

# Straight Allies: Supportive Attitudes Toward Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals in a College Sample

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**Abstract** Little research has focused on the development of positive attitudes toward the LGB community amongst heterosexuals in the USA, despite evidence demonstrating increasing levels of acceptance for sexual orientation minorities. A convenience sample of 50 female and 18 male heterosexual Midwestern university students with positive attitudes toward LGB people participated in semi-structured interviews that addressed research questions about the formation of their attitudes. Results found three key features in attitude formation: (1) early normalizing experiences in childhood, (2) meeting LGB peers in high school or college as important to the development of their attitudes, and (3) experiences of empathy based on an LGB peer's struggles and successes, or resistance to hatred expressed by those with negative attitudes.

**Keywords** Straight allies · Sexual orientation · Attitude development · Sexuality

## Introduction

Currently, most research focusing on heterosexuals' attitudes toward LGB (lesbian, gay, and bisexual) people has focused on those who hold negative and often prejudicial attitudes. However, evidence suggests that younger cohorts of Americans are becoming more accepting and supportive of LGB people, and that US society overall is seeing a gradual shift toward being more accepting. In an analysis of US public opinion data from 1973–1999, Yang (1999) found a general

decline in morality-based dislike and disapproval of gay men and lesbians, and an increase in support for legal rights. Similarly, in an examination of the General Social Survey from 1973–1998, Loftus (2001) reported increasingly positive attitudes over time about the morality of homosexuality, and growing support for removing restrictions on the civil liberties of LGB people. Understanding how these positive attitudes arise among heterosexuals is vital for many reasons, not the least of which is prevention of discrimination and acts of violence, but also to find ways to secure equal rights or move social movements forward. To address this gap, the current study focused on young men and women with positive attitudes toward homosexuality and identifies three key features in attitude development.

Much remains unknown as to how this trend toward increasing positive attitudes toward LGB people is altering the experiences of young people who are just developing their attitudes toward sexuality. In particular, little is known about the formation of attitudes based on gender, and whether there are different features that are important to young men and women when they are forming their attitudes. Thus, this research attempts to address this gap by utilizing qualitative methodology to interviewing heterosexual LGB-supportive men and women from a convenience sample of college students about their attitudes and their attitude formation. Specifically, the semi-structured interviews will address three primary research questions—participants were asked to (1) explain in detail their attitudes toward homosexuality, (2) to discuss the formation of their attitudes, and (3) to identify the means by which these attitudes are reinforced. Although no specific questions were asked of participants regarding their own gender or the formation of their attitudes based on gender, results will include any gender differences in responses to these three main questions.

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## Positive Attitudes and Allies

Most social movement literature discusses allies in terms of external resources that can be mobilized in support of a group, but the LGB rights movement has been unique in offering the ally title to members who ‘join’ the group by demonstrating support (Cortese 2006). Thus, ‘straight allies’ are heterosexuals who are usually active members in a cause-related LGB group, but Cortese argues that allies can also be “supporters of LGB causes who may or may not be members of the organization” (2006, pg. 5). In published research, allies are often described through case examples rather than systematically studied, such as in Woog’s (1999) book on friends and family who are straight allies affiliated with the PFLAG movement, or in Gottlieb’s works on siblings of gays and lesbians (Gottlieb 2005), fathers of gay men (Gottlieb 2000), and sons of gay men (Gottlieb 2003). Despite this unique and inclusive definition of ally within the LGB community, researchers have rarely studied the development of and factors affecting the positive attitudes of supportive heterosexual people.

Besides this small literature base focusing on people who self-identify as allies, there is a growing body of literature that attempts to refocus the discussion away from negative attitudes (e.g. homonegativity, homophobia, etc.) and toward positive attitudes toward LGB people. Pittinsky (2005) coined the term *alophilia*—a term meaning “liking or loving of the other”—to explain positive attitudes in the breadth of attitudes and emotions people can hold about outgroups. Although not specific to LGB people, this concept argues that intergroup relations have two sides, that not only can people hate outgroup members (one pole), or learn to tolerate them (the center position), but people can actually come to love and appreciate outgroup members (the other pole).

Morrison and Bearden (2006) argue that this historical emphasis on prejudice and negative attitudes toward LGB people stems from the fact that sexual orientation based victimization is such a pressing problem in the United States and abroad. For example, higher levels of homophobia has been correlated with being male, being religious, coming from the Southern states, and not personally knowing any LGB people, among other factors (e.g. Cramer 2001; Herek 1994; Herek and Glunt 1993; Kite 1984; Seltzer 1992). In addition, homophobia has been linked to a variety of other -isms, such as racism, sexism, etc. (e.g. Aosved and Long 2006). Cullen et al. (2002) also found that the personality variable of “Openness to Experience” was an important predictor of homophobia. Openness to Experience was defined as a set of personality variables that reflected a low level of dogmatism and cognitive rigidity, and hence a high level of openness was associated with a tolerance for ambiguity and increased

mental flexibility. Those who had little Openness to Experience were most often men, had few experiences of contact with homosexuals, and were the most homophobic. This gender difference has been cited as an important link to anti-LGB violence, that hate crimes and other homophobic behaviors are gendered behaviors that allow men to ‘prove’ their masculinity (Bufkin 1999). The FBI finds year after year in their reports about perpetrators of sexual orientation-based hate crimes that men are the majority of perpetrators (e.g. FBI 2007). Thus research about negative attitudes and the actions that emerge from those attitudes has followed a perceived “need” to identify potential victims, perpetrators, and prevent victimization as much as possible. The change-focused attitudinal research has followed this trend—looking at the mean attitudinal scores of a group and attempting to demonstrate that some type of intervention lessens negative attitudes.

