Introduction

A great deal of research has been conducted into attitudes towards homosexuality, primarily in the United States. The most recent research shows that a majority of the American population still harbour negative attitudes towards homosexuals and homosexuality, although the size of the majority has diminished markedly over the past decade (American Enterprise Institute 2004). The Canadian, British and Australian populations tend to be more accepting of homosexuality than Americans, but their attitudes are generally predicted by the same demographic characteristics and values.

From the evidence, it is possible to conclude that those with negative attitudes towards homosexuality are more likely to be religious, politically conservative, and less well educated, and to have authoritarian personalities and traditional gender role beliefs. They are more likely to live outside metropolitan areas and in the South or Midwest of the United States. They are also more likely to believe that homosexuality is a choice and less likely to have had contact with gay men or lesbians.

Evidence regarding the influence of age, gender and race on attitudes towards homosexuality is less conclusive, but it can be stated with some degree of confidence that women are more tolerant than men and younger people more tolerant than older people. African Americans tend to be less accepting of homosexual behaviour than White Americans, but more supportive of gay and lesbian civil rights (Lewis 2003).

The variables with the most significant impact on attitudes towards homosexuality are generally age, education, religiosity, gender role beliefs and political ideology, as well as contact with homosexual persons. The nature of these variables suggests that, in addition to personal experience, personal beliefs and values may be more influential than demographic characteristics (see Agnew et al 1993). Indeed, research has shown that gender differences in attitudes may be attributed to differences in gender role beliefs (Kerns and Fine 1994; Kite and Whitley 1996) and racial differences may be accounted for by the influence of religion and education (Schulte and Battle 2004).

Limitations in the Research on Attitudes Towards Homosexuality

There are several potential limitations to or biases in the literature on attitudes towards homosexuality. The most obvious limitation is that the overwhelming majority of the research has been conducted using American samples. The extent to which American
findings can be generalised to apply to other Western or English-speaking nations is unclear.

Much of the research also relies on convenience samples of college students. As Overby and Barth neatly put it, ‘[t]his is problematic… because college students tend to be wealthier, younger, better educated, and less ethnically diverse than the national population, making it difficult to extrapolate to and draw inferences regarding the behaviour of the general public’ (2002: 437). Many of these demographic characteristics of student samples, especially age and education, tend to be associated with greater tolerance of homosexuality (Herek 2002b; Overby and Barth 2002). National probability samples are rare, but notable examples are the General Social Survey series and much of the research conducted by Herek and his associates. Some of the research is also limited by its use of very small samples, particularly of ethnic and racial minorities.

Another potential limitation is the diversity of measures used to assess attitudes towards homosexuality. These variations make it difficult to make comparisons both over time and across populations. Different researchers use different scales to measure attitudes. Two of the most popular are Herek’s ‘Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men’ (ATLG) and Hudson and Ricketts’ ‘Index of Attitudes Toward Homosexuals’ (IAH). Some instruments focus on beliefs and opinions about homosexual people and others on feelings and emotions. Some focus on attitudes towards homosexual behaviour and others on attitudes towards the civil rights of homosexual people. Some use only a single item, whereas others use multi-item scales. Multi-item scales can better detect nuances, ambiguities and inconsistencies in individuals’ attitudes.

Questions seeking similar information can elicit different responses depending on how they are worded. Striking examples can be found in the literature on attitudes towards gay and lesbian civil rights. Responses change depending upon whether the question is framed in abstract or specific terms, and in terms of support for pre-existing laws or the passing of new laws (see Lewis and Rogers 1999). The picture is further complicated by modifications to question wording, or the addition of new questions, in the same instruments over time (see, for example, American Enterprise Institute 2004; CJC 1990). A particular problem in the past has been the failure to differentiate between attitudes towards gay men and attitudes towards lesbians. Many instruments used to measure attitudes simply used the term ‘homosexual’ to describe the attitude object. This is problematic both because it assumes that attitudes towards lesbians and gay men are identical and because research has shown that respondents tend to assume that the term ‘homosexual’ refers to gay men (Herek and Capitanio 1999b; Kite and Whitley 1996; Simon 1998). More recent research has set about trying to rectify this problem.

Responses may also be affected by the negative bias in many of the questions used. The clearest example is the commonly used item which asks whether respondents think homosexual relations are ‘always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all’. On the other hand, as homophobia becomes less acceptable, survey data may also be limited by a potential tendency towards socially desirable or politically correct responses, especially among well-educated samples.

The research is limited by the lack of longitudinal studies examining how the attitudes of a particular group of people change over time. It is also difficult to measure how individuals’ attitudes may change in different contexts. Moreover, ‘surveys seldom indicate whether the opinion expressed reflects strong beliefs, heavily entrenched
attitudes, experience based judgements, “top of the head” response or just a spur of the moment answer’ (CLC 1990:14). Responses to a ‘pencil and paper’ test may not give an accurate indication of an individuals’ attitudes and behaviour in their daily life.

Finally, the literature emphasises prejudice rather than tolerance. It examines the characteristics of people who hold negative attitudes towards homosexuality and homosexual people rather than asking what qualities a tolerant person possesses (Kite and Whitely 1996; Kite 2002).

Changes in Attitudes Towards Homosexuality in the United States

National opinion polls in the United States, such as the General Social Survey (GSS), began charting attitudes towards homosexuality in the early 1970s. From 1973 until the early 1990s, attitudes remained fairly stable, with 70-75% of American adults believing that homosexuality was ‘always wrong’ (Lewis and Rogers 1999; Loftus 2001; Smith 1992; Yang 1997, 2001). Those who believed that homosexuality was ‘not wrong at all’ constituted 12-15% of the population. The remaining 10% fell into the intermediate categories of ‘almost always wrong’ and ‘wrong only sometimes’ (Smith 1992).

While attitudes remained fairly stable during the 1970s and 1980s, researchers have noted a small but significant shift towards more negative attitudes in the mid to late 1980s, when the percentage of American adults who believed homosexuality was ‘always wrong’ rose above 75% (American Enterprise Institute 2004; Loftus 2001; Pratte 1993; Smith 1992; Yang 1997). Most attribute this shift to the combined effects of the AIDS crisis, which captured public attention during this period and the rise of reactionary politics during the Reagan and Bush Snr administrations (Loftus 2001; Scott 1998). However, the impact of the AIDS epidemic on attitudes towards homosexuality has been questioned, and this will be discussed further below.

Since the early 1990s, however, there has been a dramatic liberalisation in attitudes towards homosexuality. Disapproval of homosexuality dropped by ten to fifteen percentage points through the 1990s. The percentage believing homosexuality is ‘always wrong’ dropped from 76% in 1991 to 66% in 1993 and then to around 60% in the late 1990s (American Enterprise Institute 2004). The most recent data show that in 2002 those considering homosexuality to be ‘always wrong’ constituted just over 50% of the population, while over 30% of the population now believe homosexuality is ‘not wrong at all’ (American Enterprise Institute 2004). While the majority of the American population still finds homosexuality unacceptable, it has become significantly more tolerant.

Interestingly, the most recent data suggest that the conservative politics of the George W. Bush administration have not (yet) reversed the trend towards greater acceptance of homosexuality (American Enterprise Institute 2004). However, the relatively stable level of acceptance since the mid-1990s suggests that the liberal trend may have reached a plateau, with the American population roughly evenly split on acceptance of homosexuality.
While it may give a rough indication of the climate of tolerance (or intolerance), measures of the acceptability of homosexuality are merely one dimension of heterosexual attitudes towards homosexuality. For example, researchers have developed measures to differentiate between attitudes towards the (moral) acceptability of homosexual behaviour and attitudes towards gay and lesbian civil rights, and have found the trends to be quite distinct (Bernstein and Kostelac 2002; Klamen et al 1999; Loftus 2001; Smith 1992; Yang 1997: 477). While the overwhelming majority of Americans considered homosexuality to be ‘always wrong’ throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the same period witnessed a steady decline in the population’s willingness to restrict the civil liberties of gay and lesbian people (Dejowski 1992; Loftus 2001; Smith 1992; Yang 1997, 2001). For example, while only 56% of people supported equal employment opportunities for homosexuals in 1977, support had increased to over 80% by the early 1990s, reaching 88% by 2003 (American Enterprise Institute 2004). A specific example is support for employment of homosexuals as elementary school teachers, which rose from only 27% support in 1977 to 42% in 1989 and 61% in 2003 (American Enterprise Institute 2004).

While most of the research is simply descriptive of trends in public opinion, several explanations have been proposed. It is generally accepted that cohort replacement (the displacement of intolerant generations by more tolerant generations) has had a greater impact on the liberalisation of attitudes towards homosexuality than has intra-cohort change (that is, generations becoming more liberal in their opinions as they age) (Crockett and Voas 2003; Davis 1992 cited in Lewis and Rogers 1999; Kelley 2001; Scott 1998; Smith 1992). However, Scott (1998) has demonstrated a pattern of attitude change within cohorts and respondents in several surveys have indicated that their own attitudes have changed over a given period of time, mostly as a result of contact with gay and lesbian persons (Altemeyer 2001; Howard-Hassmann 2001). A 2003 Gallup poll found that while 59% of those surveyed said their attitudes had not changed, 32% said that they had become more accepting (American Enterprise Institute 2004: 9).

Dejowski (1992) and Loftus (2001) have shown that some of the shifts in attitudes towards homosexuality can be attributed to two factors. The first is demographic change, particularly the growth of a more educated population. The second is cultural ideological change, in particular the decreasing willingness to restrict the civil liberties of all unpopular groups. In addition, Loftus suggests that the liberalisation in attitudes can be attributed to the political activism and visibility of queer communities; a possible backlash in the 1990s against the success of the radical religious right in the 1980s; the

---

1 I place the word ‘moral’ in parentheses because while GSS (and other similar) questions regarding whether ‘sexual relations between two adults of the same sex’ is ‘always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all’ clearly have moral overtones, people may disapprove of homosexuality for reasons other than their moral values. Lewis and Rogers (1999) argue that there has been no trend away from moral disapproval (as of 1996) despite the decrease in the percentage of people who consider homosexuality ‘always wrong’. They attribute this decrease to the diminishing importance of other reasons for disapproving of homosexuality such as gender nonconformity, the belief that homosexual people are sexually promiscuous and the belief that homosexuality is a mental illness (120). It may therefore be strictly inaccurate to characterise the distinction in attitudes as being between the ‘morality’ of homosexuality and acceptance of gay and lesbian civil rights, as Dejowski (1992), Klamen et al (1999) and Loftus (2001: 778) do.


