lorde (1983) stated “…that among those of us who share the goals of liberation and workable future for our children, there can be no hierarchies of oppression” (p. 22). However, as Adams (2000) noted, this does not mean that different forms of oppression do not affect people in different ways. She further notes that it is useless to argue victimhood, but it is more productive to understand the dynamics of social oppression and how they affect us as a society.

**Description of Data Source and Method**

The authors of this research chose to study two groups of graduate students in graduate level leadership preparation programs: Group I consisted of 42 graduate students enrolled in a midsize public university in the mid-western United States. Group II consisted of 132 graduate students enrolled in a large public university in the southern United States. The survey instrument used for this study was the **Attitudes Towards Lesbians and Gay Men Scale (ATLG)**. Developed in 1984 by Herek, the ATLG Scale is a brief measure of heterosexuals’ attitudes toward gay men and women. The ATLG treats these attitudes as one instance of intergroup attitudes, similar in psychological structure and function to interracial and interethnic attitudes. Borrowing from public discourse surrounding sexual orientation, the scale represents statements that tap heterosexuals’ affective responses to homosexuality and to gay men and lesbians (Herek, 1984). The ATLG instrument has 20 Likert-type questions, ten of which are a subscale to measure
attitudes toward lesbians and ten are a subscale to measure attitudes towards gay men. Response choices on the instrument were ranked on scale from of 1 to 5 with 1 corresponding to “total disagreement” with the statement while a 5 signified “total agreement” with the statement.

A Cronbach’s alpha was conducted as a measure of internal reliability. The overall alpha was .94 indicating a high level of reliability and internal consistency. Additionally, a principal component analysis was conducted to determine if there were any underlying dimensions. An independent T test was also performed between the mean responses of Group I and the mean responses of Group II on each item on the instrument. Significant differences were found on only four items (one, five, six, and seven). Group I was significantly more tolerant one these items than Group II. However, given the relatively few differences that emerged, it was deemed appropriate by the authors to combine the two samples into one large pool for a further principal component analysis.

Findings

The principal component analysis conducted with the large pool of survey responses revealed three underlying factors. These dimensions accounted for 64% of the total variance. Factor one contained question items 3, 1, 10, 8, 13, 6, 9 and 5. This factor was labeled by the authors as attitudes towards lesbians (queer females) and accounted for 26% of the variance. Factor two contained items, 18, 16, 12, 19, and 14. This factor was labeled by the authors as attitudes towards gays (queer males) and accounted for 21% of the variance. Factor three contained items 17, 11, 15, 20, 4, and 2. This factor was labeled as attitudes towards homosexuality and accounted for 17% of the variance.

Attitudes toward the Gay and Lesbian Community

In terms of Research Question 1, (“What are students' who are aspiring to school leadership positions attitudes toward lesbians and gays?”) survey responses to Factor One (Attitudes toward lesbians) and Factor Two (Attitudes toward gays) revealed that very few respondent were neutral on this issue with a majority of the population (61%) tending to have more tolerant attitudes toward members of the queer community and a minority of the population (30%) tending to have more intolerant attitudes toward the queer community. However, 61% can not be an acceptable number when we consider that this population will be charged with leading our nation’s schools.

Homophobia must become a point of focus among prospective school administrators because it can directly and indirectly affect students. Given the negative relationships between knowledge and attitude, carefully planned, and implemented instruction may be helpful in changing negative attitudes towards members of the sexual minority. There is evidence in the literature that education about gay and lesbian issues can have a positive effect on homophobic attitudes (Anderson, 1981; Voss, 1980). This data serves at best as a cry for educators to again consider a curriculum that encompasses a strand focused understanding of diversity issues. Educational efforts geared towards changing homophobic attitudes have historically taken a cognitive approach, an affective approach (Pagtolun-An & Clair, 1986), or a combination of both (Rudolph, 1989).

The best way to understand the difference between these two approaches is to know that cognitive frameworks tend to focus on knowledge acquisition and transformation whereas affective frameworks focus more on feelings, emotions, and attitudes. Cognitive strategies typically include lecture, discussion, review, audiovisuals, and assigned readings (Omrod, 1990). Affective approaches include speaker panels, role plays, simulations, small group discussions, case studies, debates, poetry, and photographs (Beane, 1990). A key focus point for these efforts centers on empathy. When we as leaders of a diverse culture demonstrate apathy toward the heteronormative nature of our society, we only increase the existing hegemony by naturalizing it. Critical work is needed to help address the issues of diversity that are not always apparent in a school community.

