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# The Influence of Socio-cultural Factors on College Students' Attitudes toward Sexual Minorities

## Cover Page Footnote

The authors thank Elizabeth Heid for assistance in data collection.

# The Influence of Socio-cultural Factors on College Students' Attitudes toward Sexual Minorities

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*Research has indicated that age is a significant predictor of tolerance toward sexual minorities. However, outdated measures and social desirability may hinder attempts to accurately detect bias. This study explores attitudes toward gay males among a sample of students in the Midwestern United States. We investigate the influence of gender, religiosity, and political orientation on students' attitudes. Students' political orientation was found to be the strongest predictor of attitudes. In contrast to previous research emphasizing the relationship between age and tolerance, our study suggests that socio-cultural factors have the greatest influence on bias. This has critical implications for social work educators working with students from conservative cultures.*

*Key words: LGBT discrimination, millennial students, social work education, anti-gay bias, social work practice*

The massacre of 49 people at an Orlando gay nightclub in June of 2016, identified at the time as one of the worst mass shooting in U.S. history (Santora, 2016), served as a critical reminder of the hostility sexual minorities continue to face. Following the shooting, a *New York Times* report reviewed hate crimes data from multiple sources, including the FBI and the U.S. Census Bureau. The report concluded that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered

(LGBT) persons are twice as likely as any other minority group to be the target of hate crimes (Park & Mykhalyshyn, 2016). Despite considerable advances in civil rights, intolerance toward LGBT persons continues to be a problem with significant consequences.

With its theoretical basis in the person-in-environment perspective, social work should be the profession most likely to recognize the systemic nature of homophobia. Unfortunately, the discipline seems curiously limited in its ability to address the issue from a macro perspective (Galarza & Anthony, 2015; Pelts, Rolbiecki, & Albright, 2014). Several studies have documented the lack of LGBT content in social work education and major social work journals, raising questions regarding how the topic of sexual minority oppression is prioritized within the discipline (Martin et al., 2009; Messinger, 2011; Pelts et al., 2014; Woodford, Brennan, Gutierrez, & Luke, 2013). Consequently, there exists a significant gap in social work literature addressing homophobia as a systemic issue, with institutionalized oppression rooted in the intersection of politics, gender norms, and organized religion.

This paper presents the results of a study that examined students' attitudes toward sexual minority persons at a mid-size public university in the Midwestern United States. Our purpose was to examine the influence of gender, religiosity, and political orientation on college students' attitudes toward gay males. Consistent with social work theory, socio-cultural factors appear to be the primary predictors of sexual minority prejudice across generational cohorts (Anderson & Fetner, 2008; Flores, 2014). While previous research has documented the influence of demographic variables (e.g., gender and religiosity) on attitudes toward sexual minorities, our research targets millennial students using a more recently developed measure intended to discern subtle bias. We ask which socio-cultural factors are the stronger predictors of bias toward gay males among undergraduate students, a population commonly assumed to be less prejudiced toward sexual minorities (Jones & Cox, 2015). The research focused on attitudes toward gay males because previous data has indicated that gay men are subjected to higher rates of negative bias compared to lesbians and bisexuals (FBI, 2014; Lick, Johnson, & Gill, 2014).

## Review of the Literature

Flores (2014) noted the popular perception that “generational replacement” (i.e., younger persons displacing older, thus transforming social norms) is the most influential factor in changing attitudes toward the LGBT population. However, Flores’ analysis, which examined the differential impact of generational cohort and social environment, found cultural factors to be the strongest predictor of attitudes toward sexual minorities. Similarly, although Anderson and Fetner (2008) found that younger people were generally more tolerant, differences in the political climate were most significantly associated with differences in attitudes toward LGBT persons.

Plummer (2014) hypothesized an historical ebb and flow in anti-gay attitudes, drawing on documented evidence of periods of liberalization followed by escalations in hostility and discrimination. Increased public hostility and legislation criminalizing same-sex behavior have emerged in previously tolerant cultures such as Nigeria and the Caribbean. Plummer noted that similar shifts have occurred throughout history, such as the incarceration of gays and lesbians in concentration camps following a period of increased tolerance for sexual minorities in pre-Nazi Germany.

