

SHIRI PEARLMAN-AVNION
Department of Psychology and Department of Education
Tel Hai College, Upper Galilee, Israel
Shiripearlmanavnion@yahoo.com
NOFAR ESHED-LAVI
Department of Education
Tel Hai College, Upper Galilee, Israel

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CHANGING ATTITUDES OF NON-RELIGIOUS AND RELIGIOUS STUDENTS TOWARDS HOMOSEXUALITY: LECTURE AS A MEAN OF INTERVENTION

This research compares two intervention methods implemented at a college in northern Israel, aimed at instilling positive attitudes towards LGBT people: (1) a lecture in which a lesbian woman recounted her personal story, and (2) a neutral academic lecture on homosexuality delivered by a department lecturer. The difference between pre- and post-intervention attitudes was significantly greater among the experimental group who heard the personal story, as compared with the control group who heard the lecture. Religious students' attitudes were significantly more negative pre- and post-intervention. Contrary to our hypothesis, the experimental intervention did not have a greater impact on attitudes of religious students as compared with non-religious students.

Key words: LGBT, attitude change, homosexuality, students, brief intervention, religious, non-religious

Introduction

As LGBT students become increasingly visible and salient on college campuses, educators and administrators face challenges in making these students feel secure and welcome, given evidence that they experience discrimination, exclusion, and violence due to their sexual orientation (Balsom, Rothblum, Beauchaine, 2005; Cowie, Myers, 2016; NUS, 2014). Moreover, there are perceived benefits in encouraging favorable attitudes regarding LGBT people among college students, especially those intending to work in fields such as education or therapy, for several reasons. One, they are likely to encounter LGBT students, clients, patients and colleagues in their work. Second, since educators and therapists are agents of influence regarding public opinion, reducing derogatory ideas about LGBT people and homosexuality among these students may have a wide and long-lasting influence (Ben-Ari, 1998; Fish, 2008; LaSala, 2006; Perez, DeBord, Bieschke, 2008).

In recent years, there has been growing awareness of LGBT rights in Western countries, including Israel where the current study took place. Despite Israeli laws ensuring equal social rights (Harel, 2000; Kama, 2005) discrimination, stigmatization, and violence against LGBT people continues (Pizmony-Levy, Kama, Shilo, Lavee, 2008; Walzer, 2013). One significant predictor of negative attitudes

towards homosexuality, considered in this article, is religiosity (Arndt & De Bruin, 2006; Olson, Cadge, Harrison, 2006). Other predictors of negative attitudes include male gender, increased age, less education, and more children; while knowledge about homosexuality and friendship with LGBT persons are predictors of positive attitudes (Brown & Henriquez, 2008; Çirakoğlu, 2006; Cotton-Huston, Waite, 2000; Shackelford, Besser, 2007). Thus, it is proposed that negative attitudes towards homosexuality may be reduced by creating encounters between heterosexuals and members of the LGBT community and broadening knowledge on this subject (Chonody et al., 2009; Herek, Capitano, 1996; Shilo, 2009). Workshops and panel discussions with members of the LGBT community have been found to be successful intervention methods (Blumenfeld, 1992; Burkholder, Dineen, 1996; Chng, Moore, 1991; Rye, Meaney, 2009).

The present research compares two brief intervention methods used at a college in Israel: a lecture delivered by a lesbian woman who related her personal story then answered participants' questions; and a neutral academic lecture given in a course offered in the students' department of study which delivered information on homosexuality and homosexual people. We hypothesized:

- 1) There will be greater improvement in attitudes towards LGBT people among students who heard the personal story (experimental group), compared with those who attended the academic lecture (control group).
- 2) In the experimental group, attitudes of non-religious students towards LGBT people will be more positive than those of their religious peers, prior to and after the intervention.
- 3) In the experimental group, there will be significant improvement in attitudes, with more significant improvement among religious students.

Method

Participants

Participants included 107 first-year bachelor's degree students in the Faculty of Social Sciences at a college in northern Israel. We chose two classes and randomly assigned one to the experimental group and the other to the control group. As shown in Table, demographic traits of the groups were similar. Five participants who identified as lesbian or bisexual were not included in the statistical analyses, on the assumption that their attitudes would be positive to begin with. All self-defined religious students were considered together, regardless of level of religiosity.