3 Attitudes towards civil rights for gay men and lesbians will be discussed further below.

4 The impact of education on attitudes towards homosexuality is discussed below.
role of other liberal movements, such as the civil rights and women’s movements, in increasing awareness of discrimination against disempowered groups; and the expansion of media coverage of gay and lesbian issues (2001; see also Dejowski 1992; Scott 1998).

Other factors that may have influenced attitudinal trends include the declining influence of religion (Altemeyer 2001; Scott 1998) and shifts in attitudes towards sexual morality generally (Ficarrotto 1990; Scott 1998; Simon 1995; Smith 1992). With regard to the latter, however, it must be noted that while attitudes towards premarital sex have undergone a dramatic liberalisation, attitudes towards extramarital sex have remained constant and negative attitudes towards homosexuality have only declined slowly (Scott 1998; Smith 1992). Improved understanding of the AIDS risk may also have reduced hostility towards homosexual people (Altemeyer 2001; Scott 1998).

Attitudes Towards Homosexuality in Australia

Empirical research into attitudes towards homosexuality in Australia is virtually non-existent. Certainly no national surveys akin to the US General Social Surveys have been undertaken. Morgan polls conducted in 1974 and 1989 show a small increase in the proportion of the population supporting the legalisation of male and female homosexuality (from 54% to 58%) (Criminal Justice Commission, Queensland 1990 (CJC 1990)). By comparison, 43% of the US population supported legalisation in 1977 and 47% in 1989. In Canada in 1977, 70% of those surveyed supported decriminalising homosexuality (Fernald 1995).

In 1989 Western Australia was the most liberal state with 74% of the population supporting the legalisation of male homosexuality, while Tasmania was the least tolerant, with only 47% support. Men were less supportive than women and the youngest (14-24 years) and oldest (50+ years) age groups were least supportive. Respondents with higher levels of education and those who supported the Democrats were generally more supportive. Australians were significantly less supportive of civil rights for gay men and lesbians in 1989 than they were of legalisation of homosexual behaviour. For example, the Australian public was evenly split on the question of whether it should be illegal to discriminate against homosexual persons and only 36% believed homosexual couples who receive the same treatment as heterosexual couples (CJC 1990). Pain and Disney (1995) also found that 69% of students in their 1991 Australian university sample could be considered homophobic.

Since the 1980s, however, negative attitudes towards homosexuality have declined dramatically. In the mid-1980s, 64% of the population considered homosexuality to be ‘always wrong’. By 1999, this figure had fallen to 48%, with 28% considering homosexuality to be ‘not wrong at all’ (Kelley 2000). The AIDS scare appeared to have no effect on the liberalising trend (CJC 1990; Kelley 2000). Kelley comments that opinions on the acceptability of homosexuality ‘are among the most strongly polarised ever reported on an attitude item in this country: the vast majority of Australians are either unambiguously tolerant or unambiguously censorious, with very few holding ambivalent or nuanced views in the middle’ (2000: 15). In general, it appears that Australians are more accepting of homosexuality than Americans with less than half the Australian population considering homosexuality to be ‘always wrong’ (see also Spark Jones 2000).
Attitudes Towards Homosexuality in Britain and Canada

The first British Social Attitudes Survey in 1983 found that just over half of those surveyed considered homosexuality to be ‘always wrong’ while 18% considered it ‘not wrong at all’ (Crockett and Voas 2003). Intolerance increased through the 1980s, peaking at 64% in 1987, perhaps due to AIDS panic (Crockett and Voas 2003; Scott 1998) and the moral conservatism of the New Right (Scott 1998). Intolerance rapidly decreased through the 1990s such that by 2000 the number of those accepting homosexuality almost matched the number of those condemning it (Crockett and Voas 2003). Crockett and Voas attribute this increasing acceptance partly to a liberal period effect, but mostly to cohort replacement, whereby more tolerant generations displace those less tolerant (2003). As in Australia and the United States, attitudes towards homosexuality in Britain remain polarised. Levels of acceptance are roughly equal to those in Australia and higher than those in the United States (Widmer et al 1998), possibly due to the strength of the antigay lobby in the US and the greater influence of religion (Crockett and Voas 2003; Ellis 2002; Ellis et al 2002; Scott 1998).

Altemeyer (2001) conducted a longitudinal study at a Canadian university which showed that while opinions on the acceptability of homosexual behaviour changed very little between 1984 and 1998, respondents became much less willing to restrict the civil liberties of homosexual people. Measures of affective responses to gay and lesbian people showed that while the sight of two men kissing still bothered respondents as much in 1998 as it had in 1984, they were much more willing to associate with gay men and lesbians (Altemeyer 2001). Altemeyer suggests that these more positive attitudes are likely to be associated with a drop in religious attendance, awareness of research into the biological origins of homosexuality, greater understanding of AIDS and media support for homosexuality (2001: 70-71).

Attitudes Towards Homosexuality in Other Nations

International Social Surveys conducted in the 1990s show that there are stark national differences in attitudes towards homosexuality. Summaries compiled by Widmer et al (1998) and Kelley (2001) show that people in the Netherlands are by far the most accepting of homosexuality, with two-thirds of the population considering homosexuality ‘not wrong at all’. Dutch liberalism may be attributable to a progressive church, a strong and long-standing gay movement, a secular population, a strong public commitment to pluralism and frank discussion of sexuality in the media (Widmer et al 1998: 356). Substantial percentages of the populations of Spain (somewhat surprisingly), the Czech Republic, Canada and Norway are also accepting of homosexuality. Australia, Britain and New Zealand fall in the middle of the spectrum, with just over half the populations of these countries considering homosexuality to be ‘always wrong’. The United States is among the least accepting countries, sharing the honours with conservative religious nations such as Poland, Northern Ireland and Ireland; Eastern European nations such as Hungary, Bulgaria and Slovenia; and the Philippines.

The same demographic characteristics predict intolerance across the nations surveyed, with those who are young, female, well-educated and less religious generally the most tolerant of homosexuality. In terms of religion, Scott argues that attitudes vary
across countries according to the extent to which the organised church has retained its moral authority, rather than according to the national religion per se (1998). However, by this measure, relatively secular countries such as Britain and Australia should perhaps be more tolerant than they are (see Scott 1998: 839). Richer countries tend to be more tolerant than countries which are less economically developed (Kelley 2001).

Widmer et al have shown that attitudes towards homosexuality are not necessarily predicted by attitudes towards other types of sexual behaviour, such as premarital and extramarital sex (1998). A 'simple permissive-nonpermissive dichotomy' is insufficient to account for national differences in sexual values. Homosexuality is generally more accepted than extramarital sex, but attitudes towards homosexuality are more varied across nations and more polarised within nations. For example, Germany and Austria are very permissive of teen and premarital sex, but only moderately accepting of homosexual sex. For countries such as the Netherlands, the Czech Republic and Canada, the relationship is reversed (Widmer et al 1998: 354). These variations occur within nations as well. For example, women are generally more sexually conservative than men but are more accepting of homosexuality (Scott 1998; Smith 1992).

Kelley concludes that Australian attitudes towards homosexuality are ‘unexceptional’. Australia is ‘not as tolerant as some prosperous, irreligious nations (like the Netherlands), nor as intolerant [as] some poor, religious nations (like Chile and the Philippines). Rather it is middle of the road. Over time, Australian opinion, like that in other nations, is likely to shift slowly but steadily towards greater tolerance’ (2001: 20).

**Attitudes Towards Gay and Lesbian Civil Rights**

As mentioned above, heterosexuals tend to be significantly more supportive of gay and lesbian civil rights than they are accepting of homosexual behaviour (Bernstein and Kostelac 2002; Klamen et al 1999; Loftus 2001; Smith 1992; Yang 1997: 477). According to Loftus, this disjuncture is evident in majority group attitudes towards other minority groups and epitomises the definition of ‘tolerance’ in political sociology, whereby an individual or group grants rights to a particular group even though they dislike that group (2001: 779; Riggle and Ellis 1994: 137). The reason for the difference in attitudes may also lie in distinctions between cognitive responses (opinions and beliefs) and affective responses (emotions and feelings) towards homosexual persons. For example, heterosexuals may believe, in accordance with their political or social values, that gay men and lesbians are entitled to equal rights (for example, equal employment opportunities) and yet may still feel uncomfortable with homosexual persons and behaviour (Altemeyer 2001; Davies 2004; Hudson and Ricketts 1980; Kite and Whitley 1998; LaMar and Kite 1998; Loftus 2001; Logan 1996; Norris 1992; Van de Ven 1994). Affective attitudes appear to be less amenable to change than cognitive attitudes (Altemeyer 2001; Van de Ven 1995).

However, heterosexual support for gay civil rights varies considerably depending on two principal factors: first, the right at issue and the way in which it is formulated; and secondly, whether supporting the right entails merely endorsing existing laws or extending to homosexual persons a right which they have hitherto been denied. Survey items framed in terms of a general or abstract right to equality receive substantial majority if not near unanimous support, but when these rights are applied to specific
circumstances, support is much lower (Ellis 2002; Ellis et al 2002; Norris 1992). For example, while Ellis found that 96% of her British university sample agreed that a person’s sexual orientation should not block access to basic rights and freedoms, fewer than 55% agreed that books promoting homosexuality as a positive lifestyle should be freely available in school libraries (2002). In the United States in 1992, while 74% of those surveyed supported equal employment opportunities for gay and lesbian people in principle, only 37% favoured hiring gays and lesbians in all five occupations mentioned (salesperson, elementary school teacher, clergy, doctor, armed forces) (Lewis and Rogers 1999). Ellis concludes that because it is no longer considered acceptable to express explicitly discriminatory attitudes in the current liberal climate, respondents will usually affirm abstract egalitarian values (2002; see also Ellis et al 2002).5 However, respondents may perceive the practical application of these rights or values in specific instances (such as permitting books promoting homosexuality in public libraries) to be unfair ‘special treatment’ for gay men and lesbians (Ellis et al 2002: 134).

Certain rights for gay and lesbian people receive more support than others. Strand distinguishes between support for civil rights and support for civil liberties, arguing that heterosexuals are more supportive of civil liberties for gay men and lesbians, which are concerned with protecting individuals from undue government interference in their private behaviour, than they are of civil rights, which involve harnessing government power to limit the ability of private persons to ‘engage in social and occupational exclusion’ (1998: 115). Thus, he argues that support for gay and lesbian rights is related to people’s abstract political values as much as it is related to their attitudes towards homosexuality. Riggle and Ellis, on the other hand, found that an individual’s dislike for homosexuals reduced his/her support for the rights of homosexuals to a much greater degree than did dislike for other unpopular groups such as the KKK and neo-Nazis (1994). They attributed this difference to the strength of negative affect towards homosexuals and perhaps to the perception that homosexuals are not a ‘political’ group and therefore not deserving of political tolerance. Other research supports Strand’s theory, finding that very few American respondents support government regulation of private consensual homosexual behaviour. Again, this is attributed to a libertarian ‘live and let live’ ideology rather than active acceptance of homosexuality (Ellis 2002; Ellis et al 2002; Loftus 2001). For example, in 2003, 86% of American respondents opposed state laws regulating private consensual sexual relations between an unmarried heterosexual couple, and 82% also opposed regulation of private consensual homosexual relations (American Enterprise Institute 2004: 52).