Researchers at the Gallup organization also documented this pattern of increasing and decreasing tolerance in response to political and cultural circumstances. For example, in contrast to the more liberal attitudes of the 1970s, Gallup reported a major decrease in public support for legalizing homosexuality in the culturally conservative 1980s. Likewise, support for same-sex prohibitions increased following the Supreme Court’s upholding of Georgia’s sodomy laws in 1986 (Flores, 2014). In a Gallup survey as recent as 2008, over one thousand adults across the U.S. were asked their opinion regarding the “morality of homosexual relations.” Respondents were evenly divided, leading researchers to identify homosexuality as the most divisive of all social issues surveyed. According to the report, only abortion and physician-assisted suicide elicited similarly disparate reactions (Saad, 2008). Despite the popular perception of increasing public support, Gallup concluded that Americans

remain “highly ambivalent” on the subject of homosexuality (Saad, 2008, para. 12).

### *Homophobic Discourse as Political Strategy*

In condemning the Pulse nightclub shooting, the United States Holocaust Museum issued a statement noting the historical link between the persecution of sexual minorities and the rise of “extremist ideologies” (Hollinger, 2016, para. 2). Indeed, public opposition to authoritarian political systems often coincides with state-sponsored campaigns targeting the LGBT community (Bosia & Weiss, 2013). By the same token, Jovanovic’s (2013) study on the evolution of the right-wing, *Dveri* movement in Serbia documented how the group was able to transform from a minor “clique” to an influential political force through the use of a public campaign condemning gays and lesbians as a threat to Serbian society. Scapegoating sexual minorities is an effective political tactic, as evidenced by its recurring use. This “creation of an internal enemy” (Jovanovic, 2013, para. 1) has been employed as a means of consolidating political power in such disparate cultures as China, Iran, Russia, and Indonesia (Soboleva & Bakhmetjev, 2015).

Graff (2010) posited that the anti-LGBT campaign in Poland and its alliance with anti-European Union forces reveals that homophobia is fundamentally political in nature. Political statements to vilify the LGBT community do not simply reflect cultural conservatism; they often serve as strategies to advance broader political agendas. A case in point is North Carolina’s Public Facilities and Privacy and Security Act, or HB2. Despite popular perception that the bill focuses solely on transgender persons and public restrooms, this issue refers to only one of the bill’s five sections. Additionally, HB2 nullifies existing LGBT discrimination protections, but also prohibits increases in the state’s minimum wage, and forces all job-related discrimination suits into the more complex and onerous federal system (Epps, 2016; Martin, 2016).

*Sexual Minority Discrimination*

FBI hate crimes data show that in terms of aggregate number, the rate of LGBT victimization is second only to crimes based on race (FBI, 2014). However, further analysis by the Southern Poverty Law Center (Potok, 2011) and the *New York Times* (Park & Mykhalyshyn, 2016) revealed that when comparing rates of hate crime victimization to the group's overall representation in the population, LGBT persons are twice as likely to be victimized than any other minority group.

Reporting on state and local agencies across the country, Mallory and Sears (2014) document "pervasive" workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. An analysis of complaints filed led researchers to conclude that the rates of workplace discrimination based on sexual minority status were similar to rates of discrimination based on race and sex. Moreover, the authors argued that their analysis may actually under-represent discrimination, due to the lack of uniformity across the country in state discrimination laws for LGBT persons, and the absence of federal laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

In spite of recent indications of greater acceptance of sexual minorities, the research of Doan, Loehr, and Miller (2014) with a nationally representative sample of participants suggests a more complex picture. Although the majority of participants supported legal benefits for LGB people, only 55 percent approved of public displays of affection (PDAs) between gay men, as compared to a 95 percent level of approval for PDAs between heterosexual couples. Perceptions that lesbians and gay men are intentionally "flaunting" their sexual orientation through PDAs or gender atypical behavior (e.g., a man perceived as having a feminine gait or a woman having a "masculine" expression), have been associated with increased hostility (Lick et al., 2014). Thus, there appears to be a disconnect between participants' cognitive response in support of legal rights, and their affective response of intolerance toward behaviors that do not conform to heterosexual norms. Nevertheless, the heightened visibility of LGBT issues in recent years may serve to mitigate this sort of homophobia among millennials.