Tracking attitude changes in his students and their parents at a Canadian university, Altmeyer (2001) reports a steady trend toward participants in each new cohort of students and their parents being more accepting over time. This change over time was greatest for the students as opposed to their parents, and for women in the sample. Even among those who would “win the gold medal at the prejudice Olympics” (Altmeyer 2001, p. 66), the people who scored high on Right Wing Authoritarianism (Altmeyer 1981) and the need to be Social Dominators (Pratto et al. 1994), there were demonstrated improvements across cohorts in attitudes toward LGB people over the last twenty years. In this summary of multiple reports from this ongoing research, Altmeyer summarizes multiple features that can determine attitudes. First, he found that parents’ attitudes correlated with their child’s attitudes at .37, and students’ scores correlated with their friends’ scores at .54. He also found that having the experience of personally knowing a homosexual was one of the most meaningful experiences toward generating positive attitudes. However, Altmeyer also found that those who were “turned off” by gay-bashers created a “boomerang effect” that made attitudes more positive toward LGB people rather than the basher. These cross-sectional samples can offer some insights into how society itself is changing, but does not offer a complete picture as to how any one person can develop positive attitudes in the confusing social landscape that offers both positive and negative stereotypes about LGB people.

This study hopes to shed light on important features of the development of positive attitudes about LGB people. The current study focuses on young adults who hold positive attitudes toward LGB people, specifically those young adults who are not necessarily members of gay-straight alliances or other LGB groups that includes people who self-identify as “allies.” Unlike previous studies that

utilized survey formats, a semi-structured interview format was chosen to explore attitudes and how those attitudes developed, without imposing any theoretical model onto responses. Similar to previous research, such as the influence of parents and peers, are hypothesized to be important features in attitude development. However, the semi-structured interview format allows for more contextualization of these forces, and for previously unstudied features to emerge from the data. More specifically, people who had positive and supportive attitudes were asked about their views toward LGB people, how they felt they had formed these attitudes, and what the primary influences were in the development of their attitudes. The purpose of this line of questioning is to determine what are the most important factors influencing the development of positive attitudes toward LGB people among heterosexually identified men and women.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were drawn from the subject pool at a public Midwestern state university, where introductory psychology students receive class credit for their participation in experimental research. On the first day of fall semester, 1,018 participants responded to a prescreening questionnaire that contained demographic questions and other variables, including sexual orientation, sexual behaviors and experiences, sexual attractions or desires, and their attitudes toward gay men. A total of 305 heterosexually identified respondents (231 women and 72 men) expressed accepting and open attitudes toward gay men, had no prior sexual contact with the same sex, and reported no same-sex desires. Of these eligible respondents, 210 were randomly chosen and invited to participate. Sixty-nine (51 women and 18 men) agreed to participate, though one was later dropped after revealing that she was bisexual, for a final response rate of 32.8%. The low response rate can be attributed to the fact that students are allowed to choose for themselves the research projects in which they wish to participate, and there was no incentive offered to be part of the current study. Of those interviewed who reported their race, 45 were white, nine were Asian, three were biracial, and two were Hispanic/Latino. The youngest subject was 18, the oldest 22, and the mean age was 18.89 ( $SD=.85$ ).

### Measure

Participants responded to Herek's (1994) Attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men, Gay Men Subscale (ATLG) Short Form. Participants were asked to rate on a scale of 0–6 how

strongly they agreed with five statements, (0=completely disagree to 6=completely agree).

1. I think male homosexuals are disgusting.
2. Male homosexuality is a perversion.
3. \*Just as in other species, male homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in human men.
4. Homosexual behavior between two men is just plain wrong.
5. \*Male homosexuality is merely a different kind of lifestyle that should *not* be condemned.

Items 3 and 5 were reverse coded, and all responses summed. The range of scores on the ATLG Gay Male Short Form in the original 1018 participants was 0–30, and the mean was 9.82 ( $SD=8.17$ ), where a score of 0 indicated more open and accepting attitudes toward gay men and a score of 30 indicated very negative and intolerant attitudes toward gay men ( $\alpha=.74$ ). From this available pool, people with scores from 0–3 on the ATLG scale were considered to have open and accepting attitudes and were invited to participate in an interview.

### Procedure

Participants who met the selection criteria were sent email invitations to participate in this study in exchange for course credit. The email is a standard invitation that did not include any details about the study format or content of the questions. Because of the sensitive nature of questions about sexual orientation, and the fact that participants were unaware of the nature of the study, participants were interviewed one-on-one, not in groups. On the day of the experiment, each participant was greeted by the interviewer, who led them to an office with a few desks and chairs at the corners of the room, and one main table in the center of the room with three chairs. The participant was seated across the table from the interviewer and the purpose of the study was explained. After consent to participate and be audio recorded was obtained, the interviewer placed a digital audio recording device on the table in plain sight and the interview began. Due to subject pool time constraints, interviews were limited to one half hour.

### Interview Format

A semi-structured interview format was employed, with specific questions asked in the same order for each interviewee. This format was chosen for many reasons. First, it allowed participants to discuss content and events that they felt were meaningful, not those that were predetermined by the researchers as meaningful. Second, this format allowed participants to tell stories rather than just answer specific questions, which offered inclusion of

rich contextual details. Last, responses from a semi-structured interview also allow for an analysis that is built from the ground up, allowing the data to inform research, rather than imposing preconceived theories on the data. Many researchers have cited the utility of qualitative data that is not constrained by specific hypotheses, (i.e. Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lincoln and Guba 1985) particularly for questions that do not have a strong theoretical background that offers specific predictions. Thus, the semi-structured interviews were intended to build theory about how young people are developing attitudes toward LGB people.

The interviews centered around three basic questions. First, because of the limitations of the prescreening process and the brief nature of the ATLG short form, participants were asked to state their views about homosexuality to verify that they held positive attitudes and get more details about what “positive” attitudes meant. They were reminded of the questionnaire they filled out at the beginning of the semester and were asked “People hold diverse and complicated views about homosexuality. Could you tell us a little more precisely about your views?”

Next, participants were asked to relate the process of how they came to hold their current views. Specifically, participants were asked, “Can you tell me about the primary influences that you feel helped to develop your views about homosexuality?” If participants struggled with this question, interviewers followed up with additional queries to encourage dialogue, such as, “For example, can you think of any specific instances when you were introduced to the idea of homosexuality or bisexuality?” or “Think back to when you were a child. We aren’t born knowing about sexuality, so can you think of a time when you started to really think about it?” If participants continued to struggle to identify the history of their attitude development, then the interviewer asked more direct questions relating to (for example) the influence of family, friends, or television.