Support for all gay civil rights and liberties has grown substantially, especially since the early to mid-1990s (see Lewis and Rogers 1999; Yang 1997). For example, Torres-Reyna and Shapiro show that national support for hiring gay men and lesbians in the US military has grown from 51% in 1977 to 72% in 2001 (2002).6 The percentage of those polled by Gallup who believe marriages between homosexuals should be legally valid has risen from 27% in 1996 to 42% in 2004 (American Enterprise Institute 2004: 22). As these figures suggest, support for equality rights also differs according to the area

5 Lewis and Rogers (1999) also note that use of the word ‘equal’ may elicit socially desirable responses.
6 With one deviation in 1993, when controversy raged over President Clinton’s proposal to allow homosexual persons to serve openly in the military. The public split 47/47 on the issue at this time (Torres-Reyna and Shapiro 2002)
of social policy involved. Heterosexuals are much more likely to favour ensuring basic equality rights for homosexuals (such as equal access to education, housing and employment) than they are to favour gay marriage and adoption by gay and lesbian couples. Heterosexuals also distinguish between the types of occupations in which they approve of the hiring of gay men and lesbians. They are generally comfortable with being served by gay salespeople (92% approval), but are less comfortable consulting gay doctors (82%) and even less approving of gay elementary school teachers (61%) and gay clergy (56%) (American Enterprise Institute 2004: 13-14; see also Lewis and Rogers 1999). Lewis and Rogers suggest that heterosexuals may be concerned by the prospect of hiring gay men and lesbians into occupations involving intimate contact (particularly with children) or moral guidance (for example, the clergy) (1999).

While over 80% of the Canadian community leaders interviewed by Howard-Hassmann indicated support for basic equality rights (such as equal access to education, housing and employment), only about half favoured equal rights to marriage and adoption (2001). However, another quarter approved of legal domestic partnerships with identical legal rights to marriage (see also Tygart 2000: 266). The drawing of this distinction underscores the potent symbolism of the institution of ‘marriage’ in Western cultural tradition and religious teaching. Howard-Hassmann considers support for marriage and adoption rights to be one indication of whether Canadians are ‘willing to go further than merely according equal rights to gays, to according them societal respect and acknowledgment that their relationships are as worthy a concern as heterosexual relationships’ (2001: 130-31).

In addition to differing according to the type of right in question, respondents are generally less willing to extend existing civil rights laws to protect lesbians and gay men than they are to endorse existing protections or general equality principles (Lewis and Rogers 1999; Schulte and Battle 2004). Ellis found that while just over half the respondents viewed themselves as personally responsible for creating positive social change, only a handful gave responses that indicated an active commitment to supporting lesbian and gay rights (2002). Most conceived of their responsibility in terms of an individual obligation not to engage in discriminatory behaviour and to oppose the actions of those who did. Norris found that many of the students and college staff he surveyed felt the need to conceal their support for lesbians and gay men for fear of appearing too pro-gay (1992). Lewis and Rogers found significantly lower levels of support for passing laws to protect the rights of homosexuals than for laws per se. Through the 1990s, they found approximately 60% support for equal job opportunities for gays and lesbians but 44-48% support (and as low as 26% in some surveys) for extending civil rights protections applicable to racial and religious minorities to cover homosexuals. They suggest that lesbians and gay men may not be considered a ‘legitimate’ minority group, and that people may fear that such laws would imply special treatment for homosexuals and/or recognition of gay marriage (1999: 123).

There also appears to be a particular concern with the promotion of homosexuality and gay rights issues. 37% of Howard-Hassmann’s sample, who in other respects appeared quite accepting of homosexuality, volunteered a concern with gay

---

7 Interestingly, the group of people who approved of gay marriage and the group that approved of adoption on equal terms with heterosexuals were not co-extensive, suggesting that different considerations may come into play with regard to each issue.
‘flaunting’ (2001). Similarly, 25% of those surveyed by Ellis did not support the right of lesbians and gays to ‘flaunt their sexuality in public at marches and demonstrations’ (2002). Moreover, Ellis found that 14% believed that ‘lesbians and gays should only be allowed to express their views as long as they don’t offend or upset the majority’, 9% disagreed that it was acceptable for lesbian and gay couples openly to express their affection for their partners in public without fear of harassment or violence, and almost a quarter agreed that society has a right to prevent lesbians and gays from publicly promoting homosexuality as equivalent to heterosexuality (2002). Howard-Hassmann suggests that part of this opposition may be attributable to a more general opposition to open discussion of sexuality and a commitment to ‘a certain social decorum’ (2002: 133, 136). Respondents also express concern that the gay rights movement exerts too much political influence or is too militant (Howard-Hassmann 2001; Norris 1992). One US survey in 2000 found that 42% of those interviewed believed ‘gay rights organisations have too much influence in society’, and a 2004 survey found that 45% of respondents thought that ‘efforts to protect gay rights have gone too far in giving gays special privileges’, a figure which represented an increase of 5% since 1996 (American Enterprise Institute 2004: 10). Howard-Hassmann notes, however, that fear of gay ‘flaunting’ and ‘militancy’ does not necessarily diminish respondents’ support for gay rights (2001: 133).

People in Canada and Britain appear to be significantly more supportive of gay civil rights and liberties than are Americans. For example, support for recognition of gay marriage in Canada rose from 24% in 1992 to 42% in 1996 to 48% in 2003 (Howard-Hassmann 2001; Opinion Canada 2003) and 63% of the British students surveyed by Ellis et al agreed that lesbian and gay couples should be legally permitted to marry (2002). This is unsurprising, at least in the Canadian context, where the political climate is much more favourable to lesbians and gay men than in the US. For example, as of February 2005, gay marriage is legal in seven of the ten Canadian provinces of Canada, and in one of the three territories (Religious Tolerance.org). It is difficult to assess the extent to which support (or lack of support) for gay rights overseas would be replicated in Australia, where the political climate is currently hostile to the interests of the gay and lesbian communities, but where these interests rarely feature on the national political agenda.

Influence of Demographic Variables on Attitudes Towards Homosexuality

The factors that predict positive or negative attitudes towards homosexuality and homosexuals are generally the same as those predicting support for gay and lesbian civil rights (with the possible exception of gender and race: see below).

Gender

Gender is by far the most researched demographic variable influencing attitudes towards homosexuality. Gender can affect attitudes in two respects: first, there may be differences in the attitudes of male and female heterosexuals towards homosexuality

8 On February 1 2005, the federal government of Canada introduced a bill to legalise same-sex marriage across the nation.
(differences related to the gender of the respondent); secondly, there may be differences in the attitudes of heterosexuals towards gay men and lesbians (differences related to the gender of the target).

Numerous studies examining gender of respondent differences have shown that men generally have more negative attitudes towards homosexuality than do women (Black et al. 1998; Finlay and Walther 2003; Hayes 1997; Herek 1988, 2000a, 2002a; Herek and Capitanio 1999b; Hinrichs and Rosenberg 2002; Kerns and Fine 1994; Kite and Whitley 1996, 1998; LaMar and Kite 1998; Whitley and Kite 1995). A smaller body of research, however, has failed to reveal any significant gender differences (Oliver and Hyde 1993, 1995; Wilson and Medora 1990; see Appendix B in Kite and Whitley 1996). Secondly, research into gender of target differences shows that attitudes towards gay men are generally more negative than attitudes towards lesbians (Berkman and Zinberg 1997; Herek 2002a; Kite and Whitley 1998). The latter difference is usually accounted for by the former, that is, the more negative attitudes of heterosexuals towards gay men are attributable to heterosexual men’s hostility towards gay men (Bernstein and Kostelac 2002; Herek 2000a, 2002a; Herek and Capitanio 1999b; Kerns and Fine 1994; LaMar and Kite 1998). However, some evidence suggests that Australian heterosexual men may be no more negative towards gay men than towards lesbians, although they are still less accepting than heterosexual women (CJC 1990; Spark Jones 2000; contra Van de Ven 1994). Heterosexual men and women display similar levels of homophobia towards lesbians (Kite and Whitley 1996, 1998).

It is unclear whether heterosexual women are more rejecting of lesbians than of gay men. Some research suggests that heterosexual women’s attitudes towards lesbians and gay men do not differ significantly (Baker and Fishbein 1998; CJC 1990; Herek 1988, 2000a; Spark Jones 2000; Whitley and Kite 1995). However, other research has shown that women are more negative towards lesbians than gay men (D’Augelli and Rose 1990; Gentry 1987; Kite and Whitley 1996; Logan 1996; Schope and Eliason 2004; Whitley 1987, 1990). Kite and Whitley’s meta-analysis of research into gender differences in attitudes towards homosexuality revealed that heterosexuals do tend to express more negative attitudes towards homosexuals of their own sex, but that the pattern is more pronounced for men than women (1996). LaMar and Kite found that it was only with respect to contact that women were more negative towards lesbians than gay men (1998).

It is also unclear whether there are any significant gender differences with respect to attitudes towards civil rights for homosexuals. There appear to be no gender differences on most gay rights issues (Davies 2004; Ellison and Musick 1993; Hayes 1997; Herek 2002a; Kite and Whitley 1996, 1998; Lewis and Rogers 1999; Oliver and Hyde 1993), perhaps because questions about gay rights tap beliefs about the civil rights and liberties of minority groups rather than affective responses to gay men and lesbians (Davies 2004). However, heterosexual men may be less supportive of rights related to gender roles such as gay parenting and gay people serving in the armed forces (Kite and Whitley 1996, 1998; see also Herek 2002a; LaMar and Kite 1998). Other research suggests that men are more opposed to gay rights in general than are women, but that the gender difference is less pronounced than for attitudes towards homosexual persons and behaviour (Whitley and Kite 1995). Strand found that women were more supportive of civil rights for gay men and lesbians, but that there was no difference in support for civil
liberties (1998). There is some evidence to suggest that attitudes towards gay rights differ depending on sex of target. Heterosexual men appear to be less accepting of civil rights for gay men than for lesbians and more willing to accept discrimination against gay men, whereas heterosexual women’s support does not differ according to sex of target (LaMar and Kite 1998; Harris and Vanderhoof 1995, cited in Kite and Whitley 1998).