Various sources have found age to be a significant predictor of LGBT acceptance. In a random sample of participants, Jones and Cox (2015) found that about 73 percent of millennials supported laws to protect LGBT persons from discrimination in jobs and housing. The authors noted that as a group, millennials were much less likely to judge sexual behaviors in general as morally wrong, suggesting either that younger people are more accepting of sexual diversity or are less likely to express disapproval of others' sexual conduct. Consequently, social desirability bias among younger respondents may hinder attempts to accurately assess attitudes toward sexual minorities.

Research indicates that college students' support for LGBT rights decreased when asked about specific issues (e.g., adoption and gay marriage), as opposed to "rights" in general (Lambert, Ventura, Hall, & Cluse-Tolar, 2006). Negative stereotypes of gay males were particularly evident in findings that 33 percent of college students voiced uncertainty regarding the statement that "most pedophiles are gay" (Lambert et al., 2006, p. 11). Although earlier studies have suggested that the college experience enhances students' acceptance of diversity, Holland, Matthews, and Schott (2013) argued that there has been only limited research on students' attitudes toward LGBT persons. Nevertheless, the existing research indicates that variables of gender, race, ethnicity, and religiosity are strongly correlated with attitudes toward sexual minorities.

### *Predictors of Anti-Gay Bias*

The literature suggests that gender, religiosity, political conservatism, and contact with LGBT persons are strong predictors of anti-gay bias. For males in Western culture, standards of appropriate masculine behavior are recognized and reinforced from an early age. Most males hear and repeat derogatory terms for gays even before they have an understanding of the term's meaning, or their own sexuality (Plummer, 2014). Plummer posited that homophobia is "grounded in taboos about masculinity" (p. 132). Thus, we would expect that heterosexual males would be more likely than females to hold anti-gay attitudes, and be more averse to contact with LGBT persons.



The research documents a consistent anti-gay bias among heterosexual men. For example, in an experimental study, Mahaffey, Bryan, and Hutchison (2005) found that heterosexual men showed more discomfort being near gay men than heterosexual women did around lesbians, with male participants physiologically, as measured by startle eye blink, showing anti-gay bias (e.g., fear and disgust), but not female participants. Buck and Plant (2011) experimentally examined the timing of disclosure of sexual orientation. They found that male participants whose partner self-disclosed as gay early during an interview experiment reacted in a negative and avoidant manner, formed more stereotypic impressions of the gay partner (e.g., viewed him as more feminine and artsy), and reacted more angrily or aggressively toward him.

Although race and ethnicity have been associated with negative attitudes toward sexual minorities, Negy and Eisenman (2005) found that ethnic differences were not significant after controlling for church attendance, level of religious commitment, and socioeconomic status. Furthermore, Holland et al. (2013) found that participants who identified as non-religious showed significantly less anti-gay bias. Terrizzi, Shook, and Ventis (2010) also found that participants' religiosity and political conservatism were significantly and positively related to anti-gay bias.

Previous research suggests that social work students are more likely to identify as religious than students in other human services disciplines (Chonody, Woodford, Smith, & Silverschanz, 2013). While religiosity should not be equated with intolerance, it does present particular challenges when viewed from the perspective of addressing anti-gay bias (Dentato et al., 2016). Regrettably, some research reveals that social work students show higher levels of LGBT prejudice compared to undergraduates in other human service disciplines. For example, in a sample made up predominantly of psychology majors, students were significantly less likely to define homosexuality as a sin or perversion (i.e., 7.9% and 6.9% respectively) (Ellis, Kitzinger, & Wilkinson, 2003). Conversely, Swank and Raiz's (2010) survey of BSW students across 12 social work programs found that 38 percent reported the belief that homosexuality is a sin.

Chonody et al. (2013) surveyed self-identified Christian social work students from four public universities, regarding the effects of religious teaching on attitudes toward gays and lesbians. The results revealed that anti-gay messages were most influential among students identified as highly religious. This effect was significant, even when students had contact with gay and lesbian peers, a moderating factor found to decrease negative attitudes toward LGBT persons in research with other sample populations (Pettigew & Tropp, 2006).

