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The Heart Wants What the Heart Wants: A Student Survey on Same - Sex Relationships

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Abstract: Opinions about homosexuality and same-sex marriage are varied and often vitriolic. Yet some studies suggest that views about gays and lesbians are becoming more favorable. This study examines such views for an ethnically diverse group of sixteen college students from a private, liberal arts university in the southeastern region of the United States. Findings show that beliefs about the origins of sexual orientation are informed by the “nature versus nurture” discourse. Although certain students view same - sex relationships unfavorably, the vast majority support a person’s right to choose a partner and believe that laws should be changed to allow same-sex marriage. Explanations about how sexual orientations originate tend to be more elaborate than specific views about gay and lesbian relationships. Furthermore, students with less favorable views on the subject as well as males in general, regardless of the latter groups’ level of support, tend to provide short, cursory responses when queried about homosexual relationships and their possible legalization. My findings suggest that, despite increased support among students for same - sex relationships in general, ambivalence and politically correct responses may still be common based on gender differences.

Keywords: same-sex marriage, sexual orientation

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INTRODUCTION

As of late, the issue of same - sex relationships has become a very pressing and controversial one. Although same - sex relationships are not a new phenomenon, gays and lesbians are increasingly demanding to be able to legalize their romantic relationships. According to the United States (U.S.) census, the number of people who reported residing in a household with a same - sex partner increased 51 percent from 2009 to 2010 (US Bureau of the Census, 2010). This increase suggests that either the gay and lesbian community is growing or becoming more comfortable openly acknowledging its lifestyles. However, this community is still quite vulnerable. In 1996, after a gay rights activist claimed that Hawaii's constitution allowed for same - sex marriage, Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) that defined marriage as a relationship between a man and a woman;

In determining the meaning of any Act of Congress, or of any ruling, regulations, or interpretation of the various administrative bureaus and agencies of the United States, the word 'marriage' means only a legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife, and the word 'spouse' refers only to a person of the opposite sex who is a husband or a wife. (Senate of the United States, 1996)

Thus the federal government does not recognize same - sex marriages and the vast majority of the 50 states have either instituted laws that ban same - sex marriage or define marriage as a union between a man and woman (National Conference of State Legislature, 2011). The homosexual community is thus denied many privileges that come with marriage such as tax cuts, shared health insurance benefits, and the ability to sponsor one's spouse for entry into the country. Furthermore, Brewer (2003) reports that workplace discrimination and hate crimes are concerns among the gay and

lesbian community. Such worries in addition to political disenfranchisement based on their delegitimized relationship status illustrate this community's very real vulnerability. Despite previous studies about continued homophobia and discrimination of sexual minorities (Battle & Lemelle, 2002; Brewer, 2003), how do college students feel about this subject? Informed by the Structure versus Agency discourse, this analysis examines survey responses for a sample of sixteen undergraduate students at a private liberal arts university in the southeast on the topic of same - sex relationships and the implications that those opinions will have on the future empowerment of the homosexual community. As potential future leaders in society and given their pivotal involvement during the last presidential election, the opinions of college students on this subject will be important. Moreover, this subject is salient in light of legislative changes most recently in Maine and Maryland that suggest increasing support of same-sex marriage (Brumfield, 2012).

LITERATURE SUMMARY: SENTIMENTS ABOUT SAME - SEX RELATIONSHIPS

The DOMA and the subsequent state bans on same - sex marriage illustrate a reluctance to accept same - sex relationships in the U.S. Some studies show that these attitudes vary based on race and gender. For example, according to Negy and Eisenman (2005), Black Americans are, generally, more homophobic and less apt to support same - sex relationships than their White peers. However, the same study shows that the former group is more open to affording legal rights to gays and lesbians than the latter group. Furthermore, their results showed that for Black Americans, gender along with frequency of church attendance is a significant predictor of negative responses

to homosexuality, and gender and religious commitment is a significant predictor of negative responses for Whites (Negy & Eisenman, 2005).