Last, participants were asked about specific formative experiences that helped to reinforce their attitudes. They were asked, “Can you tell me about a specific experience that helped to really cement your views?” Drawing out information about specific instances had two purposes, first, to obtain a greater level of detail for the meaningful experiences, but also to help participants who might have struggled to articulate their answers. Of the three questions, the longest responses were generally from this last question.

To avoid contamination from preconceived notions based on prior literature of what the participants might reveal, the author did not conduct any of the interviews. Instead, students who took research course credit were trained as interviewers. This promoted a sense of “peer” interviews that well suited the semi-structured style. Student interviewers were informed of the purpose of the study in a broad fashion to avoid contaminating them as

well, that the study was looking at factors that related to attitude formation toward LGB people. Then, they listened to a scripted sample interview, learning about the nature of appropriate probes and what types of information was of interest to the research. Next, interviewers practiced on one another, and other volunteers from amongst other student researchers on other projects in the lab group, and their interviews were recorded and then discussed in the group. Once consensus was gained that all student interviewers were trained, they were given lists of potential participants to contact and schedule for an interview.

At the conclusion of interviewing, interviews were transcribed by an individual uninvolved with the research thus far to avoid “interpreting” the recorded words during the transcription process. Then, the author and interviewers listened to the interviews while reading the transcriptions to check for accuracy, or to offer insight into any ambiguous sentences that the context of the interview could illuminate. All names reported in this paper are pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants.

#### Data Analysis

Answers to the first question—a request for more details regarding participants’ attitudes about LGB people—were reported as descriptive statistics. However, the additional two questions—asking about formative influences, and how attitudes were cemented—were initially analyzed using the method of constant comparison (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Dye et al. 2000). This method is engaged in by a single researcher, in this case the author, without a coding scheme developed in advance. Instead, a coding scheme is tentatively created from a reading of the first interview, identifying significant people, places, phrases, or actions. However, as the researcher continues to read more interviews, results from each new interview are integrated into the coding scheme, and new categories can be added or collapsed. Thus rather than having multiple researchers striving to find consensus among themselves in the first stage of analysis, this method is constantly comparing against itself, that the coding scheme changes and adapts to changes in the data. For example, in the statement “I don’t know...my dad and I never really talked about it, I just kind knew, ya know?” one could identify “father” as a key feature, amongst others. Later interviews might also reveal “mother” as a formative influence, and thus a superordinate category of “parents” could be formed. The method of constant comparison is particularly useful in cases where participants cannot be recontacted to validate a researcher’s findings, and when interviews are brief in length.

Next, after the initial terms were identified, they were tentatively collapsed into superordinate categories, and themes were developed from these super ordinate catego-

ries. For example, mother and father were collapsed into “parental influence,” while at the same time overlapping with the category of “family influence”, which could include other family members besides just parents who were important in attitude formation. These tentative categories were passed to a second reviewer, who read all the interviews and made modifications to existing patterns of items, superordinate categories, and a refining of themes. Together with the original reviewer, the coding scheme was finalized.

A third reviewer used the coding scheme developed by the first and second researchers to determine if the interpretation of these superordinate categories and themes could be applied by an independent eye to each of the interviews. To follow the example of parental influence as a category, the third reviewer was given five choices to code along for each interview that emerged from the data, that (1) the participant did not mention parents, (2) they identified that their parents had negative attitudes toward LGB people, (3) that their parents never gave any indication of their attitudes, (4) that their parents had positive attitudes toward LGB people, but never directly addressed the issue with participants, and (5) that their parents had positive attitudes and that they directly influenced their children by speaking directly about sexual orientation. Although there are many other types of influences that parents can have, these were the five that emerged from the data itself, thus no category ever had zero participants. The third reviewer coded in isolation, as did the first reviewer, and initial inter-rater reliability was found to be high ( $\alpha=.96$ ). However, when discrepancies were identified, discussion followed to attempt to resolve different coding. Occasionally, the ambiguity of the participants’ responses did not allow for complete consensus to be formed between interview reviewers, in which case the participant’s response is not included in that portion of the final analysis. Because this style of analysis does not form a coding scheme that is a scale, but rather identifies descriptive statistics that participants have in common that form patterns and themes, data is reported as the number of participants and the percent of participants who fit each of the superordinate categories developed by the interview reviewers.

## Results

### Clarification of Attitudes

When describing the attitudes they held about homosexuality, participants responded with expressions of acceptance and cited a variety of reasons. Out of 66 who were able to clarify their attitudes, 19 (28.7%) expressed how being gay

or lesbian was “normal,” and that it was “no big deal.” Many talked about coming from diverse communities or experiences that actually made it difficult for them to express a more concise attitude other than they were “fine with it” and saw “nothing wrong” with same-sex attraction. Despite statements about their own acceptance of homosexuality, it was also clear that participants were aware that non-heterosexual identities were devalued in society. Often, attitudes were framed in an oppositional context, such as “I know others don’t agree...” or “not everyone thinks this way...”, indicating their understanding of homonegativity in the larger social context.

Others offered social justice reasons behind their attitudes: ten participants (15.2%) expressed support for the LGB community because it was a part of their beliefs about personal freedom, and another six (9.0%) couched it in terms of human rights. Nine (13.6%) of the participants expressed some combination of these answers.

Although we not specifically asked, some participants spontaneously offered explanations for their beliefs based on the “causes” of sexual orientation: 11 (16.6%) suggested that same-sex attraction was an innate attribute, seven (10.6%) suggested it was a choice or lifestyle, and four (6.1%) stated they thought it was a natural part of the continuum of sexuality in human beings. Some past studies have suggested that focusing on the biological components of homosexuality leads to more supportive attitudes (e.g. Hegarty and Pratto 2001; Haslam et al. 2002; Haslam and Levy 2006), but in this case, participants with supportive attitudes clearly demonstrated a wide array of reasoning behind their attitudes.