### *LGBT Content in Social Work*

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2010) has recognized the integral relationship between sexuality and human rights, noting that various groups continue to be subjected to persecution on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Nevertheless, LGBT issues in social work curricula tend to be limited to information regarding various sexualities, but are less likely to be presented from a broader social justice perspective (Galarza & Anthony, 2015). In a follow-up to Van Voorhis and Wagner's (2002) analysis of LGBT content in the major social work journals, Pelts, Rolbiecki, and Albright (2014) found that content had actually decreased to only 2.4 percent of the total number of articles published between 1998 and 2012. The authors concluded that content on LGBT issues "remain[s] barely visible" (p. 136) in the most prominent social work literature. Not only did Pelts et al. find a significant decrease in LGBT content, but the overwhelming majority of articles focused on client or practitioner concerns, with slightly over 9 percent of all papers addressing macro-level issues such as "societal stigma and heterosexism" (2014, p. 135). The authors pointed out that topics such as homelessness among LGBT youth cannot be adequately addressed without discussing the social and cultural factors that underlie these micro-level concerns. While this is a fundamental tenet of social work theory, it is often absent from discussions of LGBT issues in the literature.

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) has identified LGBT issues as a necessary component of diversity content (Martin et al., 2009). Yet, concerns regarding students' lack of practice competence in this regard, as well as negative

experiences reported by sexual minority students in social work, has led to the development of guidelines to promote supportive, affirming environments for LGBT students, faculty and staff (Craig et al., 2016). While research has shown a relationship between the level of support for LGBT persons within programs and students' competence to practice with LGBT populations (McCarty-Caplan, 2017), evidence continues to reveal a dearth of sexual minority content in social work curricula (Craig, Dentato, Messinger, & McInroy, 2016; Craig, McInroy, Dentato, Austin, & Messinger, 2015; Woodford et al., 2013). This absence has clear consequences. For example, Hylton (2005) found that sexual minority students observed noticeable discomfort among faculty and peers during class discussions of LGBT issues. While surveys suggest that social work students and faculty are generally tolerant of LGBT individuals, research reveals that their understanding and expertise of LGBT issues remains inadequate (Martin et al., 2009). In one study, half of MSW students surveyed reported feeling unprepared to work with sexual minority clients (Logie, Bridge, & Bridge, 2007). Similar findings were revealed in discussion groups organized across the country by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) to address the needs of LGBT youth. According to reports from sexual minority youth and child welfare professionals, social workers and other practitioners in the system lack the training and education to competently serve LGBT youth (Woronoff, Estrada, & Sommer, 2006). Ironically, although a survey of social work program directors reported that 59 percent believed their students were either "very well" or "fairly well" prepared to serve LGBT clients, only 19 percent reported actually assessing students' competence in this regard (Martin et al., 2009).

Notwithstanding recent legal advances, the LGBT community clearly remains a population at risk. LGBT youth are at significantly greater risk for depression and suicidal behaviors (Marshal et al., 2011), substance abuse as a means of coping with social stigma (Marshal et al., 2008), and homelessness as a result of parental and family rejection (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2016). As noted, LGBT adults are also at greater risk to suffer depression and anxiety disorders as a result of discrimination and marginalization (Bailey, 1999; Meyer, 2003; National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2016). Although professional

codes of ethics and accreditation standards mandate service to vulnerable populations, the evidence shows that social work has failed to prioritize service to the LGBT community. Our study seeks to redress the paucity of social work research on the socio-cultural variables associated with negative attitudes toward sexual minorities, and underscore the link between micro and macro effects of homophobia.

## Methods

During the spring semester of 2015, we recruited a convenience sample of 222 students enrolled in two separate sections of a required general education course. As our study specifically targeted millennial students, we chose to recruit participants from undergraduate, general education classes. This also provided an opportunity to recruit a larger number of participants to better represent the general student population. Although social work courses are not part of general education curricula, we were able survey students in two sections of a general education psychology course. An informal inquiry of the students indicated that many were interested in majoring in human services disciplines, such as social work or counseling. Of the participants, 72 percent self-identified as White; 53 percent identified as female; and 95 percent self-identified as heterosexual. The mean participant age was 19 ( $SD = 2.69$ ). Most participants were first-year students (64 percent) or sophomores (20 percent), with the remaining being juniors (12 percent) or seniors (4 percent).

### *Procedure*

Approval from the authors' Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained to ensure protection of participant sample. Students present in class on the day of data collection were invited to participate in a study that examined students' views on diversity. Potential respondents were advised that their participation was strictly voluntary. This information was provided verbally during the introduction to the study, and in the informed consent form provided to each student.