Herek's (2003) results suggest that respondents' opinions of homosexuality differ based on gender and that attitudes about gay men tend to be more negative than those about lesbians largely because of traditional views about masculinity. Furthermore, the same scholar finds that when asked about non-discrimination laws, heterosexuals are more positive when responding to abstract ideas rather than if the enactment of real laws is considered. Also, most heterosexuals, regardless of gender, do not support same - sex marriage, despite generally more positive views about homosexuality among females. Brewer's (2003) secondary analysis examines possible explanations for an increase in support among Americans for gay rights between 1992 - 2000. Respondents were asked whether they oppose employment discrimination laws and the ability of homosexuals to serve in the US military. The author finds that support for employment discrimination policies rose over the years under examination as well as support for homosexuals in the military. Also, opposition for the two topics decreased over time as a result of increased support for egalitarianism and more favorable views about gays and lesbians. The above summary parallels other studies that show how support of homosexuality varies based on factors such as religion, gender (male or female depending on the study), age, and race (Barnes, 2009, 2012; Battle & Lemelle, 2002; Cohen, 1999). As described in the subsequent section, choices people make on the subject are also influenced by broader social dynamics.

STRUCTURE VERSUS AGENCY AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is informed by the Structure vs. Agency discourse that posits the existence of structural forces or macro-level institutions in society that are heavily influential in the trajectory of the lives of groups and individuals. Some examples of structural forces are: the government/legal system, the family, and the economy. These respective entities can have incredible sway in the day-to-day lives of citizens. For example, the family is the first and most influential socializing agent in an individual's life. Most of one's principles and beliefs originate from one's upbringing. However, according to this framework, one's behavior and beliefs are a choice where agency is the power invoked by an individual to make decisions and have some control over his or her life. The choices that he or she makes and the principles that he or she espouses reflect agency. In this analysis, I consider some of the structural forces that can influence how people feel about gays and lesbians as well as the ability people have to make such decisions.

The legal system and the prevailing cultural views in society about sexual identity are two salient structural forces that influence attitudes and actions about the subject of same - sex couples. The legal system is central to many of the inequities in the homosexual community. As noted above, because of DOMA, same - sex couples are denied countless beneficial rights. Chambers (1996) analyzes some of the benefits the homosexual community stands to gain from marriage rights and characterizes these legal benefits into three categories: regulations acknowledging emotional attachment, regulations regarding parenting, laws regulating the economic relationship between the couple and the state as well as within the couple. Chambers details the legal ramifications when same-sex partners do not have the benefits of marriage. In the first category, same - sex

couples cannot refrain from testifying against each other in court. Furthermore, the Family and Medical Leave Act, which allows spouses to take off work to care for their significant other does not apply and a foreign-born spouse cannot be sponsored for American citizenship by their native-born significant other. Additionally, the decisions about medical care for ill partners too sick to make competent decisions cannot be made by a same - sex significant other, who is often the likeliest person to know their wishes. Also, when a partner dies, his or her estate does not automatically transfer to his or her same - sex significant other.

In regard to parenting, female artificial insemination and the process for the associated male to receive parental status is relatively straightforward. However, this same process does not apply for same-sex couples that must treat the process as an adoption, including a home study, home visits, and application process. As well, being granted status as a parent is not guaranteed upon completion of the process. Financial privileges associated with marriage include: social security benefits for a non-working spouse after retirement age and including spouses on employment health insurance. Although same - sex couples can choose to work around these legal challenges by orchestrating power of attorney, establishing specific clauses in their wills, foregoing raising children, and purchasing private insurance, such options point to an unequal and unfair system. Moreover, such options may be difficult for less affluent couples. More recent research by Battle and Barnes (2009) suggest that differential marital options based on sexual orientation tend to impact racial and ethnic minorities more negatively because, among gay men and lesbians, such groups are more likely to be economically challenged and more apt to either adopt children or be raising children who are biologically theirs.

Their empirical analysis illustrates how denial of same - sex marriage ultimately undermines the quality of life of children and homes of gays and lesbians of color.