### Attitude Formation

Participants were next asked about the formation of their attitudes. Responses demonstrated a wide range of experiences, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about LGB issues and people, and how supportive attitudes were developed. To distill the responses into meaningful categories, they were initially recorded as 122 separate bits from the interview transcripts. Using the method of constant comparison (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Dye et al. 2000), these incidences fell into 47 initial groupings. Further refinement of these 47 clusters meant they were then grouped into three basic themes: a process of *normalization*, and experiences of *empathy* or of *resistance*. These three clusters appeared to follow a developmental path related to the age of the participants. Many participants detailed a process of normalization during their elementary school years, where personal experiences and education made LGB people a ‘normal’ part of their social landscape. Although these normalizing experiences were experienced during childhood, they were not a prerequisite to the strong attitude

formation in the teen years. Empathetic and resistant responses developed later after participants met peers who were open about their non-heterosexual identities. For those who had already had normalizing experiences, meeting or seeing teen peers who came out as LGB and triggered empathy or resistance, this was often a crystallizing experience that strengthened attitudes that had already begun to form. However, for those who had little or no normalizing in childhood, the situations that caused empathy or resistance were not crystallizing so much as revolutionary to the formation of their attitudes.

#### Formation of Attitudes: Normalization

Most of the participants expressed some type of normalizing influence in their childhood, forces that informed their opinions that sexuality issues were ‘no big deal.’ Although all children recognized a difference in their family structure and the sexual preferences of others, there was little indication that participants were taught that this observed difference was “wrong.” Most participants expressed a sense of surprise at seeing or interacting with LGB people as children because they understood that the idea of same-sex couples was unusual, as in not the statistical norm. Amy summarized this position by saying, “Yeah, it hasn’t really crossed my mind that anything would be wrong with it. I mean, obviously, I knew that it was different from the norm, that it wasn’t obviously seen as the normal thing, but...I don’t know, just kinda seems normal.” Of these normalizing forces, three surfaced as the most influential in the early formation of attitudes: parental influence, exposure to LGB adults, and popular culture exposure to LGB topics.

#### *Parental Influence*

When asked, 40 (58.8%) of participants responded that their parents were an important influence on their attitudes. Although most people think of parents as directly educating their children with dialogue, only two participants said they ever really had “the talk” with their parents about sexuality. Instead of a direct discussion, parents often indirectly conveyed messages to their children by how they treated the issue of sexual orientation. For example, Lance said, “I’d like, hear my parents say something while I watched TV, like, ‘Just let them get married.’” Yet despite the lack of direct communication about sexuality issues, parenting styles about sexuality were still present. Overall, the parenting styles could be grouped into four basic categories: parents who were openly supportive, parents who raised their children to be generally “open-minded,” parents who never discussed sexuality issues or revealed their opinions, and those who were openly disapproving of anything that was not heterosexuality.

Of those who discussed their parents as an influence, 22 (32.3%) stated that their parents were openly supportive. This support often was relayed through discussions of politics and society, through parents’ friendships with LGB community members, and through correcting their children for the use of derogatory LGB slang. Another 18 (26.5%) of the participants reported that their parents raised them to treat everyone with respect. David most clearly expressed this parenting style by saying that his parents taught him about “basic virtues...treat everyone equally...but I don’t remember a specific occasion on which it was like, you should treat homosexuals as equally as heterosexuals. But at the same time, I don’t remember them ever saying you should treat Black people like you treat white people, or Hispanic people like you treat white people.”

There were only four (5.8%) participants who claimed to not know their parents’ opinions because it was unspoken in their household, or they assumed that their parents were neutral on sexual orientation issues. Ten of the participants (14.7%) stated that their parents were openly disapproving toward LGB people. This difference of opinion caused discomfort for many of the participants. For example, Claire had a brother who came out to her, but even before that process they knew their parents would not be accepting. “So we just grew up with them being like, ‘that’s bad’ and us being like, ‘that doesn’t make sense.’ As kids we’d always be like, ‘so then, do you not like Black people?’ and they’d be like, ‘no, Black people are fine’ and it’s like, [we realized] it’s the same thing, just a person who has some difference.”

Although parental influence is clearly one of the most important factors cited by participants, it was equally clear that there were a variety of parenting styles that could lead to supportive attitudes. Few parents were actively teaching their children to be supportive of LGB people, but through indirect means they conveyed their attitudes to their children. However, a substantial portion also recognized that their parents were NOT supportive of LGB people, suggesting that parenting alone is not the only means by which participants developed their positive attitudes.

#### *Exposure to LGB Adults*

Another feature of participants’ normalization stemmed from other adult influences in their lives. Many of the participants had experiences of either knowing people personally, or knowing of people who were not strictly heterosexual. In their childhoods, 38 (55.8%) of the participants reported having known LGB adults. Many had had LGB teachers, coaches, childhood friends with same-sex parents, or relatives whose non-heterosexuality was known to the participant. Twenty-five participants (36.7%) were exposed to one LGB adult, 10 (14.7%)

participants were exposed to at least two people identified as LGB, and three participants (4.4%) had been exposed to three or more adult members of the LGB community during their childhood. Of those participants who knew adults that were openly identified while they were growing up, 15 (50%) reported that the individual was a close family friend, nine (30%) knew a peer's relative (most often a peer's same-sex parents), and 12 (40%) had LGB-identified family members themselves. Four participants had LGB adult cousins, and three had LGB aunts or uncles. In addition, many participants had social relationships with other adults who were sexual minorities, such as high school teachers ( $n=7$ ), babysitters ( $n=2$ ), coaches ( $n=2$ ), college teachers ( $n=1$ ), hairdressers ( $n=1$ ), and priests ( $n=1$ ). Last, many of those interviewed also reported knowing of people who they did not socialize with personally, such as older siblings' friends ( $n=2$ ), distant friends of relatives ( $n=10$ ), or were able to identify or guess at the sexual orientation of strangers ( $n=10$ ).