In order to maintain anonymity, participants were instructed not to place their name or any personal identifying

information on the survey instrument. Students completed a brief survey that included measures of religiosity (Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire [SCSORF], Plante & Boccaccini, 1997), attitudes toward gay men (Modern Homonegativity Scale [MHS], Morrison & Morrison, 2002), as well as demographic (e.g., gender, age, race and ethnicity, and sexual orientation) and other personal information (i.e., political orientation and contact with LGB acquaintances and friends).

Participants' political orientation was measured with a one-item question: *At this stage in your life, how do you see yourself politically?* Students responded on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*Very Liberal*) to 5 (*Very Conservative*). Contact with LGB people was assessed using three questions adapted from Schiappa, Gregg and Hewes (2006), with the following response options: *I do not know any gay/lesbian/bisexual people personally* (coded as 0); *I am acquainted with a few gay/lesbian/bisexual people* (coded as 1); *I have a few (three or less) gay/lesbian/bisexual friends* (coded as 2); and *I have more than three gay/lesbian/bisexual friends* (coded as 3).

## Results

Descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alphas, and intercorrelations for all measures appear in Table 1.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, Alphas, and Correlations

Measure	M	SD	$\alpha$	$r$				
				1	2	3	4	5
1. Gender	--	--	--	--	.120	-.277**	-.179**	.144*
2. Religiosity	23.73	9.48	.98	.120	--	.280**	.261**	-.137*
3. Homo-negativity	28.82	9.62	.91	-.277**	.280**	--	.478**	-.306**
4. Political orientation	2.92	.84	--	.074	.261**	.478**	--	-.204**
5. Contact with Gay Males	--	--	.79	.144*	-.137*	-.306*	-.204**	--

Note: \* Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed); \*\* correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

*Mean Scores*

Participant scores on the MHS ranged from 12 to 60, with a mean score of 28.82 (SD = 9.62), reflecting moderate levels of homo-negativity. The mean score on the Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire (SCSORF; Plante & Boccaccini, 1997) was 23.73 (SD = 9.48), indicating moderate religiosity among the present sample. As noted, political orientation was measured using a single question, on a five-point scale. The mean score was 2.92 (SD = .84), with a mode of 3. While close to half of the sample defined themselves as politically "middle of the road" (48.4 percent), the difference in the percentage of students identifying as "liberal" (23.3 percent) versus "conservative" (19.7 percent) was not substantial. Slightly more than 2 percent differentiated participants who identified as "very liberal" (4.5 percent) from those identifying as "very conservative" (2.2 percent). Nevertheless, the total number of students identifying as liberal (27.8 percent), outnumbered those identifying as conservative (21.9 percent).

*Intergroup Contact*

A majority of the sample (57.7 percent) reported having gay male friends, with 40.6% reporting "a few" (defined as 3 or less) and 17.1 percent reporting more than 3. Only 11.1 percent of the sample reported not knowing any gay men personally. Conversely, over a quarter of the sample (26.4 percent) reported not knowing any lesbian women personally, with 25.9 percent reporting having a few lesbian friends. Only slightly more than 10 percent of students indicated having more than three friends who were lesbian. Moreover, students were more likely to report not knowing any bisexual people personally (35.7 percent), with less than a quarter of the sample reporting "a few" bisexual friends and only 11.3 percent reporting more than three friends who identify as bisexual.

*Pearson Correlation Coefficients*

Correlation coefficients were computed for the predictor variables, and the outcome variable of homo-negativity as

measured by the MHS [See Table 1]. Our analyses showed significant correlations at the 0.01 and 0.05 levels between negative attitudes toward gay males and the variables of gender, religiosity, contact, and political orientation, as detailed below.

A moderately strong correlation of  $-.28$  was observed between gender and homo-negativity. Consistent with previous research, males were more likely than females to endorse negative attitudes toward gay men, scoring five points higher on the MHS. Gender was also found to have low but significant correlations with political orientation and contact with gay males. Male students were significantly more likely to indicate a conservative political orientation, with an inverse correlation of  $-.18$  between gender and political orientation. Female students were more likely to report contact with gay males, as indicated by a low but significant correlation of  $.14$  between gender and contact.