Kite and Whitley attribute the inconsistencies in these results primarily to differences in the samples and measures used. The most pronounced gender differences appear in student samples (as opposed to large national samples) and studies measuring affective responses to gay and lesbian people (rather than support for gay rights) (1996: see also Davies 2004; Kite and Whitley 1998; Oliver and Hyde 1995, Spark Jones 2000; Whitley and Kite 1995). Kite and Whitley also found that multi-item scales produce larger sex differences than single-item scales (perhaps by allowing for a more nuanced assessment of attitudes) (1996). The terminology used to describe the attitude object (gay man, lesbian or homosexual) may also affect results (Kite and Whitley 1996; Whitley and Kite 1995). People tend to assume that the term ‘homosexual’ refers to gay men (Herek and Capitanio 1999b; Kite and Whitley 1996; Simon 1998), and it has been shown above that heterosexual men generally hold more negative attitudes towards gay men than towards lesbians.

Much energy has been spent theorising these apparent gender differences in attitudes towards homosexuality. Gender differences cannot be reduced to other demographic differences since women are more likely to have a lower income, to be more religious and more sexually conservative than men, all of which are typically associated with negative attitudes towards homosexuality (Herek 2002a; Kite and Whitley 1998, Scott 1998; Smith 1992). The most popular theory holds that gender differences in attitudes derive not from biological sex, but from gender role attitudes, which comprise stereotypes about men and women, beliefs about appropriate social roles for men and women, and perceptions of those who violate gender norms (Deaux and Kite 1987; Kite and Whitley 1996). Gender differences in attitudes towards homosexuality are substantially diminished if not eliminated when differences in gender role beliefs are controlled (Kerns and Fine 1994; Kite and Whitley 1996; Louderback and Whitley 1997).

Male and female heterosexuals with non-traditional gender role attitudes (for example, those who support the equal division of labour in the home) tend to exhibit more positive attitudes towards homosexuality (Basow and Johnson 2000; Black et al 1998; Deaux and Kite 1987; Hinrichs and Rosenberg 2002; Kerns and Fine 1994; Whitley 1987, 2001; Whitley and Kite 1995). Men tend to hold more traditional attitudes because they experience stronger gender socialisation and because traditional gender roles preserve their greater privilege and power (Kerns and Fine 1994), but homophobia in women may also vary according to their gender role attitudes (Basow and Johnson 2000). In fact, it has been tentatively suggested that when men and women hold similar gender role beliefs, women may hold more negative attitudes towards

---

9 Does this perhaps suggest that age and levels of education mediate the relationship between gender and attitude towards homosexuality?
10 Note that the direction of causality is not entirely clear. While it is likely that men and women who develop non-traditional gender role attitudes become more accepting of homosexuality, it is possible that those with positive attitudes towards lesbians and gay men develop non-traditional gender role beliefs as a result: Kerns and Fine 1994.
homosexuality (Whitley 2001). However, it may be that attitudes towards homosexuality are more strongly related to beliefs about masculinity and femininity than to beliefs about equality of the sexes (Polimeni et al 2000; Weinberger and Millham 1979; Whitley 2001).

Gay men and lesbians are disliked partly because they are perceived to deviate from gender norms (Basow and Johnson 2000; Corley and Pollack 1996; Kite and Whitley 1996). These gender norms are more rigid and restrictive for men than for women, and homosexual men are perceived to deviate more from traditional gender roles than are lesbians (Basow 1992; Basow and Johnson 2000; Herek 2000a; Kerns and Fine 1994; Kite and Deaux 1987; Kite and Whitley 1996; Logan 1996; Polimeni et al 2000; Whitley and Kite 1995). For example, a man with stereotypically feminine characteristics is more likely to be assumed to be homosexual than is a woman with stereotypically masculine traits (Deaux and Lewis 1984; Kite and Deaux 1987; Kite and Whitley 1996; McCreary 1994; Whitley and Kite 1995). 11 Femininity is not only less rigid than masculinity, but it is also less tied to heterosexuality. Whereas female heterosexuality is assumed, male heterosexuality must be proved (Basow 1992; Basow and Johnson 2000; Herek 2000a, 2002a). Moreover, violation of gender roles by men is viewed more seriously than gender role violation by women, in part because it is perceived to threaten their social privilege and power (Herek 2000a, 2002a; Kerns and Fine 1994; Kite and Whitley 1996, 1998). Men thus feel more pressure to conform to gender roles and therefore to express disapproval of homosexuality (Herek 2000a; Kite and Whitley 1996; Whitley and Kite 1995). It also follows from the more serious nature of male gender role deviation that gay men are viewed more negatively than lesbians, especially by heterosexual men (Gentry 1987; Herek 1988; Kite and Whitley 1996; Whitley 1987; Whitley and Kite 1995).

Most of the research focuses on the correlation between attitudes towards homosexuality and gender role attitudes, and it is unclear to what extent antigay attitudes are related to gender role self-concept or self-discrepancy, that is, the extent to which an individual believes he or she conforms to gender stereotypes. Kite and Whitley found that people who reported a dissimilarity between themselves and the relevant feminine or

11 This proposition comes from Kite and Whitley (1996), LaMar and Kite (1998) and Whitley and Kite (1995). They cite Deaux and Lewis (1984). It is also supported by a study by McCreary (1994). He argues that data in Kite and Deaux (1987) also implicitly support this finding. However, neither Deaux and Lewis (1984) nor Kite and Deaux (1987) were available for this literature review. Apparently what they say is that ‘when men are described as possessing female traits, occupying female roles, or having female physical characteristics, the estimated probability that they are also homosexual sharply increases. Similarly, but to a lesser extent, probabilistic judgments of homosexuality increase when women are described as occupying male roles or having male physical characteristics’ (Kite and Whitley 1996: 337-338). McCreary (1994) also found this to be true for women described as having male traits. The following texts may assist in clarifying and elaborating this point: Deaux and Lewis (1984); Kite and Deaux (1987); Storms, Stivers, Lambers and Hill (1981) ‘Sexual Scripts for Women’ 7 Sex Roles 699-707; Klassen et al (1989) Sex and Morality in the US: An Empirical Enquiry under the Auspices of the Kinsey Institute.
masculine stereotype were more tolerant of homosexuality (1996). Other studies have found no relationship between antigay attitudes and ‘normal levels of psychological investment in traditional gender roles’ (Kite and Whitley 1998; Whitley 2001). Still others have found that extreme investment in a masculine identity or lack of identification with positive feminine traits are correlated with negative attitudes towards homosexuality (Kilianski 2003; Polimeni et al 2000; Whitley 2001), or have found that gender role self-concept correlates with antigay attitudes for one gender but not the other (Basow and Johnson 2000; Simon 1995; Theodore and Basow 2000; Wilkinson 2004).

Herek argues that whereas heterosexual men organise their attitudes towards homosexuals in terms of gender and sexual identity, which results in different ways of thinking about lesbians and gay men, heterosexual women seem to organise their attitudes more in terms of a minority group paradigm, according to which they perceive gay men and lesbians as members of a single quasi-ethnic group (2000a, 2002a). Women with negative attitudes may reject this group for religious, moral or other reasons, while women with positive attitudes may consider the group to be an oppressed minority with valid political demands, but both tolerant and intolerant women are unlikely to differentiate between gay men and lesbians (Herek 2000a: 264). The evidence suggesting that women sometimes hold more negative attitudes towards lesbians, however, suggests that the sexuality-gender paradigm also shapes women’s attitudes towards homosexuality, albeit to a lesser extent than it determines men’s attitudes (Herek 2000a; Logan 1996).

Taking a functional approach to explaining men’s and women’s attitudes, Herek also suggests that heterosexuals’ attitudes towards homosexuals may serve a defensive function (1986, 1988, 2002a). Because homosexuality is stigmatised, many heterosexuals wish to avoid being thought to be homosexual, and therefore express hostility towards homosexuals as a means of demonstrating that they themselves are heterosexual (Herek 2002a). The need to express disapproval of homosexuality may be particularly strong among heterosexuals who are insecure about their personal adequacy in conforming to gender norms or who have experienced homosexual desires or engaged in homosexual activity, which they reject as inconsistent with their self-concept (Herek 1986, 2002a). If homophobia functions to demonstrate that a heterosexual person is not homosexual, then it follows that this person is likely to hold more negative attitudes towards homosexuals of his/her own sex, who pose the most direct threat to his/her heterosexual identity (Herek 2000a; Kite and Whitley 1998; Logan 1996; Polimeni et al 2000). However, heterosexual women are likely to feel less threatened by lesbianism, partly because female gender and sexuality norms are more flexible and partly because they may have more experience in repelling unwanted sexual advances (Kite and Whitley 1996, 1998; LaMar and Kite 1998). In accordance with the minority group paradigm, heterosexual women’s attitudes may also function to affirm a personal identity based on values (such as sexual morality or minority rights) rather than femininity and heterosexuality (Herek 2002a).

The gap between heterosexual men’s attitudes towards gay men and lesbians might also be explained by the ‘sexualization of lesbianism’ (Kite and Whitley 1996, 1998). Several studies have shown that lesbianism has acquired positive sexual connotations for heterosexual men that are not associated with male homosexuality (for example, Nyberg and Alston 1977; Turnbull and Brown 1977). Most recently,
Louderback and Whitley (1997) found that when the erotic value of lesbianism was controlled, men’s attitudes towards lesbians were almost identical to their attitudes towards gay men, which suggested that the erotic value attributed to lesbianism ameliorates men’s negative attitudes towards lesbians.

However, Bernstein and Kostelac discovered that, within the police force at least, the intersection between gender and sexuality could produce different results (2002). They found that although police generally believed that gay men made more competent police officers than do lesbians, they still held more negative attitudes towards gay men than lesbians. Citing Kite and Whitley (1998), they suggest that this may be because heterosexual men fear unwanted sexual advances from gay men. Heterosexual male police officers ‘may be less hostile towards lesbians in general, but their doubts about women’s ability to perform effectively as police officers may account for their more negative view about lesbians in policing compared to gay men in policing’ (2002: 316-317).

Finally, women may have more positive attitudes towards homosexuals than men because they tend to have had more contact with gay men and lesbians (Herek and Glunt 1993), and contact has been shown to be correlated with more positive attitudes (Herek and Capitanio 1996; Herek and Glunt 1993; see also below). Herek and Glunt argue that gender differences in attitudes towards homosexuality may therefore be self-reinforcing: ‘[c]ultural ideologies of gender may lead heterosexual men more than heterosexual women to manifest hostility toward gay men. Their heightened hostility, in turn, reduces the likelihood that lesbians or gay men will come out to them. Consequently, their antigay attitudes are not likely to be moderated by the experience of interpersonal contact with openly gay people’ (1993: 243). Lottes and Kuriloff suggest that women may be tolerant of homosexuality because they have been socialised to be caring, nurturing and supportive, and to develop a concern for social issues (1994).