Although the distribution of males and females in this sample is heavily skewed and should be interpreted cautiously, there were some intriguing differences between men's and women's experiences with adults who were non-heterosexual. There was an equal distribution of men and women who had non-heterosexual relatives, and who knew other adults in their lives (the coaches, teachers, etc.). However, eight female participants (15.6%) reported knowing non-heterosexual adults who were the parents of their friends, which was far more than the single male participant who reported knowing friends with LGB parents in the sample (5.5%). All those who reported knowing that a friend had two parents of the same gender reported that those same-sex couples were women. There were no additional comments by participants to suggest why only women same-sex parenting couples were known and accepted, and there was no mention of male same-sex couples who were their friends' parents.

Thirty of the 68 participants (44.1%) did not know any adults who were identified as homosexuals growing up. Just as roughly half of participants had parents without identifiably positive attitudes toward LGB people, almost half also were not exposed to other LGB adults in their youth.

### *Popular Culture Exposure*

Although most participants discussed interpersonal factors as the most influential, there were also a range of media or popular culture references made by participants when citing influences in forming their attitudes. Eight participants mentioned television in general as being a force in crafting their opinion about LGB people, with five different specific shows mentioned (*Will & Grace*, *Queer as Folk*, *The Real*

*World*, *The OC*, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*). Due to the more adult nature of many of these shows, most participants did not relate knowledge of this type of programming and reading materials until late middle school or early high school. In addition, one participant mentioned seeing the musical *Rent* on Broadway as a major formative influence, and one participant mentioned music, though did not name a specific artist or type of music. Finally, five participants mentioned reading materials being important: magazine articles, school assignments, and novels they had read were all mentioned. Thus, along with personal encounters in their social lives, participants also utilized exposure from mass culture in forming their attitudes.

Perhaps the most interesting gender differences in the results were in this section. By far, female participants mentioned more sources of media as influences than the male participants. Women mentioned six different television programs or shows, five mentioned reading materials, and six mentioned television in a general way being influential. However, no male participant mentioned a specific show, none mentioned being exposed to reading materials, and only two mentioned television in a general type of way. This difference raises interesting questions about exposure of men and women to popular culture representations of LGB people—why the female participants relaying exposure at rates nearly five times what the male participants were reporting is unclear from the responses and the low sample size. However, the fact that women reported far more incidences of specific popular culture exposure, in far greater detail, is an intriguing contribution from these participants.

Though exposed to television and other forms of culture, many participants also expressed an understanding of the limited nature of media as a form of education. Clifton said that in the early years in which he was starting to think about sexuality issues, that he “didn't see it as anything more than a joke on television” and that it wasn't until later when a friend came out to him that he realized the reality of LGB relationships. However, Anthony stated that “entertainment, television, movies, they tend to capitalize on the humorous aspects of homosexuality. You know, portray it in such a way that is very out there and sort of, you know, maybe it is sort of like a fashion even. Whereas, I suppose most of my experiences with homosexuality in the real world is [*sic*] much less sort of whimsical and exaggerated,” and Julie said, “I think the media influences definitely don't portray the long term romantic relationship.” The latter two participants demonstrated a more knowledgeable and critical stance about the television representations of LGB relationships when compared to the reality that they were experiencing through their relationships with real homosexuals. Their opinions overall seemed to match the opinions of scholars that show there are both good and bad

elements to ‘gay television’ (Battles and Hilton-Morrow 2002; Cooper 2003; Hart 2004; Schiappa et al. 2006). Despite these positive and negative influences of the media, similar to their experiences as children being exposed to LGB people and issues as a part of their social landscape, mass media sources were another location of “normalizing” LGB people and issues in the world around them.

#### Cementing and Revolutionizing Attitudes: Empathy and Resistance

Despite evidence of childhood exposure for many respondents, 20 of the participants (29.4%) reported that they had not directly been exposed to any LGB people in childhood. Regardless of childhood exposure, as the participants moved toward adulthood they had opportunities to meet LGB peers rather than just adults. Eight participants (11.8%) reported that they had a friend come out to them in middle school, 25 (36.8%) reported that they had LGB friends in high school, 11 (16.2%) reported that coming to college was the first time they had met an ‘out’ LGB person, and 33 (45.5%) of participants claimed that they had LGB friends currently. However, there are some interesting differences between the male and female participants. Amongst female participants, nine (18.0%) had a close high school friend come out to them in high school, and three (6.0%) had a high school friend come out to them once they were in college. The opposite is true for male participants—only one (5.5%) said they had a high school friend come out to them while they were in high school but three (16.6%) had a high school friend come out to them once they were in college. Interestingly, 24 (48.0%) of the female participants reported currently having LGB friends, and seven (38.8%) of the male participants had current LGB friends. It is unclear what the developmental impact of these differences in the timing of exposure to LGB peers based on gender due to the small percentage of men in the sample, but it does offer the suggestion that perhaps men and women are exposed to LGB peers at different ages.

For participants who had already been exposed to LGB people, or were living in a social context where differences in sexual orientation had already been normalized, meeting peers who came out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual gave them an opportunity to solidify their views. However, for participants who did not have LGB people as a normative part of their construction of the social landscape in childhood, meeting LGB peers was often their first opportunity to grapple with their thoughts and attitudes about LGB people.

For example, when a friend came out to him in high school, Sun-hi (who had not had strong normalizing experiences as a child) talked about his surprise and

uncertainty: “when he first told me, I didn’t know what to say. I have never been in that situation before. And I felt bad because I didn’t know what to tell him. I just told him I guess that I was glad he felt like he could tell me.” However, Danielle had a different reaction—one of relief—“I think that I was aware that he was keeping something from me and like, the longer that went on the harder it was for us to be friends. When he told me, it was like this giant weight was lifted off of our friendship.” Along the continuum of reactions these participants described, the two most common could be described as empathetic, such as feelings of solidarity with their LGB peers, or reactions of resistance, such as reactions against people they perceived as behaving badly or being oppressive toward LGB people.