Participants' level of religiosity also had a moderately strong relationship to negative attitudes toward gay males, with a significant correlation of  $.28$  at the  $.01$  level, indicating that students who scored higher on the SCSORF (Plante & Boccaccini, 1997) also had higher scores on the MHS. Religiosity was significantly associated with political orientation, with a moderate correlation of  $.26$ , reflecting that students scoring higher on the variable of religiosity were also more politically conservative. Finally, a low but significant inverse correlation of  $-.14$  revealed that students who identified as more religious were less likely to have contact with gay males. In keeping with prior findings regarding the benefits of intergroup contact (Allport, 1954/1979), a significant inverse correlation of  $-.31$  was observed between contact with gay males and homo-negativity. Not surprisingly, the variable of contact was also significantly associated with political orientation. An inverse correlation of  $-.20$  revealed that students who indicated a more liberal political orientation were significantly more likely to have contact with gay males. Participants' political orientation showed the strongest relationship to the criterion variable. A high positive correlation of  $.48$  at the  $.01$  level reflects that students that identified as more politically conservative scored higher in homo-negativity.

In contrast to previous findings, significant correlations were not found between homo-negative attitudes and the variables of age ( $p = .46$ ); race/ethnicity ( $p = .22$ ); and sexual orientation ( $p = .28$ ).



Consistent with racial demographics of the Midwest United States, our participant sample identified predominantly as “white” (70 percent). Additionally, participants overwhelmingly identified as “heterosexual” (87 percent), and over 80 percent of the sample identified as being between the ages of 18-21 years old. Consequently, this lack of variance within the sample may have limited our ability to detect differences based on variables found to be salient in prior research.

### *Regression Analysis*

Analysis of a Q-Q plot indicated a normal distribution of the dependent variable. Scatterplot analyses revealed linear relationships between the criterion variable of homo-negative attitudes, and the predictor variables of gender, religiosity, contact with gay males, and political orientation. We conducted regression analyses, yielding the following results:

Bivariate analyses reflected similar beta and  $R^2$  scores for the predictor variables of gender ( $\beta = -.28$ ;  $R^2 = .07$ ) and religiosity ( $\beta = .28$ ;  $R^2 = .07$ ). Contact with gay males revealed slightly stronger predictive power ( $\beta = -.31$ ;  $R^2 = .09$ ). We found a significant relationship between homo-negative attitudes and respondents’ political orientation,  $F(1, 215) = 63.51$ ,  $p = .000$ . With a beta score of .48, and an  $R^2$  score of .22, political orientation appeared to be the strongest predictor of students’ attitudes.

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the influence of each predictor above and beyond the other variables. In the first step of the model, religiosity and gender were included as predictors. Beta scores for both were .32 and -.31 respectively, revealing similarly moderate correlations between predictors and the criterion variable. The combination of religiosity and gender resulted in an  $R^2$  score of .17. The addition of the predictor variable of contact in the second step of the regression model showed only slight changes in the beta scores of religiosity and gender, to .28 and -.28 respectively. The addition of the contact variable to the regression model increased the  $R^2$  from .17 to .22, showing only a slight increase in the predictive power of the model with the addition of contact with gay males.

As noted, political orientation appeared to be the strongest predictor among the variables examined. Adding this variable to the regression model resulted in a decrease in the beta scores



of religiosity, gender, and contact to .19, -.22, and -.17 respectively. Yielding a beta score of .35, the addition of political orientation to the regression model increased the  $R^2$  score from .22 to .33. Thus, the addition of students' political orientation to the regression model accounted for 33% of the variance in the criterion variable of attitudes toward gay males. The partial correlation coefficient of .38 for the variable of political orientation also reflects the strength of this predictor over and above the other predictor.

## Discussion

The present study refutes the perception that progress in LGBT rights will continue to advance, unimpeded by shifts in political and cultural climate. Although prior studies suggest greater acceptance for LGBT persons among younger people (Anderson & Fetner, 2008; Jones & Cox, 2015), our findings suggest that socio-cultural factors such as political orientation and religiosity continue to be the strongest predictors of attitudes toward sexual minorities.

A Gallup poll concluded that the association between strong religious beliefs and conservative politics continues to be an enduring pattern in U.S. society (Newport, 2014). Likewise, our study showed a significant relationship between religiosity and political orientation, with religious students being more politically conservative. Not surprisingly, students indicating moderate levels of religiosity on the SCSORF scale also showed moderate levels of homo-negativity on the MHS measure. While more students identified as either "liberal" or "very liberal" as opposed to "conservative" or "very conservative," the majority of the sample defined themselves as "middle of the road," possibly suggesting a reluctance to commit to a particular political orientation.