The gap between male and female heterosexual attitudes towards homosexuality is apparent across nations (Kelley 2001), and appears to be increasing (Altemeyer 2001; Crockett and Voas 2003; Kite and Whitley 1996; Scott 1998). Scott found that women’s attitudes tend to be more changeable over time (1998). This again suggests that women’s attitudes are less strongly tied to their self-identities and that their attitudes are more likely to respond to external events such as the AIDS crisis and to more general socio-political change (Altemeyer 2001; Loftus 2001; Scott 1998). The gender gap appears to be widest among young people and college students (Crockett and Voas 2003; Kite and Whitley 1996; Oliver and Hyde 1995; Whitley and Kite 1995).

Australian researchers would probably find similar gender differences in attitudes towards homosexuality (to the extent that any firm conclusions can actually be drawn from the data). One small Australian study found no overall sex differences in homophobia, but did find that male university students were more negative towards gay men and female students were more negative towards lesbians (Polimeni et al 2000). However, it did make two findings inconsistent with the tenor of US research: first, the intensity of men’s antigay sentiment was no greater than that of women’s antilebian sentiment, and secondly, women with both high and low levels of homophobia held non-traditional gender role beliefs. This confirms the theory that the need to maintain traditional gender roles is an inadequate explanation for female homophobia. In general, it seems that female homophobia is less well explained than male homophobia.
Race and Ethnicity

Research investigating racial differences in attitudes towards homosexuality has produced inconsistent results. Some research shows that white Americans have more negative attitudes towards homosexuality than do black Americans (Finlay and Walther 2003; Klassen et al. 1989; Levitt and Klassen 1974). Other research has uncovered no racial differences in levels of homophobia (Glenn and Weaver 1979; Herek and Capitanio 1995; Irwin and Thompson 1977; Millham et al. 1976). Still other research shows that black people hold more negative attitudes than white people (Alston 1974; Herek and Glunt 1993; Hudson and Ricketts 1980; Nyberg and Alston 1976-77; Schneider and Lewis 1984; Tiemeyer 1993; Waldner et al. 1999). Herek suggests that more negative attitudes among black populations may be accounted for mainly by the relatively favourable attitudes of white women (2000b).

It has been suggested that black Americans may be less accepting of homosexuality than white Americans but equally if not more supportive of civil rights for gay men and lesbians (Bonilla and Porter 1990; Glenn and Weaver 1979; Haeberle 1999; Lewis 2003; Loftus 2001). However, Dejowski made the unusual finding that black people were more willing to restrict the civil liberties than comparable white people (1992). Recent national surveys in the United States show that nearly three-quarters of the black population still believe that homosexuality is ‘always wrong’ (American Enterprise Institute 2004: 3; Lewis 2003: 75), a figure which is approximately 15 percentage points higher than the national average, whereas roughly the same percentage of blacks and whites agree that homosexual marriage should be recognised by law (American Enterprise Institute 2004: 23). It appears that while a greater proportion of the black population holds negative attitudes towards homosexuality, their attitudes are less negative than the attitudes of (the smaller proportion of) intolerant white Americans (Lewis 2003: 75).

Greater disapproval of homosexuality among blacks may be explained by the influence of religion and education. Black Americans are considerably more religious than white Americans and the highly religious are more likely to hold negative opinions of homosexuality (see below). Blacks are more likely to belong to fundamentalist Protestant denominations, to attend church more frequently, to believe in a punitive God, to be guided by religion in their everyday lives, and simply to accept rather than question their religion (Bonilla and Porter 1990; Lewis 2003; Schulte and Battle 2004). Indeed, Schulte and Battle found that racial differences in attitudes towards lesbians among college students disappeared when religion was controlled, that is, racial differences in attitudes were accounted for by religious values and behaviour (2004). Secondly, education is thought to lead to greater acceptance of diversity and more liberal sexual and political attitudes, as well as providing opportunities to interact with gay men and lesbians (Ellison and Musick 1993; Herek and Capitanio 1996; Lewis 2003; see also below). Lower levels of education among the black population are therefore also likely to be correlated with higher levels of homophobia: black Americans are only two-thirds as
likely as whites to have graduated from college (Lewis 2003).\footnote{Lewis (2003) suggests that the younger average age of the black population and the greater proportion of black female respondents may partially offset the impact of religion and education on attitudes towards homosexuality.} Herek and Capitanio also found that black Americans were more likely to hold positive attitudes towards gay people to the extent that they did not consider homosexuality to be an entirely ‘white’ phenomenon, that is, to the extent that they associated homosexuality with black as well as white people (which would provide them with some commonality with gay people) (1995).

On the other hand, it has been suggested that black Americans may be more supportive of gay civil rights as a result of their personal experiences of discrimination and the lessons of the civil rights movement (Bernstein and Kostelac 2002; Bonilla and Porter 1990; Haeberle 1999; Lewis 2003). Indeed these experiences seem to exert so powerful an influence on black attitudes to gay rights that variables which predict white attitudes, such as gender, education and age, have less impact on black attitudes (Finlay and Walther 2003; Herek 2000b; Herek and Capitanio 1995; Lewis 2003).

Research exploring gender differences in attitudes among the black population has also generated inconsistent results. Herek and Capitanio found that white males, black males and black females did not differ in their attitudes towards gay men and lesbians (1995). However, other research has shown that black women are more accepting of homosexuality than are black men (Battle and Lemelle 2002; Waldner et al 1999). Lewis found that gender differences were insignificant on most items but that black men were significantly more likely to consider homosexuality to be ‘always wrong’ and yet also more likely to favour gay rights laws (2003). Researchers have suggested that the need or desire to conform to black masculinity norms, which include compulsory heterosexuality, may be one factor contributing to more homophobic attitudes among black men (Battle and Lemelle 2002; Lemelle and Battle 2004; Lewis 2003). Disempowered by racial discrimination and unemployment, black men may seek to reassert their (heterosexual) masculinity by emphasising traditional gender roles. Black women, on the other hand, may have already subverted traditional gender roles through their greater involvement in the workforce and consequently greater financial independence (relative to white women) such that violation of gender norms is not perceived as threatening (Battle and Lemelle 2002; Lemelle and Battle 2004; but compare Bonilla and Porter 1990). Whites may also have more positive attitudes because the gay movement is more visible in white culture than in ethnic minority cultures (Armesto and Weisman 2001).

Very little research has been conducted into the attitudes of ethnic groups other than black and white Americans. In fact, the General Social Survey lumps all other ethnic groups (when it includes them) into a single ‘other’ category. It appears, however, that Hispanic Americans are generally no more homophobic than whites (Alcalay et al 1989-90; Bonilla and Porter 1990; Span and Vidal 2003) and may be more tolerant than blacks (Bonilla and Porter 1990). Span and Vidal (2003) considered this somewhat surprising, given that Hispanic Americans are subject to similar social pressures to black Americans. Bonilla and Porter (1990) suggest that the less dogmatic approach of the Latin American Catholic church and the more fluid construction of homosexuality in Hispanic cultures may be responsible for these more tolerant attitudes. However, Hispanic Americans were
found to be less supportive of gay civil liberties than both white and black Americans, which Bonilla and Porter attributed to their lower levels of education and thus ‘acculturation’ into American democratic values (1990). There were no differences in the attitudes of different Hispanic groups (for example, Mexicans versus Puerto Ricans) (Bonilla and Porter 1990). Even less research has been dedicated to the attitudes of those with Asian backgrounds, and it is limited by its use of the generic term ‘Asian’. There is some suggestion that Asian students are more homophobic than white students (Lippincott et al 2000; Span and Vidal 2003), but that homophobia decreases with length of residency or ‘acculturation’ (Meston et al 1998). In Britain, Davies (2004) found that ‘Asians’ (Indians and Pakistanis) were considerably more homophobic than whites but that there was no difference on support for gay civil rights. Given the very different history and ethnic composition of Australian society, the North American research is unlikely to have great significance for Australian researchers. In any case, there appears to be little consensus.

Religion

There are three ways in which ‘religion’ can influence heterosexuals’ attitudes towards homosexuality. It is unclear which is the most influential. First, whether a person is religiously affiliated or is not religious has been shown to affect their attitude towards homosexuality. Religious persons are generally more prejudiced against homosexuals than non-religious persons (Crockett and Voas 2003; Fisher et al 1994; Hayes 1995; Schulte and Battle 2004; Scott 1998). For example, Crockett and Voas found that 44% of Christians in Britain believed that homosexuality was ‘always wrong’ in 1999/2000, compared with 28% of non-religious people (2003). There is some evidence, however, that the attitudes of non-practising Christians may now be similar to the attitudes of non-religious people (Crockett and Voas 2003). Tolerance is increasing at the same rate in religious and non-religious populations (Crockett and Voas 2003).

Secondly, the type of religion or religious denomination to which an affiliated person belongs influences the extent to which they accept homosexuality. People belonging to fundamentalist or evangelical Protestant denominations, including Baptists, tend to hold the most negative attitudes towards homosexuality, followed by Catholics, Jews and those belonging to more liberal Protestant denominations, such as Presbyterians, Methodists and Episcopalians (Crockett and Voas 2003 (partial support); Finlay and Walther 2003; Fisher et al 1994; Glenn and Weaver 1979; Hinrichs and Rosenberg 2002; Kunkel and Temple 1992). Fundamentalist Christians may be more intolerant because they are more likely to subscribe to Biblical literalism and to have authoritarian personalities, which lead them to conform to the values of (religious) authorities (Ellison and Musick 1993; see also below).13 Crockett and Voas suggest that the gap between the views of liberal and evangelical Christians appears to be widening, as does the gap between the views of younger and older Christians (2003). Young Anglicans and Presbyterians are no more likely to be homophobic than nonreligious young people, but their negative attitudes increase more sharply with age, such that older Christians are significantly more homophobic than nonreligious people of the same age.