#### *Empathy*

The most common event that impacted attitudes for participants as teenagers, regardless of their exposure as children, was through an encounter with a peer that elicited an empathetic response. This first experience with a peer generated a variety of responses, such as when Hannah said that having a lifelong friend come out to her “kind of forced me to see them not as gay people, but as people that happened to be gay.” Brianna related a slightly stronger reaction, “a friend of mind that I’d known for a long time came out in college. That solidified [my attitude] because how could anybody find any justification for discriminating against this person for this particular aspect of their personality that had always been there?” Last, Danielle also said “...it doesn’t define a person, it’s not a person’s entire being, it’s not their sexuality, like it’s one aspect about who they are, like they have green eyes, or they have blonde hair or something like that.” Many participants discussed their distress as seeing friends who came out being rejected by family and/or friends, and remarked on the struggles that they witnessed as peers struggled for acceptance in their families and communities. For example, Steve said that he had started formulating a positive opinion, but then, “my school was very racist, homophobic, and everything...my friend was openly gay and everyone knew since middle school...seeing how he was treated and not agreeing with it” really cemented his views. And Sun-hi, who admitted at first being taken aback by his friend coming out to him, paid close attention to his friend’s life afterward and felt his positive attitude toward gays and lesbians was confirmed when “I saw how hard it was for my friend, that he couldn’t even tell people and that he had to hide his feelings in our town.” In contrast, some people saw the opposite, the amazing love and support of family and friends when a peer revealed their sexuality. In particular, Janet told the story of bonding with a friend’s



mother “I just thought that it was so amazing and it just kind of made me realize that your friends and your family can accept that and it’s like nothing different in someone’s life.”

A few participants found a common bond to LGB people through similar experiences of oppression. Sarah, a Jewish participant, related how “feeling like an outsider [for being Jewish] has kind of made me become a person who wants to help people,” and Kai, a biracial male participant said about using ‘gay’ as a derogatory term: “I feel like that’s something really important that people should be able to change because if people said, ‘Oh, that’s so Chinese’ I would not be happy about that.” Participants reported feeling empathy for their struggling peers, whether or not the participant considered them a ‘friend.’ Seven participants shared experiences of oppression, whether being criticized for having gay friends, belonging to a racial/ethnic/religious minority group, or being bullied in school, and found themselves empathizing with members of the LGB community, even if they did not personally have any LGB friends or acquaintances.

### *Resistance*

Many participants’ experiences of empathizing with LGB people also created a feeling of resistance against those who were maltreating LGB people. Other participants did not necessarily feel a kinship with LGB persons specifically, but reacted strongly against the expression of prejudice in their communities and society at large. For example, Stacey reported “I saw these women on the steps of the Grad [library] and they started kissing each other and [a male passerby] just started yelling at them, how horrible they were. That surprised me too. I just can’t believe that people can have those views about it.” Or, they would mention hate crimes and other forms of violence and their surprise at how little sense such actions make, such as Liz who said, “Like our high school down the street, somebody got beat up because his mom was a supporter of the gay alliance. He got beat up because of his mom!”

Participants reported that they were sometimes exposed to people with very strong homophobic views that created a reaction of resistance. For some, this feeling of resistance was in addition to their empathizing with specific known-members of the LGB community, but for others it was a more philosophical reaction to perceived hatred. Sumin said this about people who hold negative attitudes toward the LGB community: “it [homosexuality] doesn’t have an impact on them, but they are taking away somebody else’s right to be happy and live the life they want to be.” This perception of ignorance was shared by other participants, such as Connie, who said of her conservative town that “I wasn’t going to follow all the lemmings.” Just like

experiences of empathy, many participants who had been insulated by parents and other adults discovered a society unwelcoming to sexual minorities when they became older, and Jenny reported that “high school was when I started to be more aware of the hatred.”

One particularly notable account was Stacey, whose school put on the play titled “The Laramie Project” about the slaying of Matthew Shepard. She was one of the few respondents who grew up in a diverse and accepting community, and had a parent who explained what it meant for people of the same sex to love one another. With this upbringing, she expressed how ‘normal’ sexual minorities were to her and how she had never thought too much about it until her experiences with “The Laramie Project.”

...it was kind of scary because I’d never been around people that hadn’t been accepting...people from some town in Kansas or something started coming to our school and started protesting....They told us we were all going to hell for watching it. So that really scared me and had a huge effect on me because I didn’t know that people could be like that.

Thus, for this participant, like a handful of others, it was not empathizing with a specific LGB person that helped solidify her attitudes toward homosexuality, but rather her resistance to the negative attitudes she saw amongst the protesters.

In addition to resisting the perceptions of close-mindedness in their communities, many respondents understood that their interactions and friendships with LGB people were rare, and could be a source of condemnation. Many participants expressed awareness of the fact that most other people were not as “OK” with sexual minorities as they were, such as Jun—“I don’t think that most of America feels the way that I do about this topic.” But this painful knowledge was not limited to an abstract society, but to individuals close to the participants as well. Derek commented that when his cousin came out to his family “I remember people in my family...making all these bigoted comments. I was like, ‘This is someone in our family who we’ve always loved and been around and then all of a sudden that’s supposed to change?’ I don’t know how you could say that about one of your relatives.”

An interesting and unexpected finding was that some participants had a mix of empathy and resistance for both sides of the debate. They could empathize with both the LGB people they knew, and with the people who expressed condemnation for sexual minorities. Though this level of complexity in thought was not a common response from the participants, Jenny said that she was motivated to “figure this out and realize why they hate it so much because I just don’t understand, and I feel bad for those people that they don’t even know what they’re making fun of.” In addition,

Danielle said that she “felt like I wanted to tell other people that there is a different opinion to be had...you need to understand that not everybody agrees with you and talking about it as though that is the only opinion is being really closed off.”

Thus, although visible signs of protest such as picketers at the funerals of gay men are often cast as exclusively negative, many participants reported that experiences with these ugly aspects of the debate about sexual orientation had a positive effect—they found that they became more committed to their positive attitudes toward sexual minorities.