Secondly, culture as a structural force is quite pervasive. It reflects and affects accepted norms in society, behaviors, principles, and ideologies. Because of its subtleties, American culture's influence on the lives of its citizens makes it inescapable. For example, the federal government can extend marriage rights to the homosexual community. However, it cannot police the streets and keep citizens from staring at a same - sex couple as they walk down the street holding hands or protect them from negative remarks. Nor can the government prevent certain forms of discrimination against them in terms of adoption services, housing, and hate crimes. Such crimes can be prosecuted after the fact, yet I contend that they take place based on tacit acceptance in the wider society.

In his seminal text, *Race Matters*, West (1993) describes some of the difficulties Americans have when addressing issues of sexuality in general. Because the subject is taboo, many persons, particularly White Americans, avoid the subject and fear it. However, West contends that the absence of sexuality in the public discourse does not preclude abuses of the bodies and identities of women, Blacks, and sexual minorities. West's premise can be broadly applied in this study because it informs our understanding of the cultural constraints that may undermine candid conversations about sexuality – including discourses about homosexuality (Barnes, 2009; Battle & Lemelle, 2002; Cohen, 1999). Some Americans' views about gays and lesbians appear to be changing as evidenced by Maine and Maryland's 2012 legislative support of same-sex marriage and the upcoming Supreme Court decision to hear several same - sex cases (Ho, 2012; Liptak,

2012; Serwer, 2012). Yet debates continue around subjects like; whether persons are born gay/lesbian or chose sexual orientation; whether tolerance is sufficient or acceptance of homosexuality is required; and, should gay men and lesbians have the same rights as straight people. These types of questions reflect dynamics such as religious beliefs, familial socialization, and experiences, which are often influenced by cultural values, traditions, and norms in society. Based on these and other dynamics not presented here, it is important to continue the discourse on this important subject. I hope to add to existing literature by considering some of the views and suggestions of college students about same-sex relationships.

METHODS AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

This study was based on a voluntary survey of an upper level sociology class during fall 2011 at a private liberal arts university in the southeast. A convenience sample was used. Respondents were easily accessible and willing to participate in the study. The course focused on grassroots social movements. Due to the elective nature of the class and the subject matter, it is reasonable to infer that the students were more likely to be familiar with social problems, inequality, and controversial subjects. The class itself was also very ethnically diverse. Sixteen completed surveys were received. The ratio of male to female respondents was exactly 1:1. There were eight male responses and eight female responses. Of the respondents, four self-identified as African American, five as Caucasian, two as Hispanic/Latino, two as Asian, two as Other (African and Indian), and one as multiracial (specified as African American and Caucasian).

In addition to providing demographic information such as race, classification, sex,

and age, students were asked their general thoughts about sexual orientation, followed by more specific questions about gay/lesbian relationships and legal options for such groups (survey provided in the appendix). The data were examined using content analysis, which included a close reading of responses to compare and contrast beliefs and suggestions that emerged. I was specifically interested in how students understood sexual orientation and how those views translated into decisions about changes in laws (Krippendorf, 1980). I consider this study to be the first step in future investigations about student views on controversial, potentially sensitive subjects.

EMERGENT THEMES ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Findings from this study often parallel the varied, sometimes ambiguous views about this sensitive subject that are currently evident in the wider society. Most of the sampled students have thought about how one's sexual orientation manifests. Many are supportive of the legalization of same-sex marriage. Yet others appear reticent to fully embrace this stance based on personal factors such as religion and views about what should constitute *marriage*. Themes summarized here as "Nature vs. Nurture: I Just Don't Know", "Yes...and No", and "Same and Equal" illustrate the nuanced nature of their comments. Representative quotes and corresponding analyses are provided in the next sub-sections.