---

13 Fisher et al (1994) note that it is possible that religions do not instil these conservative values, but rather that conservative people are attracted to religions that reflect those values.
Thirdly, the person’s ‘religiosity’, that is, the frequency with which they attend church and/or the extent to which religion is integral to their lives, has a significant impact upon their attitude towards homosexuality. The research generally suggests that those who attend church more regularly are more prejudiced against gays and lesbians (Finlay and Walther 2003; Glenn and Weaver 1979; Herek and Glunt 1993; Hinrichs and Rosenberg 2002; Kelley 2001; Kunkel and Temple 1992; Scott 1998). However, Fisher et al found that frequency of worship was significantly related to antigay attitudes only among those belonging to antigay denominations, and not to the attitudes of those belonging to ‘gay tolerant’ religions (1994). Those attending church regularly might be more intolerant because they are more frequently exposed to antigay messages, and also because they tend (once again) to have more authoritarian personalities (Altemeyer 1988; Fisher et al 1994). People with an ‘intrinsic’ religious orientation, that is, those who consider their faith to be an end in itself, and who try to live by it, are more prejudiced towards gays and lesbians than those with an ‘extrinsic’ orientation, who use religion as a means to an end, for example, to gain social standing (Fisher et al 1994; Griffiths et al 2001). Griffiths et al found that the theory that those with an intrinsic orientation might ‘hate the sin, but love the sinner’ was not supported. They found that intrinsics were as rejecting of homosexual people as they were of homosexual behaviour (2001; contra Howard-Hassmann 2001).

Religion is likely to have considerably less influence on attitudes towards homosexuality in Australia. Australia is a more secular society than the United States (Griffiths et al 2001; Spark Jones 2000), and the religiously active population is declining. The percentage of the population claiming no religion climbed from 12.9% in 1991 to 16.6% in 1996, dropping slightly to 15.5% in 2001. In 2001, people in the 18-24 years age group were most likely to state that they had no religion (20%). The percentage of the population claiming a Christian affiliation is declining slowly, while those belonging to religions other than Christianity have grown in number (Australian Bureau of Statistics). No research has been conducted into the impact that affiliation with non Judeo-Christian religions may have on attitudes towards homosexuality (Finlay and Walther 2003).

Marital Status

It is often thought that those who have never married or who are divorced, and who therefore deviate from social convention themselves, should be more accepting of homosexuality (Lewis and Rogers 1999; Smith 1992). However, findings have been mixed (Lewis and Rogers 1999). Smith (1992) and Herek and Capitanio (1995) have found that those who had never married or who were divorced were more tolerant; Kunkel and Temple found that those who were married were more tolerant (1992); and Royse and Birge found no difference (1987). Bernstein and Kostelac found that police officers who were single, divorced or cohabiting held more favourable attitudes towards gay people, and yet were more likely to engage in discriminatory behaviour towards them than were married people (2002).

Place of Residence
In terms of regional differences, those who hail from the southern states of the US tend to be most intolerant of homosexuality, followed by residents of the mid-western states. Those from the Pacific and north-eastern states are most tolerant (American Enterprise Institute 2004; Dejowski 1992; Herek 2002b; Herek and Capitanio 1996). Ellison and Musick found that southern origins or residence continued to account for differences in attitudes even when religion, level of education and rurality were controlled (1993). They attributed this to the cultural homogeneity of the South where residents have less personal or political contact with minority groups, the tendency to localism, the tendency to distrust the unfamiliar, the perception of leftwing groups (including gays and lesbians) as threats to the status quo or social institutions, and the pervasive influence of messages of religious intolerance even upon non-religious persons. In Australia in 1989, Western Australia was significantly more accepting of homosexuality than the other states, while Tasmania was the least accepting state (CJC 1990).

Those who live in metropolitan and suburban areas appear to have more positive attitudes towards homosexuality and to be more likely to support gay rights than those who live in rural areas (Haeberle 1999; Herek and Capitanio 1996; Levitt and Klassen 1974; Lewis and Rogers 1999).

**Political Ideology**

As would be expected, individuals who subscribe to a liberal political ideology are more tolerant of homosexuality than are those who subscribe to a conservative political ideology (American Enterprise Institute 2004; Haeberle 1999; Herek and Capitanio 1996; Herek and Glunt 1993; Seltzer 1993; Yang 2001). This translates roughly to a Democrat versus Republican party preference (American Enterprise Institute 2004; Haeberle 1999; Herek and Capitanio 1996), although the attitudes of each group are not always internally consistent (Haeberle 1999).

**Age**

Most of the research conducted with adult samples suggests that older people are more prejudiced towards gay men and lesbians than are younger people (Haeberle 1999; Herek and Glunt 1993; Kelley 2001; Lewis 2003). This is attributed primarily to a liberal cohort effect, that is, each generation being more tolerant than the last, rather than to the ‘conservatising effect of age’ (Crockett and Voas 2003; Kelley 2001; Lewis 2003; Lewis and Rogers 1999).

However, age does not always have a linear effect on attitudes (Lewis and Rogers 1999). Studies of the attitudes of high school and college students suggest that young people, particularly males, may in fact become more homophobic during their adolescence, but become more tolerant when they reach adulthood (Baker and Fishbein 1998; Kurdek 1988; Van de Ven 1994). The increase in prejudice during adolescence may perhaps be caused by defensive reactions in young men as they grapple with their sexuality and masculinity in the context both of dating and intimate relationships and of a male homosocial environment which demands conformity to restrictive masculinity.
norms, which become somewhat looser as they enter tertiary education (Baker and Fishbein 1998; Schellenberg et al 1999).

Lewis also noted non-linear fluctuations in the age-attitude relationship among the black population (2003), while Strand observed different age effects for support of civil rights as compared with support for civil liberties, with older people more supportive of the former and younger people more supportive of the latter (1998).

**Education**

In general, ‘education’ increases acceptance of homosexuality, that is, attitudes improve as a function of time spent in education (Eliason 1995; Herek and Capitanio 1996; Kelley 2001; Kurdek 1988; Lottes and Kuriloff 1994; Seltzer 1992; Spark Jones 2000; contra Van de Ven 1994). For example, in 2000, 65% of General Social Survey Respondents with a high school education believed homosexual relations were always wrong, compared with 47% of college graduates (American Enterprise Institute 2004). In a longitudinal study conducted by Lottes and Kuriloff between 1987 and 1991, participants scored 25% higher on measures of homosexuality tolerance (as well as other liberalism measures) in their senior college year than they had as first-year students (1994). Senior students reported majority approval of homosexuality, which contrasted sharply with national findings (approximately 75% disapproval in both years: American Enterprise Institute 2004). ¹⁴ It is generally accepted that increased tolerance is the result of what is learnt both inside and outside the classroom. For example, education fosters liberal attitudes, gives individuals the ability to think critically, the opportunity to interact with a diverse range of people and a greater awareness of the negative effects of prejudice (Lewis 2003; Lewis and Rogers 1999; Lottes and Kuriloff 1994; Schellenberg et al 1999).

Some research has found that students studying particular subjects or taking particular courses are more tolerant of homosexuality. Humanities, social sciences and psychology students are generally less homophobic than students studying subjects such as business and science (Matchinsky and Iverson 1996; Parker and Bhugra 2000; Schellenberg et al 1999), although some studies have found no difference (Cotten-Huston and Waite 2000; Ellis et al 2002). It is unclear whether humanities and social sciences students are less prejudiced as a result of course content, or because these courses tend to be chosen by less homophobic people or people predisposed to attitude change, or because these courses are dominated by women (Corley and Pollack 1996; Schellenberg et al 1999).

**Impact of Other Variables on Attitudes Towards Homosexuality**

**Educational Interventions**

¹⁴ Note that the questions in Lottes and Kuriloff’s (1994) study were worded differently from the questions used in the GSS. Lottes and Kuriloff also conducted their study at the height of the AIDS crisis: the improvement in attitudes might have been attributable to changes in socio-political context rather than the impact of education (Schellenberg et al 1999:141)
Educational interventions aimed at changing students’ attitudes towards homosexuality have had mixed results. Students who have completed human sexuality courses are more tolerant of homosexuality, but this may be because students who enrol in such courses are likely to be more liberal in their attitudes to begin with (Cerny and Polyson 1984; Iyriboz and Carter 1986; Patton and Morrison 1993; Stevenson 1988).

Interventions involving simply a monologue by a gay or lesbian speaker or a brief, one-off discussion of gay and lesbian issues appear to be less effective than interventions which involve more personal contact, interaction and dialogue between heterosexual students and homosexual students/speakers (Chng and Moore 1991; Cotten-Huston and Waite 2000; Nelson and Krieger 1997). Panel discussions with gay and lesbian speakers have had some success in achieving short-term results, but less success in producing long-term change (Nelson and Krieger 1997, Van de Ven 1995). Nelson and Krieger also found that a panel discussion was more successful in dispelling myths about homosexual people and in increasing support for gay rights than it was in changing attitudes towards the morality of homosexuality and in improving personal reactions to disclosure of homosexual identity by a close friend or relative (1997). There is some suggestion that female heterosexuals may be more susceptible to attitude change (Green et al 1993; Van de Ven 1995; contra Nelson and Krieger 1997).

Several studies have also shown that exposure to positive visual media depictions of homosexuality and homosexual people may have some effect in reducing homophobia (Levina et al 2000; Luhrs et al 1991; Mazur and Emmers-Sommer 2002; Riggle et al 1996).

**Interpersonal Contact**

Research shows that the extent to which a heterosexual individual has had contact with gay and lesbian individuals has a strong influence on his or her attitudes towards homosexuality. Heterosexuals who report knowing someone who is gay generally express more positive attitudes towards homosexual people (Altemeyer 2001; Berkman and Zinberg 1997; Finlay and Walther 2003; Herek and Capitanio 1996; Herek and Glunt 1993; Hinrichs and Rosenberg 2002; Howard-Hassmann 2001; Overby and Barth 2002). Even in demographic groups which generally display more negative attitudes, such as the highly religious, those who have had contact with homosexual people hold less negative attitudes (Herek and Glunt 1993). Herek and Capitanio found that interpersonal contact reduces anti-gay prejudice most where heterosexuals interact with more than one gay or lesbian person, interact with gay or lesbian people with whom they have close relationships and learn about the gay or lesbian person’s sexual orientation directly from the gay or lesbian person (1996). In an earlier study, however, they found that contact experience did not strongly influence the attitudes of black Americans, perhaps because they reported contact with people with whom they were not on intimate terms or because they mostly had contact with non-black homosexuals with whom they may have been unable to perceive commonalities (Herek and Capitanio 1995).

It has been suggested that contact increases acceptance of gay and lesbian people because interactions with gay and lesbian people can challenge stereotypes and encourage the heterosexual person to think of gay people in a more individualised and
personal way (Altemeyer 2001; Herek and Glunt 1993; Howard-Hassmann 2001; Overby and Barth 2002).