## Discussion

These interviews seemed to suggest that normalizing, empathy, and resistance might follow a developmental path in many of the participants’ lives. If normalizing occurs, it seems to happen earlier in childhood, usually in elementary school. This is followed by the possibility of experiences of empathy and resistance happening in the teen years. For those participants who had experienced normalization in childhood, meeting LGB peers in high school and early college crystallized their developing attitudes, but for those who had not had normalizing experiences, meeting LGB peers was often a more tumultuous event. Consistent with Savin-Williams’ (2005) prediction about the decreasing importance of sexuality as a defining characteristic for individuals’ identities, these college-aged participants largely expressed their attitude that sexuality was “no big deal.” In participants’ early development, it seemed that micro-level interactions were the most important—with family and friends being the most influential. Positive attitudes started early in childhood for about half of participants because they had already been exposed to non-heterosexuals before they explored their own or their peers’ sexual orientations or identities.

Consistent with Altmeyer’s (2001) studies, participants first cited their parents as a strong influence on their attitudes, not necessarily through direct conversation, but more often in the examples that their parents set with their behaviors. This type of reinforcement was in the home in other ways as well, occasionally through aunts or uncles, and through older siblings’ experiences as they entered a period where they were developing their own sexual identities. This is not to say that all participants’ had experiences with parents or other family members that were uniformly accepting of LGB people. Besides parents and immediate family members, there were other types of micro-level contact. An equally important, if not more important feature of participants’ childhood experiences was seeing ‘out’ adults in their communities. This is

consistent with prior research that suggests contact is an important feature of possessing positive attitudes toward LGB people and non-heterosexuality in general (e.g. Herek and Capitano 1996). The current study provides evidence that entire communities might be positively influenced by LGB people making the choice to live their lives openly. Although the responsibility for changing attitudes should clearly not rest on the shoulders of LGB people alone, knowing out and open LGB people clearly affected the participants in this study.

Less frequently mentioned than parental attitudes or exposure to LGB adults were mass media sources in popular culture. Participants spontaneously mentioned many television programs that show positive images of people who were not heterosexual, and mentioned that seeing these images and learning of these stories helped to form their positive attitudes toward LGB people. There were also students who mentioned that they grew up in more “liberal” places, such as New York City, and felt that positive attitudes were expressed by their communities as a whole during their early childhoods.

Participants’ descriptions of their experiences suggested a one way path from passive acceptance to active engagement. Early on, they accepted the explicit and implicit messages around them, whether those messages were normalizing, not stating a clear message, or even homonegative. However, as they moved into middle school and high school, they were more engaged in their own attitude formation through processes of empathy and resistance, regardless of exposure to normalizing influences in childhood. Parents were cited as the most common first source of their attitude formation, but second were encounters with peers. Most did not meet a gay or lesbian peer until late in high school or early in college, and most often this was a friend who came out to them rather than an encounter with a stranger who was already openly lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Phoebe specified how having a sexual-minority peer influenced her: “I think it is a lot easier to understand and identify with someone who is your age or in your peer group to help you really understand issues that are really close to you and how they would experience it.”

An important contribution of this study is also in the domain of peers. Although previous research shows the importance of peers in attitude formation (Altmeyer 2001), this study found that few participants mentioned heterosexual peers as an important influence, but that LGB peers had a large influence on their attitudes. When childhood-normalized participants interacted for the first time with a gay or lesbian peer they were already on the path toward acceptance, and having a friend come out crystallized their already developing attitudes through processes of empathy or resistance. For those who had not considered issues of sexual orientation prior to high school, meeting a sexual-

minority peer their own age was crystallizing as well, but induced more conflict. These respondents had not been primed to be accepting in the same way as their peers who had been exposed to issues of sexual orientation as children. For participants with early childhood experiences, meeting a LGB peer induced reactions of “OK, good to know.” Because non-heterosexuality was not seen as aberrant, only unusual (in that it was not the most common sexual orientation), the relationship continued with little change. However, participants without childhood normalization were often put into a position of “OK, what does that mean?” if a friend came out to them, both in raising issues of understanding the boundaries of LGB identities, and what it meant for the friendship. Rather than moving smoothly forward with their relationships with LGB peers, participants without the benefit of early childhood experiences used more cognitive resources to sort out how they felt about their friend’s revelation. So in summary, the lack of early childhood normalization did not stop a teenager from forming positive attitudes, but having those early experiences eased the transition into full and meaningful relationships with LGB peers.

Just as normalizing experiences were not necessary to develop positive attitudes, meeting a LGB peer personally was not critical. Many participants expressed empathy as a function of knowing *about* LGB peers, or hearing stories of the difficulties faced by LGB people in the US and abroad. Although meeting an LGB peer had a huge impact, any instance that could draw an empathetic response from participants had a high probability of affecting their attitudes.

A similar process appears to have happened for those participants who expressed experiences of resistance as well. When participants who had experienced childhood normalizing encountered incidences of LGB prejudice or heterosexism, they were much more likely to identify them as negative. Because they were primed by their early experiences to have positive attitudes, encountering these prejudicial behaviors affirmed their already positive attitudes, and sometimes even engendered negative attitudes toward the people exhibiting prejudice. For the participants who did not have experience childhood normalization, there was a much larger sense of confusion and conflict, and the need to use cognitive resources to make sense of the prejudice. Often, these participants expressed an immediate reaction against expressions of hatred and prejudice, but had to work harder to think through exactly why they had reacted the way they did.

Although the sample size in this study is quite small, and thus comparisons must be done with a high level of caution, there are some suggestions that the male and female participants had slightly different experiences of normalizing, empathy, and resistance. For example, male partic-

ipants did not report the same amount of popular media sources as a factor in determining their attitudes. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, participants were not directly asked about popular culture and media, but women cited far more sources in the media that influenced their attitudes compared to the men. Whether men are being exposed to these sources less, or are just not reporting them as an important source is unclear. However, a second interesting phenomenon emerged. Women were far more likely to have had a close friend come out to them in high school, where men were much more likely to have that experience in college. Again, it is unclear why men are not having that experience at the same age as women, but these differences in exposure, or impact of exposure, may offer insight into consistent research findings that suggest men have less positive attitudes toward LGB people.