Instruments

We used a demographic questionnaire and an updated Hebrew version of the self-report Homosexuality Attitude Scale (HAS) (Kite & Deaux, 1986; Shilo, 2004), which includes an item regarding HIV carriers that did not appear in the original instrument. The questionnaire included 22 statements such as "I would not mind having homosexual friends"; "Homosexuality is a mental illness" and "If I were a parent I would not mind my son or daughter being gay". Each statement is rated on a 5-point Likert scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree, so that scores for the total questionnaire range from 22 to 110. The translated questionnaire has

excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .93$) (Shilo, 2004), and in the present research, it was $\alpha = .91$ prior to the intervention, and $\alpha = .92$ afterwards. Item 7 (“Lesbians and homosexuals don’t like members of the opposite sex”) was excluded as the reliability test showed that the Cronbach’s alpha reduced the reliability.

Table

Demographic Traits of Experimental and Control Groups

	Experimental Group (N=43)			Control Group (N=64)		
	N	%		N	%	
Gender						
male	2	4.65		12	17.19	
female	41	95.35		52	82.81	
Marital Status						
unmarried	35	81.40		51	79.69	
married	8	18.60		13	20.31	
Children						
yes	1	2.33		2	3.12	
no	42	97.67		62	96.88	
Religion						
Jewish	43	100		61	95.31	
Other	0	0		3	4.69	
Religiosity						
religious	9	20.93		15	23.44	
non-religious	34	79.07		49	76.56	
	Range	M	SD	Range	M	SD
Age	20–28	24.17	1.77	20–55	24.99	4.77

Procedure

Respondents in the experimental and control groups completed the HAS before and after the respective interventions. The talk by the lesbian woman covered her life story including childhood, process of coming out, and marriage to a woman. She responded to questions from the audience. The control group attended an academic lecture on homosexuality, presented as part of a course in the department of study.

Results

Participants’ attitudes towards homosexuality were relatively positive even before the interventions, which may be due to the composition of the sample: primarily non-religious, female, social science students.

We calculated the difference between the pre- and post-intervention questionnaire scores on the HAS. A *t*-test for independent samples confirmed the first hypothesis: improvement in attitudes as reflected in change in HAS scores was greater in the experimental group than in the control group (see Figure 1).

A Mann-Whitney test using group means confirmed the second hypothesis: non-religious respondents in the experimental group expressed more positive attitudes towards homosexuality before and after the lecture (see Figure 2).

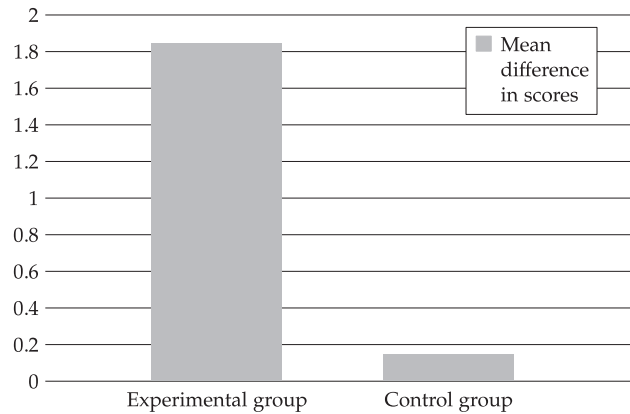


Figure 1. Means of Research Groups: Differences in Scores on HAS Pre- and Post-Intervention