Nature vs. Nurture: I Just Don't Know

Although two broad themes emerged about definitions and thoughts about sexual minorities, students overwhelmingly are in support of legalizing same-sex marriage. Despite consistent views about legalities, students are varied in their understandings of sexual orientation. Six respondents believe that the origin of homosexuality is

genetically or biologically based; two believe people make choices in terms of their orientation. And six students are unsure and reference both biology and agency. Two failed to comment on this question. As illustrated by the following representative quotes, the comments are often informed by the “nature versus nurture” discourse. Interestingly, the above pattern is the same whether one considers the views of females or males and shows that male students in this study are no more likely than female students to associate sexual orientation with nature or nurture.

When the subject of nature is considered, a female 19 year-old Hispanic sophomore describes sexual orientation based on a broad biological view of organisms; “this occurs naturally. It’s a minority, but sometimes happens just like some different variations of sexual orientations in the rest of the animal kingdom.” Another female has similar views; “people are born with their sexual orientations – they can’t help how they feel” (female 19 year-old Indian sophomore). However, another female has a contrasting view that suggests support of a nurture-based perspective; “I think that it is a choice. I don’t think anyone is born a certain way” (female 20 year-old African American sophomore). When their male peers are considered, a 20 year-old African American sophomore notes; “I think it is not a choice, but the way people are born. People are just born to be their sexual orientation.” The following 20 year-old White junior uses biological descriptions to explain his belief in nature over nurture; “I think it is just a sort of natural variation in preference.” Lastly, another male 20 year-old White junior provides a succinct response, “They are born with it.” However, several males point to the socialization process for cues; “I think that it has to do with various environmental factors such as the type of

relationships that you have with your parents, etc.” (21 year-old African American senior). However, a 21 year-old African American senior suggests an explanation informed by the Structure vs. Agency discourse; “People always need labels. It is the way our society operates. Without a label, people have a tough time identifying with anything.” This latter comment also refers to support of the social construction of reality and its implications for placing people in categories and interacting with them based on such groupings.

However, just as many students believe sexual orientation is a result of *both* nature and nurture than support biological rationales. I do not interpret this pattern as an example of indecisiveness, but rather examples of people who are still in the process of understanding complex issues and who are attempting to be open - minded about them. The following representative quotes from males illustrate this theme;

Development and voluntary associations create a psychological preference toward one gender or the other based on emotional and other forms of compatibility. (18 year-old White freshman)

Some sort of biological difference, social preference, or psychological difference. (22 year-old African American senior)

It’s not proven, but I think it’s a mix of nature and nurture (genetics and how you are raised). (21 year-old White senior)

In one of the above instances, a student actually refers to the nature vs. nurture discourse; others use different terminology to allude to the same theme. In each case, male students suggest a certain amount of uncertainty about the *cause* of one’s sexual orientation as well as belief in the complexity of the trait. A similar thematic pattern emerged among female students;

I’m still not sure if its nature or nurture, but I’m learning toward nature more – that is

they feel that way naturally since they are young. (21 year-old Asian senior)

They are a combination of both natural environment as well as nurture. (19 year-old Asian sophomore)

In addition to the above more succinct responses, the following female student details the two-fold process from which she believes sexual orientation emerges;

I think that sexual orientation is a combination of biology and social factors. For instance, some people may be homosexual although their society's religious and cultural views disagree strongly. Other people may be naturally heterosexual but experiment with other socially acceptable sexual orientations and may then have that orientation. (19 year-old African sophomore)

Like their male counterparts, the above female students believe multiple factors shape one's sexual orientation. In addition to providing varied interpretations, responses tend to be longer and more detailed when compared relatively with responses for later survey questions. As suggested in the next section, the above views do not necessarily influence thoughts about gay and lesbian relationships specifically.

VIEWS ABOUT GAY AND LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS

Two themes emerge when students are asked their thoughts about gay and lesbian relationships and whether such persons should be able to marry and have the same rights as heterosexual couples. The first illustrates some of the difficulties some persons have separating their desire to support equality from specific beliefs about what constitutes marriage.