Although this two-stage process—childhood normalization and later experiences of empathy or resistance—was the most common among participants, not all fit this pattern. Some participants never had normalizing experiences and their attitudes were formed through a process of empathy or resistance, and other participants never had the normalizing influences of their childhood challenged in high school and college and thus never had their attitudes solidified. A handful of participants admitting not being on intimate terms with anyone they knew was gay, but had other reasons for empathizing, such as shared experiences of prejudice or discrimination based on group status. For some people meeting LGB peers did not in any way trigger a crystallization of their values, and they expressed a consistent “live and let live” mentality that did not change into active supportive or positive attitudes toward non-heterosexuality.

For example, some participants expressed an inability to determine where their attitudes came from, and that their attitudes were just natural, such as Lance who claimed his attitude “came from my own intuition.” However, other participants demonstrated more thoughtfulness about the topic, such as Deborah: “I guess what’s changed since high school when I began to examine it more was, ‘Ok, this is the way that these people live their lives. Is that Ok?’ Not a matter of just knowing that it exists, but a matter of actually accepting it.” In addition, participants expressed varying levels of involvement with LGB causes. Most were quietly supportive, but a few people identified as being active allies. Mark clearly had done a lot of thinking about sexuality issues, had been a member of his high school gay-straight alliance, and continued to be active in ally activities in college. Though many participants expressed at least some knowledge of current issues in the sexual orientation debates (such as right to marriage, adoption, and parenting issues), his concluding remarks demonstrate a more

advanced level of participation in the LGB struggle for rights:

What brought me to be really passionate about it was the last election when all 11 states [*sic*], the ballot was out, asking for the ban on same sex unions and every single one passed it. And nothing happened. There wasn't like any giant uprising....It was just like, it was amazing how, when [race-based civil] rights were attacked, there was just this giant response from the African American community. In the gay community there was less of [an outcry], at least less of a public one, or less of one that I could see, and I decided that I needed to get involved.

Thus, there was a wide variation in overall participant responses regarding how invested they were in their positive attitudes toward LGB people. For some people, their positive attitudes were a core part of their view of themselves, representing values they believed in. For other participants their views were less specific to LGB people, and merely a facet of many beliefs about their overall ability to be a “good” person. This offers suggestions for future research to determine at what other factors interact with positive attitudes toward non-heterosexuality and lead a person to become an active ally, to vote for LGB-affirmative legislators, or to remain a silent citizen who does not actively seek to engage with the lives of LGB people.

#### Limitations

Although this study targeted a cohort of young adults, it is important to note that these were students from an elite institution of higher education. The most highly regarded public state in the state, it was the most expensive (in terms of tuition), and the school whose students had the highest average parental incomes. Results must be interpreted with caution due to the probable social class biases that exist in this sample. Generalizing these results to other 18–22 year olds must be done cautiously. In addition, although the races included in the sample were consistent with the race distribution in the Introductory Psychology class, the fact that this sample was predominantly white also limits the generalizability of findings.

One of the most serious limitations of this study was the use of Herek's (1994) ATLG Gay Male Short form. Prescreening limited the choice of scales that could be employed, and it was not ideal to use a scale that asked only about attitudes toward gay men. However, even though the ATLG measured only negative attitudes toward gay men, the interview directly elicited respondents' attitudes toward lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. Prior research has established that people can have very different attitudes toward these three subgroups, with lesbians harassed less often and gay men and bisexuals more so,

but for different reasons (e.g. Blumenfeld 1992; Comstock 1991; Mohr and Rochlen 1999; Pharr 1997). Thus, the prescreening questionnaire was a very specific measure was used as an indicator of more general attitudes. The clarifying question that began the interview was an attempt to ascertain attitudes toward lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals and allowed participants to clarify their own opinions outside of the measure. However, new research has also suggested that low scores on homophobia scales indicate tolerance as opposed to true acceptance. Work by Pittinsky (2005) has suggested a that there is more than just tolerance, that some people actually have love for, or deeply value, cultures and identities that are not their own. This suggests that, rather than using homophobia or heterosexism scales to find low scorers who are “tolerant,” new scales are needed to explore people who have actively positive attitudes toward non-heterosexuals.

In addition, it was necessary to limit interviews to 30 minutes because of the time constraints associated with using the subject pool. So although these interviews were rich in detail, participants were also asked to describe the specifics of just one meaningful event from their past. Many described summaries of other meaningful events, but those were by necessity abbreviated. Thus, this paper does not capture all the details along the path of developing attitudes related to sexuality issues, just a selection of major milestones in these participants' lives.

#### Conclusion

Although research examining positive attitudes toward LGB is scant, this project contributes to this growing area of interest by examining the formation of positive attitudes in college aged young adult. This research found a wide variety of levels of commitment to attitudes, from those who were active allies to those who expressed their attitudes with a “live and let live” philosophy—in other words, to accept but refrain from engaging with LGB people. Many of the participants expressed that LGB people were normalized for them as children, that they were never explicitly taught that that ‘homosexuality’ was wrong, that it was another variation in a diverse society. Although not all participants had these normalizing experiences, a majority were exposed to parental attitudes, adults who were identifiably LGB, and popular culture references to homosexuality that helped normalize the idea of non-heterosexual people.

Regardless of normalizing forces, many participants stated that in high school they had experiences of empathizing with LGB people, or finding reasons to resist those who were unsupportive of LGB people. This was often, but not always, through meeting peers who came out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. For those whom had normalizing experiences as children, meeting LGB peers, or

hearing their stories, helped solidify their attitudes toward LGB people. For those who had not had normalizing experiences, these high school and college experiences were more unsettling, but still led to positive attitudes toward LGB people. These experiences of normalizing, empathy and resistance do not indicate developmental stages that people must pass through as they age. Instead, participants reported that normalizing influences were most prevalent and meaningful in their early childhood, and that experiences of empathy or resistance were most likely to occur in high school or as they entered college. Although it is important to recognize the limitations of this study, more research on allies in the broadest sense of the word, namely people with positive attitudes toward LGB people, needs to continue. However, this research suggests that in the process of developing positive attitudes toward non-heterosexuality there are many opportunities for positive influences throughout the early life of children, youth, and young adults, that developing positive attitudes takes time, and that there is much variation in emotional responses such as empathy or resistance that lead to positive attitudes toward LGB people.

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