

The Social Location of Those Holding Antihomosexual Attitudes

Richard Seltzer

Howard University

Using data from a 1985 national sample of over 2300 adults, an index of attitudes toward homosexuality was created from 13 different questions. Respondents were more likely to hold antihomosexual attitudes if they were politically conservative, religious, older, less educated, male, married or widowed, or from the South. The effects of religiosity were less pronounced among black respondents. In addition, middle-aged respondents were more liberal than younger or older respondents if they were college educated or black.

Previous research on correlates of attitudes toward homosexuality has used either student samples, nonnational local samples, or a single indicator. For example, Herek (1984) used factor analysis on a series of indicators of homosexuality. He found two primary factors: (1) a condemnation-tolerance factor and (2) a beliefs factor. This research is an excellent example of research examining multiple indicators of homosexuality. However, his samples consisted only of undergraduates and it would have been inappropriate for him to try to make detailed inferences about demographic correlates with the factors. College students are relatively homogeneous and little would be learned by examining correlates based upon, for example, age or education. Some authors have not been so cautious (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980) and their results are more suspect.

On the other hand, Nyberg and Alston (1976) and Irwin and Thompson (1977) used single indicators to study correlates of antihomosexuality. The former used National Opinion Research Center's (NORC) question on the moral acceptability of homosexuality and the latter used NORC's three narrowly defined questions on homosexuals and First

Amendment rights. Although their results are both fascinating and useful, their findings should be viewed as tentative since reliance upon single indicators can be problematic.

Britton (1990) used multiple indicators with a sample that was not exclusively student. However, his sample was of adults living in a Southwest city. This is far better than using a student survey; however, the limited geographic scope calls for caution in making more universal claims.

A proper study on correlates of attitudes toward homosexuality should (1) have a national sample of adults, (2) allow for multiple indicators and (3) have a full list of demographic variables.

When a national sample of adults became available that met most of the above criteria, it seemed worthwhile to reexamine the issue of demographic correlates of attitudes toward homosexuality.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this study were derived from a survey conducted by the *Los Angeles Times* (LAT) in 1985. The sampling frame for this survey included all telephone residences in the nation, including Alaska and Hawaii. A total of 2308 respondents, 18 years and older, were interviewed during the eight days ending December 12, 1985. Although the primary topic of this survey was attitudes toward AIDS, 13 questions were solely on the issue of gays.

Seven questions in the *Los Angeles Times* survey dealt with homosexuality and AIDS. For example, was "AIDS a punishment GOD has given homosexuals for their way of life." Such questions are excluded from this analysis in order to avoid mixing up attitudes toward these two issues. Nevertheless, respondents' answers to questions about gays may have been affected by the fact that they were also being asked questions about AIDS. In some exploratory regression, a beta of .31 was found between the factor on attitudes toward homosexuality and a factor representing support for repression of people with AIDS. Furthermore, a correlation of .52 occurred with these two indices. It is clearly difficult to disentangle these two sets of questions and some caution is called for in drawing inferences about only one set of these questions.

Exploratory factor analysis was used to examine the structure of these 13 questions. Only one coherent factor could be derived from the data (eigenvalue = 5.23). The first factor explained 40% of the variance and the second factor explained only 8%. These 13 questions were combined into a single index using principal components analysis. The phraseology, frequencies of the liberal responses, and correlation with the factor are

given in Table I. This factor clearly represents general attitudes toward gays and gay rights.

In order to improve interpretability, a 0–100 scale was created from this factor. The absolute value of the largest negative score was added to each data point. Thus, the lowest score would be zero. The result of the largest score divided by 100 was then multiplied by each data point. Therefore, the homosexual attitude index (HAI) would range from 0 to 100. A 100 represents a respondent who took the antihomosexual position on all questions and a score of 0 represents someone who answered all 13 questions in a manner consistent with tolerance for homosexuality.

Given the exploratory nature of this research, all demographic questions asked in the LAT survey were used in the statistical analysis. These variables were age, race, whether respondent was Latino, sex, education, region, marital status, income, religion, frequency of church attendance, whether the respondent was a “born again Christian,” and self-identified political viewpoint. It would have been preferable if some additional demographic variables were chosen (i.e., media habits or occupational prestige) or if some of these questions were differently formulated (i.e., used standard census occupational coding). Nevertheless, their choice of demographic variables is relatively complete.

Prior to computing the regression equation, some exploratory research on HAI was conducted using analysis of variance. In this exploratory research, some special interactions among the independent variables were significant. These special interactions are included in the regression equation and are discussed in the findings.

