Socio-Demographic Predictors of Support for Lesbian and Gay Civil Rights

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Abstract

This study examined the socio-demographic variables associated with support for civil rights for lesbians and gays. Participants were 537 straight individuals (26% male, 74% female). Men reported less support for lesbian and gay civil rights than did women. Also, Black participants reported less support than did White or Hispanic participants. Religiosity, political ideology, gender role beliefs, and attitudes toward lesbians and gays were all significantly correlated, in the predicted directions, with support for lesbian and gay civil rights; however, age was not. Regression analysis showed that participants’ attitudes toward lesbian and gays was the strongest predictor of their support for lesbian and gay civil rights.

Background

As the debate over gay and lesbian civil rights plays out in the nation’s courts and legislatures, negative attitudes toward homosexuality are still prevalent in our society (e.g. Herek, 2000). Americans are becoming increasingly supportive of civil rights for gays and lesbians (Brewer, 2003); yet, individuals’ attitudes toward homosexuality continue to reflect moral disapproval (Sherrill & Yang, 2000). Thus, people’s attitudes toward homosexuality may not necessarily reflect how they feel about civil rights for lesbians and gays (Ellis, Kitzinger, & Wilkinson, 2002).

This study examined the socio-demographic variables (including age, gender, race, religiosity, political ideology, gender role beliefs, and homophobia) associated with support for civil rights for lesbians and gays.

Based on previous findings (e.g. Brown & Henriquez, 2009), we expected a progressive political ideology, feminist gender role beliefs, and positive attitudes toward gays and lesbians to be positively associated with support for lesbian and gay civil rights.

Method

Participants

Participants were 537 straight individuals (26% male, 74% female). The mean age of participants was 26.32 (SD = 9.80) and ranged from 17 to 68 years. The sample was ethnically diverse: 58% White, 14% Black, 9% Hispanic, 11% Asian, 10% “other”.

Design and Procedures

Participants completed the Support for Lesbian and Gay Civil Rights Scale (SGLCRS; Brown & Henriquez, 2011), the Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gays Scale (ATLGS; Herek, 1988), the Gender Role Beliefs Scale (GRBS; Keer & Holdan, 1996), and a questionnaire where participants rated their religiosity on a scale of 1 (not at all religious) to 7 (very religious), and their political ideology on a scale of 1 (Liberal) to 7 (Conservative).

Results

Because there were significant intercorrelations among our variables, we used path analysis to examine the direct and indirect effects of participants’ socio-demographic characteristics on their support for gay and lesbian civil rights. In our model, participants’ gender was coded as 1 for male (n = 134) and 0 for female (n = 397). For experience with gays and lesbians, we assigned participants a 1 (n = 349) if they reported having a gay friend or family member and a 0 (n = 188) if they did not. For race, we collapsed and dummy coded participants’ race to create a single dichotomous variable with values of 1 for White (n = 317) and 0 for Non-White (n = 220).

Discussion

Consistent with previous findings, participants’ race, experience with gays and lesbians, religiosity, political leanings, and gender role beliefs were all significant direct predictors of support for gay and lesbian civil rights. We did not find any direct or indirect effects for participants’ age. However, we attribute this null result to the limited age-range of our sample.

By examining the individual characteristics that predict support for gay and lesbian civil rights, we gain a better understanding of the nature and causes of anti-gay prejudice. This knowledge, in turn, may help us better identify and address the inequalities gays and lesbians continue to experience in our society.