Yes...and No

Contrary to existing studies on continued unfavorable views on the subject (Barnes, 2009; Herek, 2002; Negy & Eisenman, 2005), the vast majority of respondents view

gay and lesbian relationships favorably and support same-sex marriage. However, several students had mixed feelings. Although they do not seem to want to be a part of a process that discriminates against sexual minorities, their religious beliefs and up-bringing appear to make it difficult to wholeheartedly support same-sex marriage;

I have mixed feelings [same response to both questions]. (19 year-old African female sophomore)

The above student believes sexual orientation is a result of both nature and nurture, yet her uncertain views about homosexual relationships are evident in her two short responses to my queries. According to the following 21 year-old White male senior, sexual orientation is largely a result of nurture and inadequate familial relationships. Yet his somewhat ambivalent views about gays and lesbians inform beliefs that although such persons should have equal rights in terms of romantic relationships, it does not require a synonymous definition;

I really don't think that much about them to be honest. They don't bother me...marriage - no, civil unions - yes.

And the following student's religious beliefs preclude support for same-sex marriage. However, he ultimately supports a couple's decision to make choices that make them happy;

Personally, it goes against my religion so I find it morally wrong, but people should ultimately do what makes them happy, so if they want to be in a homosexual relationship, then I am indifferent to it...Well in my opinion, there is still a sanctity of marriage that is clearly defined between a man and a woman, so I don't think marriage is the correct term to use for it. Civil union is more correct. They should be allowed to include each other in their wills, on insurance and things like that. (21 year-old African American male senior)

The above detailed statement is an anomaly among the short responses the majority of students with less favorable views provide. Unlike the above views on homosexual relationships the following students are much more direct and certain about their sentiments.

Spreading Love and Happiness: Same and Equal

The final theme associates the importance of equality as a requisite for happiness. According to the following students, gay and lesbian couples deserve the same chance at happiness as straight couples. Furthermore, they support legal changes to make such marriages a reality;

Everyone deserves to be happy. They are doing what makes them happy. Yes. These couples should have the same rights as heterosexual couples. (19 year-old Hispanic female sophomore)

If people are happy with them then they should be free to lead their lives as they please. Yes – everybody should have equal rights. (19 year-old White female sophomore)

I think they are just like heterosexual relationships – having love and arguments. Yes [support equality] because they are partners, no different than straight people. (21 year-old Asian female senior)

The above three quotes associate relationships with happiness and love. The first two quotes specifically refer to the former concept and the two students emphatically give their support (“Yes”). Moreover, their remarks suggest that the current illegal status of same-sex unions reflects more than a legislative constraint, but prevents gays and lesbians from experiencing emotional and psychological well-being, contentment, and fellowship the two students seem to associate with marriage. The third student’s remarks expand this premise because she considers

same-sex couples to be the same as opposite-sex couples in their tendency to have positive and negative experiences. For her, this similarity means same-sex couples deserve the same rights. The subjects of equal rights and equal treatment are more directly evident for the following students. It is common for students to refer to the constitution or the government as they describe deservedness;

More power to them! Absolutely. The constitution doesn’t mention excluding gays from rights. (18 year-old White male freshman)

I think they are legitimate and should be viewed the same as heterosexual relationships. Yes! Sexual orientation is a personal matter and government should not be able to deem what is acceptable. (20 year-old bi-racial male sophomore)

In addition to their support, both of the above students question whether the structural forces associated with the legal system should have the right to enter individual’s personal, intimate lives. Their comments also suggest that personal agency (i.e., “more power to them” and “sexual orientation is a personal matter”) does or should influence such decisions. Next, the latter two comments continue the pattern where students consider same-sex relationships to be the “same” as their heterosexual counterparts;

Yes! I think they should be treated the same way that heterosexual relationships are treated. (21 year-old White male senior)

I don’t really mind. They exist the same as heterosexual relationships exist. I have a few gay/lesbian friends who talk to me about their relationships..it is very similar to heterosexual relationships. It makes no difference to me. Yes, they should have equal rights. (19 year-old White female sophomore)

The first White male student above provides a more succinct, emphatic response.

However, the female student renders much more detail, corroborated by comments from gay/lesbian friends, to support legalization of same-sex marriage.