REGRESSION RESULTS

The results of the multiple regression are given in Table II. Collectively, the independent variables were able to explain 39% of the variance of the HAI.

Self-identified political viewpoints was clearly the most predictive variable. Respondents who said they were very liberal averaged 42.8 on the HAI scale vs. 79.6 for those who said they were very conservative. This variable by itself explained 19% of the variance of HAI in the regression equation. It should come as no surprise that there was a strong correlation between these variables. In fact, attitudes toward homosexuality is theoretically a strong contributor toward explaining a person’s self-identified political viewpoints. Therefore, the regression was also run excluding this variable. The relative importance of the other background variables is very similar to their importance when including political viewpoints as a predictor.

Table I. List of Attitudinal Questions

How would you describe your views on homosexuality? Very liberal, somewhat liberal, middle of the road, somewhat conservative, or very conservative?

(Liberal — 31.9%^a; 0.71^b)

Generally speaking, are you in favor of hiring an employee regardless of whether he or she is a homosexual or lesbian, or are you opposed to that — or haven't you heard enough about that yet to say?

(Favor — 60.1%; 0.73)

How sympathetic would you say you are toward the homosexual community? Would you say that you are very sympathetic, somewhat sympathetic, somewhat unsympathetic, or very unsympathetic to the homosexual activity?

(Sympathy — 44.0%; 0.68)

Do you sometimes feel uncomfortable when you are around homosexual men, or doesn't that happen with you? How about being around lesbian women?

(Comfortable — 58.4%; 0.31)

If you had a child who told you he or she was a gay or a lesbian, what do you think your reactions would be? Would you be very upset, somewhat upset, or not very upset, or not upset at all?

(Not upset — 8.7%; 0.63)

Now I'm going to mention some phrases that people sometimes use to describe gays or lesbians and then I'm going to ask you to tell me which one you agree with the most. Of course, if you don't agree with any of them, or if you agree with all of them about the same amount, then just say so: gays and lesbians are a danger to children; they threaten the family as an institution; they are immoral; homosexuals make themselves too obvious; they're too politically active; or they have stronger sex drives than others?

(Agree with none — 31.7%; 0.63)

What is your attitude toward homosexuality? Do you personally approve of homosexual relations between consenting adults . . . or do you think it's alright for other people but not for yourself . . . or do you oppose it for everyone?

(Approve, OK others — 49.1%; 0.76)

What about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex? Do you think it is always wrong, or almost always wrong, or wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all?

(Not wrong — 22.5%; 0.73)

Table I. *Continued*

Do you favor or oppose laws to protect homosexuals against job discrimination?
(Favor — 56.3%; 0.40)

How do you feel about the political activity of homosexuals — that is, both gays and lesbians? Do you think homosexuals have too little political power, or about the right amount, or do you think that homosexuals have too much political power?

(Too little, about right — 58.9%; 0.66)

Do you think the government is paying too much attention to gays and lesbians, or about the right amount, or do you think the government hasn't paid enough attention to people who are homosexuals?

(Not enough — 25.0%; 0.23)

If your party nominated a well-qualified person for Congress, and you heard that he or she was a gay or a lesbian, would that make you more likely to vote for such a candidate, or less likely, or wouldn't it make any difference one way or the other?

(More likely, no difference — 52.1%; 0.76)

How would you feel about a candidate who supported homosexual issues and appeals to gays and lesbians for their votes? Would you be more likely to vote for such a candidate, or less likely, or wouldn't it make any difference one way or the other?

(More likely, no difference — 40.0%; 0.70)

^a All responses represent the sum of more liberal responses and are based only upon respondents who had an opinion.

^b The second number in parentheses is the correlation with the factor from the principal components analysis. Negative coefficients are removed to help in interpretation.

Indicators of religiosity are some of the best predictors of attitudes toward homosexuals [Britton, 1990 (Southwest sample); Nyberg & Alston, 1976; Irwin & Thompson, 1977]. With the LAT data it was also found that people who more frequently attend church or consider themselves to be reborn Christians hold the most antihomosexual attitudes. For example, respondents who most often attended church averaged 80.2 on the HAI vs. 59.2 for those who almost never attended church. However, a surprising interaction was found between frequency of church attendance and race on the factor. Among black respondents, weekly church attendance had no effect upon the HAI.