While age was not a significant predictor of attitudes, the most revealing finding is that undergraduate students showed moderate levels of homophobic attitudes, in contrast to previous research indicating higher levels of tolerance toward sexual minorities among millennials. This finding is striking in that we employed a more sensitive measure of anti-gay attitudes, developed to identify subtler indications of bias. Consequently, it can be argued that, as Jones and Cox (2015) suggested, research showing greater tolerance may actually be reflecting reluctance

among younger people to display anti-gay bias. Likewise, research has shown that outward indicators of a gay or lesbian identity, such as displays of affection between same sex-couples or gender non-conforming behavior, result in negative reactions and expressions of hostility (Doan et al., 2014).

Our results support Flores' (2014) finding that cultural factors are more significant than generational cohort in predicting attitudes toward sexual minorities. This has critical implications for social work educators in working with students from traditionally conservative cultures, particularly with regard to issues of sexuality. The intersection of gender, religion, and politics presents unique challenges for social work educators, who are called upon to help students understand oppression based on sexual orientation. LGBT prejudice may be unique among the various "isms" that educators address in social work curricula. In contrast to bias related to racism, sexism, or ageism, most students do not come from cultures where sanction and disapproval of a particular group is integrated into an organized, institutional system of beliefs. Thus, when addressing anti-gay bias, social work educators may be challenging students' moral teachings and understandings of the basic nature of human relations and society. In addition, it has been suggested that recent advances in LGBT rights have led to an organized backlash that educators may be confronted with in the classroom.

Lupa (2015) argued that the Obergefell Supreme Court decision legalizing same-sex marriage has galvanized a resistance movement based on religious beliefs opposed to same-sex relationships and behavior. Citing the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act that served as the basis for the *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* decision, Lupa predicted an ongoing battle between advocates of LGBT rights and advocates of "religious freedom." The appearance of so-called "religious liberty" bills that allow discrimination of LGBT persons on the basis of stated religious conviction or belief have been put forward in Georgia, Mississippi, and North Carolina, up to this writing. According to a CNN news story (Sanchez, 2016), most religious rights bills are being advanced in states with a high proportion of evangelical Christians, reflecting socio-cultural variables as a primary influence in attitudes toward LGBT issues.

While the limited content in social work research and education regarding the LGBT population focuses primarily on clinical issues (Pelts et al., 2014), this reductionist perspective limits sexual minority oppression to a narrow, micro-level focus. Such a restricted focus would seem to account for its absence from broader discussion related to social justice within social work literature and curricula. Consequently, the discipline fails to attend to the systemic causes that underlie many issues that social workers may see in practice with LGBT clients, such as higher rates of homelessness and suicide among LGBT youth, or depression and anxiety among LGBT adults (Bailey, 1999; Marshal et al., 2011; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2016). As noted, reports from social work education directors, students, professionals, and most importantly, clients, reveal that social workers are inadequately trained to serve sexual minority clients (Martin et al., 2009; Woronoff et al., 2006). The question remains as to whether social work will recognize LGBT concerns as a macro issue, and address the intersecting socio-cultural factors that underlie sexual minority oppression.

### Limitations

Obviously the use of a convenience sample limits the generalizability of our findings. Moreover, as noted, our sample lacked diversity. Given the homogeneity of the sample, future research would benefit from a greater diversity of participants and a comparison between geographic locations (e.g., the southern United States, and more urban, diverse areas, such as the East or West Coast states). Finally, while regression analysis showed political orientation to be the strongest predictor of attitudes, these results should be interpreted with caution, as the survey used a single item to measure this variable.

Caution is warranted in drawing conclusions regarding social work education from a sample of general education students. It should be noted however, that we are not concluding that participants' attitudes were related to the presence or absence of LGBT content in course curricula, as this was not part of our survey. Rather, we focused on socio-cultural factors of bias and identified political orientation as a significant predictor of anti-gay attitudes. This finding is consistent with evidence

of homophobic discourse as a political strategy and LGBT oppression as a social justice issue, a perspective worthy of greater attention in social work education.

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