However, the causal link between positive attitudes and contact is uncertain. Interpersonal contact is more likely to be reported by those who are young, female, highly educated and politically liberal (Herek and Glunt 1993). Thus, it may be that heterosexuals with more positive attitudes (or who belong to demographic groups which tend to have more positive attitudes) are more likely to have contact with gay men and lesbians, perhaps because they are more likely to choose to have homosexual friends, or because they find themselves in environments where gay and lesbian people are more visible, such as at university, or because gay men and lesbians are more likely to disclose their sexual orientation to people from whom they think will respond positively (Berkman and Zinberg 1997; Herek and Capitanio 1995, 1996; Herek and Glunt 1993; Overby and Barth 2002). However, a substantial proportion of the contact reported is with relatives, workmates and others with whom respondents associate involuntarily, which suggests that contact does reduce prejudice rather than (or as well as) vice versa (Berkman and Zinberg 1997). In addition, respondents themselves often attribute changes in their attitudes to contact with gay and lesbian people (Altemeyer 2001; Howard-Hassmann 2001).

Overby and Barth note that, in the case of minority groups other than lesbians and gay men, contact between the majority group and the outgroups is more likely to increase tension and prejudice than reduce it (2002). One explanation for the different effect of contact on attitudes towards homosexuality might lie in the notion that, unlike race, homosexuality is a ‘concealable stigma’ (Herek and Capitanio 1996). This means that lesbians and gay men may have the opportunity to dispel stereotypes and to have others get to know them just as ‘people’ before disclosing their sexual orientation. Because it must be actively disclosed, homosexuality may also be more likely to provoke discussion than, say, race (Herek and Capitanio 1996).

Researchers therefore suggest that despite the possibility of stigma and discrimination, more gay men and lesbians ‘coming out’ may eventually lead to greater acceptance of homosexuality (Agnew et al 1993; Altemeyer 2001; Herek and Capitanio 1996; Herek and Glunt 1993; Wills and Crawford 2000).

Influence on Attitudes of Beliefs about the Origins of Homosexuality

Those who believe homosexuality to be genetic or biological rather than learned or freely chosen are more likely to have positive attitudes towards homosexuals and be more supportive of gay and lesbian civil rights (Hegarty and Pratto 2001; Herek and Capitanio 1995; King 2001; Matchinsky and Iverson 1996; Piskur and Degelman 1992; Tygart 2000; Whitley 1990; Wood and Bartkowski 2004). This is probably because people believe that an individual cannot be held responsible for a stigma or ‘abnormality’ which is immutable and therefore beyond the individual’s control (King 2001; Whitley 1990). One study found that men and African- and Asian-Americans were more likely to believe homosexuality to be controllable (Armesto and Weisman 2001).

---

15 Biological arguments are also very problematic. For example, they still present homosexuality as an abnormality, but one which should be tolerated since it cannot be controlled (see for example Hegarty 2002; Haslam, Rothschild and Ernst 2002).
However, in Hegarty’s study, respondents’ judgments about whether immutability beliefs were indicative of a tolerant or condemning view of homosexuality moderated the relationship between tolerant attitudes and immutability beliefs. That is, the link between tolerant attitudes and a belief in the immutability of homosexuality only held for those respondents who considered the immutability of homosexuality to be a belief espoused by tolerant people. Respondents who held tolerant attitudes but who did not necessarily believe that immutability beliefs were expressive of tolerance did not always hold such beliefs (2002). Thus Hegarty argued that beliefs about the origins of homosexuality are constructed as expressions of particular political viewpoints: ‘immutability beliefs may be associated with tolerant heterosexual people leading individuals who are tolerant and condemning to take up positions in favour of either “biology” or “choice” respectively’ (2002: 163).

Herek and Capitanio found that among the white population, the belief that homosexuality is not a choice was linked to greater contact with gay and lesbian people, whereas among the black population, the belief that homosexuality is not a choice was equally common among blacks who did or not have contact with gay and lesbian people (1995). They argue that the beliefs of black Americans regarding the origins of homosexuality may be shaped less by contact than by African American cultural constructions of homosexuality which are more fluid.

The effect of believing that homosexuality is determined by environmental factors such as family upbringing has not been investigated (Lewis and Rogers 1999).

**Attitudes Towards Homosexuality and HIV/AIDS**

Strong correlations have been found between negative attitudes towards people with AIDS, the perception of AIDS as a ‘gay disease’ and high levels of antigay prejudice (D’Angelo et al 1998; Herek and Capitanio 1999a; Johnson and Baer 1996; Kunkel and Temple 1992; Larsen et al 1990; McDevitt et al 1990). While all people who contract AIDS sexually are considered responsible for the their infection, gay men with AIDS and men who contract HIV through homosexual sex are evaluated more negatively than are heterosexuals with AIDS or other illnesses (Fish and Rye 1991; Herek and Capitanio 1999a; Johnson and Baer 1996; contra D’Angelo et al 1998). Heterosexuals with negative attitudes towards homosexuals are more likely to be poorly informed about and unduly fearful of AIDS (Carney et al 1994; D’Angelo et al 1998; Herek and Glunt 1991; Price and Hsu 1992; Waldner et al 1999). For example, they are more likely to hold mistaken beliefs about how AIDS is contracted. Homophobic individuals are also more likely to endorse restrictive and punitive measures against people with AIDS (Seltzer 1993).

Negative attitudes towards people with AIDS correlate more strongly with homophobia than with knowledge about AIDS (Johnson and Baer 1996), and possession of greater knowledge about AIDS does not necessarily lead to greater willingness to interact with a person with AIDS (Fish and Rye 1991). These findings may be interpreted as evidence that attitudes towards AIDS are based on affective responses (Johnson and Baer 1996) or beliefs about what AIDS symbolises (Herek and Capitanio 1998, 1999a) as well as (or perhaps more so than) on cognitive reactions such as fear of infection.
Research shows that men are generally more negative towards or fearful of people with AIDS than women (Bouton et al 1989; D’Angelo et al 1998; Johnson and Baer 1996; McDevitt et al 1990; contra Kunkel and Temple 1992). However, this gender difference in attitudes towards people with AIDS is probably attributable to gender difference generally found in attitudes towards homosexuality (Fish and Rye 1991; Johnson and Baer 1996), and perhaps differences in levels of empathy (Fish and Rye 1991).

A considerable amount of research has been dedicated to assessing whether the perceived association of HIV/AIDS with the gay population has increased prejudice against homosexuals, particularly gay men. Some studies have suggested that AIDS contributed to homophobia (Klamen et al 1999; Pleck et al 1988; Pratte 1993; Scott 1998). For example, approximately one-third of American adults surveyed in the mid-1980s reported feeling more negatively towards homosexuals as a result of the AIDS epidemic (Pleck et al 1988; Pratte 1993). However, other studies have questioned the impact of the AIDS epidemic on attitudes towards homosexuality claim, often with the benefit of hindsight or long-term survey data (CJC 1990; Dejowski 1992; Herek and Capitanio 1999a; Nelson and Krieger 1997; Smith 1992; Yang 1997; Young et al 1991).

Herek and Capitanio argue that ‘AIDS attitudes were for many heterosexuals a symbolic vehicle for expressing preexisting sexual prejudice’ (1999a: 1132), that is, homophobia strengthened the stigma attached to AIDS, rather than vice versa. Through the 1990s, there was an increasing awareness that AIDS was not restricted to the homosexual population, and yet the correlation between homophobia and negative attitudes towards people with AIDS persisted. This suggests that AIDS stigma continued to function as a ‘symbolic expression’ of attitudes towards homosexuality (Herek and Capitanio 1999a; see also D’Angelo et al 1998).

**Personality**

The extent to which different personality traits affect attitudes towards homosexuality has received some attention. Most of this research has been directed towards examining the links between negative attitudes towards homosexuality and ‘right-wing authoritarianism’. The authoritarian personality exhibits a high degree of deference to established political, social and especially religious authority; support for values endorsed by that authority; and aggression towards outgroups if sanctioned by that authority (Altemeyer 1988, 1996, 2001).

Several studies have shown that there is a strong correlation between authoritarianism and intolerance of homosexuality (Altemeyer 1988, 1996, 2001; Basow and Johnson 2000; Haddock and Zanna 1998; Whitley and Aegisdottir 2000; Whitley and Lee 2000; Wilkinson 2004). People with authoritarian personalities are more likely to say that they would help the government to harass, torture, imprison and execute gay people, and are more likely to approve of gay bashing (Altemeyer 2001).

Limited research has also been conducted into other personality traits that may affect attitudes towards homosexuality. These include: social dominance orientation, that is, ‘the extent to which one desires that one’s in-group dominate and be superior to outgroups’ (Pratto et al 1994; Whitley and Aegisdottir 2000; Whitley and Lee 2000); self-esteem (Crandall and Cohen 1994); empathetic concern and perspective taking.
(Johnson et al 1997); the personal need for structure (Smith and Gordon 1998); and even whether an individual is a morning or an evening person (Smith and Gordon 1998)!

However, Cullen et al argue that the influence of personality factors on prejudice generally and anti-gay attitudes in particular has been overemphasised (2002). They maintain that the social, economic and political advantages associated with discriminating against outgroups are likely to be more influential.

Relationship of Homophobia to Other Political and Social Values

Attitudes towards other oppressed groups predict attitudes towards homosexuality, that is, people who hold racist and sexist views are more likely also to be homophobic (Agnew et al 1993; Altemeyer 2001; Biernat et al 1996; Ficarrotto 1990; Kite and Whitley 1996; Whitley 2001; Whitley and Aegisdottir 2000). This suggests that, for some people at least, anti-gay attitudes are less related to gay people per se than to their own prejudiced personalities (Altemeyer 2001). These people may be said to display a more general ‘social reactionary attitude’ (Kite and Whitley 1996, 1998) or to subscribe to an ‘antiegalitarian belief system’ (Whitley 2001). However, Basow and Johnson found that homophobia was not entirely coextensive with other types of prejudice, perhaps because homophobia is a more socially acceptable prejudice, or because it is perceived to threaten family and gender norms in a way that other minority groups do not (2000; see also Agnew et al 1993; Whitley and Aegisdottir 2000). Moreover, it is unlikely that the antigay attitudes of those who are themselves members of minority groups would be derived from a prejudiced personality, and are therefore probably predicted by other variables (see Whitley and Aegisdottir 2000).

Attitudes towards homosexuality are also related to sexual conservatism (Ficarrotto 1990; Scott 1998; Simon 1995; Smith 1992). For some heterosexuals, homophobia may stem from more general beliefs and negative feelings about sexuality and sexual morality. This may go some way to explaining some heterosexuals’ discomfort with public displays of gay and lesbian sexuality (Howard-Hassmann 2001).