Despite diversity in terms of school classification, race, age, as well as sex, and despite varied views about the origins of sexual orientation, students overwhelmingly support same-sex relationships and their right to wed. Females were no more or less supportive of same-sex relationships or their right to marry. However, a review of response patterns show that, female students tend to provide longer, more detailed explanations than their male counterparts. Although both sexes are in support of the two issues, females are more likely to explain why, while male responses tend to give short phrases or when questioned about support for legal options, provide single words (i.e., “yes” or “absolutely”).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Responses, while varied in format, generally affirm that same - sex couples should have the same legal rights as heterosexual couples. These findings parallel existing studies and mainstream reports that suggest opinions about same - sex relationships are becoming more positive (Brewer, 2003; Ho, 2012; Liptak, 2012; Negy & Eisenman, 2005; Serwer, 2012). Moreover, students’ support of same-sex marriage is consistently favorable despite sample heterogeneity. Even ambivalent and more negative views about homosexuality do not prevent students from supporting the legal rights of same - sex couples to wed and be treated equally. Thus the sampled students appear able to transcend various beliefs and uncertainties to recognize the common humanness of same - sex couples (West, 1993).

However, female students in this study are more likely to provide detailed explanations to justify their support than are

male students. Furthermore, male students often provide “one word or one phrase” affirmations for the legalization of same-sex marriage. Although I cannot fully explain these differences, I provide several possibilities. Given that all respondents completed their surveys during the same class period, this prevents attributing differences in response lengths to time constraints. During the same period, females are able to provide substantially more detailed responses. Furthermore, both males and females provide similar types of responses, in terms of format and length, when asked to explain a more esoteric question—the origins of sexual orientation. However, male students may not have been as comfortable expressing their views when asked direct questions about gay and lesbian relationships and possible legalities. For some males, the possibility of politically correct responses must be considered. Rather than question the validity of their support, these findings suggest the need for additional studies in more informal spaces or mail-in surveys to elicit additional information from males on the subject (Brewer, 2003; Negy & Eisenman, 2005).

These findings are also interesting given that they suggest possible heightened student tolerance at a school in a locale associated with intolerance. However, their presence in a course on grass roots social movements suggests the possibility that they selected such a university to affect change in its culture. Based on these findings, I contend that increased tolerance and reasoning based on common humanness appears evident for many of the sample students (West, 1993). Some young people such as college students may be seeing past the ideologies of their families as well as structural forces such as religion and conservative culture to use their agency to determine what is right and wrong to them. However, federal legislation to recognize

and legitimize same - sex relationships is still necessary. Like-minded individuals must unite to collectively call for legal change. This study reflects a small group's opinions about a large, controversial issue. The findings are very intriguing. However, at the very least, a study with a more representative, national sample that includes additional questions about issues such as personal ideology, religion, and family history will be necessary to draw more comprehensive conclusions about this important topic.

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APPENDIX

Vulnerable Populations – Sexual Orientation

I am in HOD-2690-03: Vulnerable Populations this semester. For my project, I am performing a survey to find out what [University's name] students think about sexual orientation. This is a confidential survey (do not place your name on it). There are no right or wrong answers. Please answer honestly. Thank you for your help.

1. Age _____

2. Gender: _____Female _____Male

3. Classification (check one):

_____ Freshman

_____ Sophomore

_____ Junior

_____ Senior

_____ Other (_____)

4. Race (check one):

_____ White

_____ Black/African American

_____ Hispanic/Latino

_____ Asian

_____ Other (_____)

5. What do you think about people who have different sexual orientations (heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, and lesbianism)? Please explain.

6. What do you think about gay/lesbian relationships?

7. In your opinion, should gays and lesbians be afforded legal options such as: marriage, the ability to include their partner in their wills, ability to adopt children as a couple, and the ability to include their partner on their insurance?

Please contact Dr. Sandra L. Barnes in the Dept. of Human and Organizational Development (sandra.l.barnes@vanderbilt.edu) with questions or comments about this survey.