Respondents with less education are more likely to hold anti-homosexual attitudes. It was found that respondents with only an

Table II. Regression Parameters on Gay Attitude Factor^a

	<i>B</i>	Beta	<i>T</i>	Significance
Political views	9.12	0.39	14.74	< .0001
Frequency church attendance	2.91	0.18	6.04	< .0001
Years of education	-1.31	-0.17	5.56	< .0001
Sex (male)	6.85	0.15	5.61	< .0001
Region (South)	6.10	0.12	4.58	< .0001
Race (black) × Age (18-29)	18.56	0.15	5.47	< .0001
Age	0.11	0.07	2.41	.02
Race (black) × Church (weekly)	-9.34	-0.09	3.38	.0008
Age (30-49) × education (college)	-6.67	-0.11	3.56	.0004
Born again Christian (yes)	4.56	0.09	3.29	.001
Owner small business (yes)	8.48	0.08	2.99	.003
Never married (yes)	-5.21	-0.09	3.09	.002
Separated/divorced (yes)	-6.11	-0.08	3.04	.003

^a $R^2 = .39$.

elementary school education averaged 80.3 on the HAI compared to 58.6 for those who graduated college. These results were also similar to those of Britton (1990), Nyberg and Altson (1976), and Irwin and Thompson (1977).

Men are more antihomosexual than women. However, the difference in the HAI between men and women was only about six points. Kite (1984) also found using meta-analysis that males were somewhat more negative toward homosexuals than women.

Respondents who live in the South averaged six points higher on the HAI than those who live outside of the South. This result is in accordance with previous research that found Southerners to be more conservative in general (Hulbert, 1989), and more conservative in particular on First Amendment rights for homosexuals (Irwin and Thompson, 1977).

Older respondents are more conservative on homosexuality than younger respondents. The results from these data were also similar to those of Britton (1990), Nyberg and Altson (1976) and Irwin and Thompson (1977). For example, respondents between the age of 25 and 35 averaged 62.3 on the HAI compared to an average score of 77.7 for those over the age of 65. There were two interesting interaction effects concerning age. The first is that among college educated respondents, those who are between 30 and 49 are more liberal on HAI than those who are either younger or older (59.1 vs 53.8 vs 69.0). In essence, there is a "Vietnam generation" effect among the college educated. This effect is not found among noncollege-educated respondents.

The second interesting age interaction is with race. Among black respondents, a similar "civil rights generation" effect occurs. Black respondents between the ages of 30 and 49 are more liberal on the HAI than those who are either younger or older (75.8 vs 62.9 vs 68.7). In fact, among black respondents, it is the youngest age cohort that is the most conservative.

People who are separated (50.9), divorced (59.3), or never married (58.3) are more liberal in their attitudes toward homosexuality than people who are married (68.5) or widowed (68.7).

The last significant term in the regression equation is that owners of small businesses are more likely to be antihomosexual. Their average score of 78.7 on the HAI is not easy to explain. Whether a respondent was an owner of a small business did not correlate with any of the other class variables: income or education.

Finally, it should be noted that, after excluding interaction terms, race was not statistically significant in explaining attitudes toward homosexuality. In addition, neither income nor religion proved to be statistically significant in predicting the HAI.

CONCLUSIONS

These findings are very consistent with those authors who have either used a single indicator in a national sample (Nyberg & Alston, 1976; Irwin & Thompson, 1977) or multiple indicators in a more local sample (Britton, 1990). Respondents are more likely to hold antihomosexual attitudes if they are religious, less educated, older, and Southern. Unlike the above authors, this study also found males to be somewhat more antihomosexual than females. However, this is similar to the results of Kite's (1984) metaanalysis.

Some of the more interesting findings of this study were not tested for by previous researchers. Political beliefs are clearly the most powerful predictors of attitudes toward homosexuals. This is not especially surprising since an attitude that is political in nature should correlate highly with an overall index of political beliefs.

What are somewhat surprising are some of the interaction effects. It was found that religiosity had no effect among black respondents and that the effect of age was curvilinear among college-educated respondents and black respondents. The lack of relationship among blacks between religiosity and attitudes toward homosexuality contradicts the limited previous research on this issue (Smith & Seltzer, in press). It is conceivable that Smith and Seltzer, who found a strong relationship between religiosity

and attitudes toward homosexuality among black respondents, were overly influenced by the use of a single indicator. They used the NORC question on moral acceptability of homosexuality. One would expect a strong relationship between religiosity and attitudes toward homosexuality when this attitude is only examined in terms of moral acceptability to the respondent. Other dimensions of attitudes toward homosexuality may be less influenced by religiosity.

The curvilinear effects of age among black respondents and college educated respondents is likely a "Vietnam" or "civil rights" generation effect. Perhaps those who were more likely to fight against oppression in their youth are more likely to oppose its modern-day manifestations.

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