By employing educational intervention strategies that focus on empathy towards members of the gay and lesbian community and an understanding of the heterosexist culture, future school administrators are allowed the opportunities to build a framework of empathy and a social conscience that will empower them throughout their career. Moreover, administrators who have been enlightened to the perspectives of those in the gay and lesbian community maybe more likely to help build a culture of tolerance in their own schools.

Having a sound knowledge base may help educators respond to the emotional or “moral” arguments with logic and
factual information (Sobocinski, 1990). Furthermore, Herek (1989) stated that educators can play an important role in reducing the bigotry which underlies antigay sentiment and action. He suggested that school staffs should “…receive explicit training in sensitivity to lesbian and gay issues to prepare them to foster tolerance and reduce conflicts in their students. Additionally, such training should be reflected in licensing and professional degree requirements” (p. 954). This is not the first call for training in sensitivity and or empathy towards gay and lesbian issues for those who work in schools. Rainy (2001) agreed that there should be training of this sort when considering the professional development educators as well as those who specialize in school counseling. However, he noted that:

There would be great difficulty in creating changes at the university level because of current attitudes held toward lesbians and gay men by society in general. The university could possibly face political and economic consequences by taking an overt stand on gay and lesbian issues. Social change would probably have to precede changes at the university level; however, this could be an opportunity for the university to affect social change. (p. 55)

The 31% of respondents who demonstrated an intolerant attitude towards gays and lesbians in this study is further evidence that homophobia is still pervasive in our culture. While we can recognize that there are strides being made towards acceptance of those in the sexual minority, this statistic serves as a further call to action for those involved in administrative preparation programs.

**Attitudes Concerning Issues of Equity**

Regarding Research Question 2 (What are students’ attitudes concerning issues of equity as it relates to lesbians and gays?), survey responses showed a more even spectrum of responses with a significant number of neutral responses for each question in the factor. In general, 40% of respondents tended to be more supportive of equity for gays and lesbians with 25% being non supportive of equity for gays. What is most interesting is that 35% of respondents were neutral about issues concerning equity. The authors of this current research wonder if the neutrality of responses is a symptom of apathy in the pool of aspiring school leaders when considering issues centered on the sexual minority. Furthermore, these authors contend that neutrality concerning issues of equity and marginalized groups is in direct conflict with the concept of leading in a democratic society. Just as with issues related to other marginalized groups, neutrality regarding an issue of oppression is a symptom of one who has not considered thoughtfully the world in which they live. Discussions surrounding the theory and practice of how domination works are essential to helping aspiring leaders reflect on the world in which they live as well as their role in it. In becoming aware of both the positions they inhabit and the locations from which they speak, aspiring leaders are better able to take responsibility for, and transform their beliefs and actions (Popekewitz & Brennan, 1997). McIntosh (1988) attempted to articulate struggle with coming to understand the concept of White privilege when she noted that:

... whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. So I have begun in an untutored way to ask what it is like to have white privilege. I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was “meant” to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks. Describing white privilege makes one newly accountable. My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture. I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her
individual moral will. My schooling followed the pattern my colleague Elizabeth Minnich has pointed out: whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow “them” to be more like us. (p. 3)

In an effort to help others interpret what a culture of White dominance and privilege means in day to day life, McIntosh generated a list of privileges taken for granted by those who were not members of an ethnically marginalized group. She recommended the list be used by the reader as a tool to reflect and build empathy for members of an ethnically marginalized group. While she does mention that the lack of these privileges transcend to other oppressed groups, there is not an in-depth mention of specific privileges within a heteronormative framework. Seeing this list as an inspiration, we propose a list specific to the lens of leading school communities (see Appendix), as a starting point for discussions geared towards helping students reflect on their own attitudes, or lack of attitudes, towards members of the sexual minority. The purpose is to generate a sense of empathy among those administrative aspirants who are members of the sexual majority by asking them to consider their professional goals through a queer lens. Furthermore, these perspectives may assist members of the heteronormative community of school administrators to move from a place of apathy to a place of empathy in terms of their attitudes towards members of the lesbian and gay community.