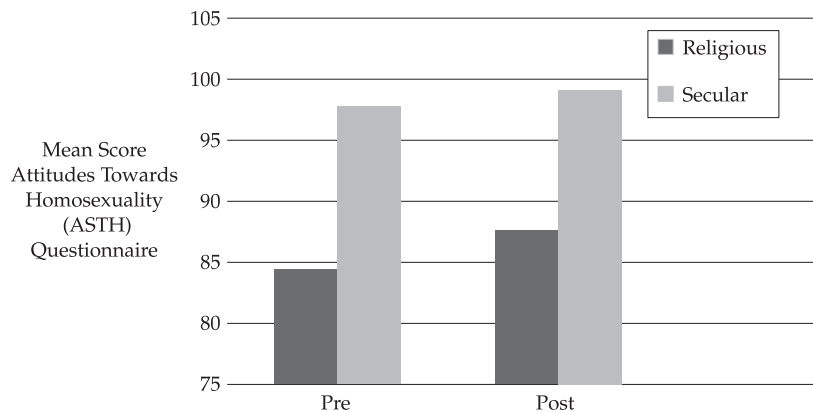


Figure 2. Religious and Non-religious Respondents: Differences in Attitudes Towards Homosexuality Pre- and Post-Intervention

Comparison of differences in pre- and post-intervention scores of the non-religious and religious respondents using the Mann-Whitney test for independent samples refuted the third hypothesis: there was no significant difference between the degree of change in pre- and post-intervention scores among religious and non-religious students. Nevertheless, there was a significant change among both religious and non-religious students in their attitudes toward homosexuality. The difference between the pre- and post-intervention attitudes of the religious students was twice as great as that of the non-religious respondents. This suggests the possibility that despite the effect size, the small size of the sample worked against confirmation of the hypothesis.

Discussion

These findings are consistent with those of other recent research. Although we did not examine cognitive and emotional components separately, the results suggest that the interpersonal encounter promoted emotional identification, contributing to positive attitude change.

It is possible that the difference in degree of pre-post intervention change between religious and non-religious students did not reach the level of significance because of the small number of respondents in the religious group, and use of the nonparametric Mann-Whitney test.

Thus the results indicate that hearing a personal story from a member of the LGBT community constitutes an effective intervention for improving attitudes towards homosexuality. Since research in this field in Israel is still in its infancy, it is important to examine long-term effects, expand the target population to include adolescents and adults, and to explore suitable programs regarding the subject of LGBT persons for the general public, not only college students, who tend to be a liberal population.

Further, the finding that even after the lecture attitudes of religious people towards homosexuality were more negative than those of their non-religious peers may indicate that their initial attitudes could not be changed by a single lecture. It may be necessary to implement longer-term intervention, comprised of several sessions, in order to achieve attitude change.

The present research was the first in Israel to examine the effectiveness of an intervention program aimed at changing attitudes towards homosexuality. Some limitations of the research should be taken into account. First, the small sample size precluded examination of relationships between attitudes towards homosexuality and background variables such as gender, and marital status. Second, the sample represented a limited sector of the Israeli population, reducing external validity and generalization of results. Additionally, the attitude change observed does not necessarily indicate change in behavior. Neither can long-term change be assumed, given the short time frame of the pre-post tests. Future research should examine the possibility of behavioral change from such intervention programs, persistence of change, and replicability of findings in a larger, more diverse population representative of Israeli society.

This manuscript is submitted in compliance with ethical standards.

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ZMIENIANIE NASTAWIENIA STUDENTÓW WIERZĄCYCH I NIEWIERZĄCYCH WOBEC HOMOSEKSUALNOŚCI: WYKŁAD ŚRODKIEM ODDZIAŁYWANIA

Streszczenie

W prezentowanym badaniu porównano dwie metody oddziaływania zastosowane na uczelni w północnym Izraelu, mające na celu zaszczepienie studentom pozytywnego stosunku do osób LGBT: (1) wykład, na którym homoseksualna kobieta opisuje swoją własną historię oraz (2) wykład akademicki o charakterze neutralnym dotyczący homoseksualności, prowadzony przez wykładowcę uczelni. Różnica między postawami przed interwencją i po interwencji była istotnie większa w grupie eksperymentalnej, która wysłuchała osobistej historii, niż w grupie kontrolnej, która wysłuchała wykładu. Stosunek do osób LGBT był istotnie bardziej negatywny przed i po interwencji u studentów wierzących. Sprzecznie z postawioną hipotezą eksperymentalna interwencja nie miała tak dużego wpływu na postawy studentów wierzących w porównaniu ze studentami niewierzącymi.

Słowa kluczowe: LGBT, zmiana nastawienia, homoseksualność, studenci, krótka interwencja, wierzący, niewierzący