**Conclusion**

While this article highlights that there is work to do, it also recognizes that with the call towards democracy, leadership, and social justice, this is the time for that work. Now is the time for action and change in leadership preparation programs. Oft times we let things go without addressing them, hoping that somehow they will disappear. We have reached a new era in society where LGBT2S2S people are no longer hiding in the closet, but are out and proud, even in public education.

Educational leadership preparation programs are charged with preparing the nation’s schools leaders and these programs would be negligent in that training should they not prepare future leaders who are grounded in social justice. As educational leaders who set the tone for staff and students in our school communities, principals must actively work to build a respectful and inclusive school climate (Goodman, 2005). Heterosexist attitudes and beliefs must be addressed, eliminated, and changed in order to create safe, respectful schools for students and adults of all sexual orientations.

As we continue on this road toward justice, we must heed the words of Margaret Mead (1935):

> If we are to achieve a richer culture, rich in contrasting values, we must recognize the whole gamut of human potentialities, and so we weave a less arbitrary social fabric, one in which each diverse human gift will find a fitting place (p. 322).

**APPENDIX**

**Heterosexual Privilege Checklist**

1. I can be pretty sure that if I live my school’s community, my neighbors will be pleasant or neutral to me.
2. I can feel confident about the kind of ring I wear on the third finger of my left hand.
3. I am free to put in my office mementos and photos of my personal life.
4. I can confidently explain to my secretary that my partner or spouse gets immediate access to me when they call or visit my school.
5. I can feel confident in discussing the details of my weekend activities in a group of people.
6. I can feel confident that when I hug a student or faculty member of the same sex, it is interpreted as an honest act of support or admiration.
7. If I was a successful athlete, physical education, drama, art, or dance teacher, I can feel confident that people will not assume my success is based on my sexual preference.
8. I can be confident that people do not confuse my sexual preference with pedophilia.
9. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to the group that shares my sexual orientation.
10. I am free to publicly display affection for my partner, date, or spouse, when walking in a shopping mall, eating dinner in a restaurant, grocery shopping, running in a neighborhood park, or attending a school community event.
11. I am free to demonstrate that I and or my family is community minded by including my significant other and or children in school/community events such as carnivals, plays, concerts, and dance.
12. When students come to me for mentorship and counseling about their issues concerning sexuality, I am free to be honest about my own and I do not have to think twice about how I am counseling them.
13. I can dance with my partner at my school’s prom.
14. I do not have to be concerned about who answers the telephone in my home if it rings early in the morning, in the evening or on the weekends.
15. If I am proposed to by my significant other, and accept, I can enjoy sharing the news with my coworkers, inviting them to my wedding and all the other ceremonies related to it.
16. I do not have to worry about insurance for my spouse because he or she is covered by my insurance.
17. I know that when I die, my spouse will receive the social security benefits that I spent a career earning.
18. I don’t have to travel with a legal portfolio that grants me entrance into the emergency room and power of attorney for my partner and or our children in case there is an accident.
19. If I choose to be assertive, or emotional, my action will not be seen as the result of my sexual orientation.
20. My sexual preference will not be considered related at all to my ability to parent, or to relate to children.
21. I do not function in a space where I feel as though I am forced to choose between deceiving people about my private life and being stripped of my credibility as an educational leader.
22. I am not concerned with having to tolerate educating people who ask insensitive and embarrassing questions specific to my sex life in an effort to understand those who share my sexual preference.
23. I can feel free to practice my religion with my partner or spouse in a church, synagogue, or temple of my choosing that is in the same neighborhood as the school district that I serve.
24. I am not made acutely aware that my choice of specialty as an educator, hairstyle, dress, or choice of jewelry will be taken as a reflection of my sexual preference.
25. I can build a culture of tolerance and fight homophobia in my school without my sexuality being called into question.
26. I can be alone with colleagues of the same sex in a locker room at the gym, or share a hotel room at a business conference, and feel comfortable.
27. If I lose credibility as the leader, I can feel confident that my sexuality is not the problem.
28. I don’t have to feel uncomfortable every time I write a check (for service organization dues, donations, the sunshine fund, etc) because my name and my partner’s name are printed on it.

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References


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