The Attitudes of Certain Groups Towards Homosexuality

The Attitudes of Members of the ‘Helping Professions’ Towards Homosexuality

Doctors, psychologists, social workers and students studying to enter these professions are generally less homophobic than the general public, with substantial majorities holding positive views (Berkman and Zinberg 1997; Crawford et al 1999; Klamen et al 1999; Parker and Bhugra 2000). However, most research shows that 10-15% of members of these groups can be considered homophobic (Berkman and Zinberg 1997; Crawford et al 1999; Parker and Bhugra 2000), and this may compromise the standard of care provided to gay and lesbian patients and clients.

The Attitudes of Parents of Gay Men and Lesbians Towards Homosexuality

Most of the literature is not concerned with parents’ attitudes towards homosexuality per se, but rather with parental reactions to a child’s disclosure of his or
her sexual orientation. These reactions are mostly described in terms of the array of emotions experienced such as shock, grief, guilt, shame, anger, acknowledgment and acceptance (Armesto and Weisman 2001; Ben-Ari 1995; Savin-Williams and Dubé 1998). However, national polls show that between 1974 and 1985, 70-80% of the US population have said that they would not be accepting of a homosexual child and think their relationship with the child would be strained (Yang 1997).

Most parents initially experience shock, followed by a range of negative emotions, including grief, guilt and shame (Ben-Ari 1995; Robinson et al 1989; Savin-Williams and Dubé 1998). Extreme negative reactions are relatively rare. Savin-Williams (1995, cited in Savin-Williams and Dubé 1998) found that almost half the mothers of gay and bisexual college students whose son’s sexual orientation had been disclosed to them responded with disbelief, denial or negative comments, while half the fathers responded with silence or disbelief. 18% of the parents responded with acts of intolerance, such as attempts to convert their child and threats to cut off financial or emotional support. 11% of mothers and 3% of fathers responded with rejection, hysteria or physical attack. Telljohann and Price found that 35% of young gay men and lesbians reported that their parents reacted in a positive or supportive manner (1993). Most studies have found that mothers react more positively than do fathers (see Ben-Ari 1995; D’Augelli and Hershberger 1993; Savin-Williams and Dubé 1998; contra Savin-Williams 1995, cited in Savin-Williams and Dubé). Both mothers and fathers appear to be more accepting of a gay son than a lesbian daughter, perhaps because they hold daughters more responsible for producing grandchildren (Ben-Ari 1995). Most parents consider themselves to be more accepting than their children perceive them to be (Ben-Ari 1995).

Most parents become more tolerant over time (Ben-Ari 1995; Robinson et al 1989; Savin-Williams and Dubé 1998). In D’Augelli and Hershberger’s study, over half the mothers and 37% of the fathers were accepting, a quarter of mothers and 36% of fathers were tolerant, and a quarter of mothers and 28% of fathers were intolerant or rejecting (1993). Little research has investigated the demographic characteristics and beliefs which predict different reactions by parents (see Savin-Williams and Dubé 1998). Similarly, no research has investigated the child variables that may influence parental responses, such as the child’s status in the home, the degree to which the child deviates from gender norms, age of disclosure and involvement in a romantic relationship (Savin-Williams and Dubé 1998). Ben-Ari suggests that negative parental responses can partly be attributed to a lack of exposure to homosexuality. Most parents had no experience of homosexual people and issues or had never thought about homosexuality (1995).

**Attitudes Towards Bisexuals**

Very little research has been conducted into attitudes of heterosexuals towards bisexual men and women, perhaps because attitudes towards bisexuals are often conflated with attitudes towards homosexuals (Eliaison 1997; Herek 2002b). The little research that has been carried out suggests that negative attitudes towards bisexuals are widespread, correlated with negative attitudes towards gay men and lesbians and predicted by the same variables (Eliaison 1997; Herek 2002b; Mulick and Wright 2002). This suggests that attitudes towards homosexuals and bisexuals arise from the same ‘social milieu’ and the same ‘general belief system’, which includes religiosity, moral conservatism and
traditional gender role beliefs (Herek 2002b; Mulick and Wright 2002). However, heterosexuals appear to exhibit more negative responses and attitudes towards bisexuals than homosexuals (Eliason 1997; Herek 2002b). Heterosexual women are generally more positive in their feelings towards bisexuals than are heterosexual men, and bisexual women are generally rated more highly than bisexual men (Eliason 1997; Herek 2002b).

One interesting finding is that heterosexual women rate bisexual men and women less favourably than homosexual men and women whereas heterosexual men rate male targets less favourably than female targets, regardless of whether the target is homosexual or bisexual (Herek 2002b; see also Herek and Capitanio 1999b; Herek 2000a). The consistently more negative ratings of male targets by heterosexual men suggest that heterosexual men’s attitudes towards homosexuals and bisexuals are both linked to concerns regarding gender, sexuality and masculinity. Heterosexual women, on the other hand, appear to perceive homosexuals and bisexuals as distinct minority groups and their attitudes towards each group appear to be differently motivated (Herek 2002b). Heterosexual men’s more positive attitudes towards bisexual and lesbian women may also be attributable to the sexualisation of lesbianism as a male fantasy (Eliason 1997). The limited number of studies, however, restricts the extent to which these findings can be relied upon.

The Dynamic Nature of Attitudes Towards Homosexuality?

This review of the literature has revealed a very large number of studies showing that attitudes towards homosexuality are influenced by a number of different demographic, contact and personality variables, as well as by social and political beliefs. Some of the research has revealed the sometimes ambiguous nature of these attitudes. For example, it has shown that heterosexual people think differently about the acceptability of homosexual behaviour compared with the entitlement of gay men and lesbians to the equal enjoyment of civil rights and liberties. However, the dynamic nature of attitudes towards homosexuality remains an under-researched area, and the following findings cannot be considered conclusive.

A limited amount of research has sought to understand the potential disjuncture between heterosexuals’ affective reactions to homosexuality and homosexual people (their emotions or feelings), and their cognitive attitudes towards homosexuality (their opinions and beliefs). While these two dimensions of attitudes towards homosexuality are related, they are not identical. For example, it is possible to believe that gay men and lesbians should enjoy civil rights equal to those enjoyed by heterosexual men and women, and yet still feel discomfort with the expression of gay sexuality or when interacting with a gay or lesbian person (Altemeyer 2001; Davies 2004; Howard-Hassmann 2001; Hudson and Ricketts 1980; Kite and Whitley 1998; LaMar and Kite

---

16 For example, compared with heterosexual women, heterosexual men were more likely to report that they would have a sexual relationship with a bisexual woman, to agree that bisexuals have more sexual partners than heterosexuals and homosexuals, and to agree that bisexuals are more likely to have more than one sexual partner at a time than heterosexuals: Eliason 1997.

17 The third component of ‘attitudes’ in social psychology is the behavioural aspect, that is, past behaviours or behavioural intentions. However, I deal with this separately below.
As Van de Ven argues, ‘[t]he result may be outward tolerance but underlying hostility, perpetuated in part by anti-discrimination policies and equal opportunity strategies that put a premium on acceptable behaviours toward minorities and less emphasis on cognitive notions, while all but ignoring “inner” feelings’ (1994: 118).

Most measures of homophobia tap cognitions rather than affective reactions, such as anger, guilt, disgust and delight (Pain and Disney 1995; Van de Ven 1994, 1995). However, as Van de Ven’s argument suggests, it becomes increasingly important to assess more than the cognitive aspects of attitudes towards homosexuality as homophobic beliefs become less acceptable (Spark Jones 2000). For example, Howard-Hassmann described her respondents’ answers as ‘often internally self-contradictory, with, for example, a liberal attitude to gay adoptions combined with revulsion against gay sexual practices’ (2001: 129). Estrada and Weiss found that although 46% of the military personnel they surveyed agreed that male homosexuality is merely a different lifestyle that should not be condemned, 90% said they would feel uncomfortable sharing a room with a homosexual (1999). Affective attitudes may be more resistant to change than cognitive attitudes (Altemeyer 2001; Nelson and Krieger 1997; Van de Ven 1995).

The issue of the relationship between attitudes and behaviour has also generated debate. In general, it seems to be accepted that the attitudes of individuals towards homosexuality do not directly predict how these individuals will behave towards homosexual people (Fernald 1995; Kite and Whitley 1998; Loftus 2001; Scott 1998), although some studies have shown a correlation between antigay attitudes and antigay behaviours (Bernstein and Kostelac 2002; Fishbein and Azjen 1974; Haddock and Zanna 1998; Kite and Whitley 1998). Indeed, as Bernstein and Kostelac ask, ‘if the same person can hold different sorts of attitudes regarding sexual orientation, then which attitudes translate into actual discriminatory behaviour?’ (2002: 305)

Contextual or situational factors may moderate the relationship between attitudes and behaviour (Bernstein and Kostelac 2002; Haddock and Zanna 1998; Kite and Whitley 1998). For example, in their survey of the attitudes of police officers towards homosexuality, Bernstein and Kostelac found that line-level officers were more likely to engage in discriminatory behaviour against gays and lesbians than superior officers regardless of their attitudes towards homosexuality (2002). Other studies have found that heterosexuals respond more negatively to gay men and lesbians when they are presented in a stereotypical manner than when they are presented as ‘ordinary’ people (Golebiowska 2000; Lord et al 1984; Laner and Laner 1979, 1980; latter three cited in Kite and Whitley 1998). Kite found that although heterosexual men expressed more negative attitudes towards gay men than lesbians, they did not necessarily respond more negatively towards gay men in an interactive setting (1992). She argues that these men had learnt to temper their prejudiced reactions in this context, noting that their behaviour might differ in other settings, for example, where more intimate contact such as sharing a room was proposed (Kite 1992: 1234; Kite 2002). Indeed, Norris found that students were comfortable with and willing to extend rights to gays and lesbians only in certain contexts. For example, while 95% of the students reported that they would not refuse to live in a house with a gay person, one respondent commented, ‘I might object if it were just a two-person dorm but not a house’ (1992: 109).
Other experiments have shown that exposure to pro-prejudice or anti-prejudice norms can play a role in either encouraging or inhibiting expressions of prejudice (Masser and Phillips 2003; Monteith et al 1996). It seems that where there are clear attitudinal or behavioural norms, individuals will tend to act in accordance with those norms, whereas personal beliefs are more likely to come into play in individuated situations where there are no clear norms (Kite 2002; Monteith et al 1996). Highly prejudiced individuals seem more inclined to alter their expression and behaviour in accordance with perceived social norms than are individuals low in prejudice (Altemeyer 2001; Masser and Phillips 2003). It is possible that men’s attitudes are also more susceptible to situational manipulation (Herek and Capitanio 1999b).

References


Louderback, Laura A and Bernard A Whitley Jr (1997) ‘Perceived Erotic Value of Homosexuality and Sex-Role Attitudes as Mediators of Sex Differences in Heterosexual


Schellenberg, E Glenn, Jessie Hirt and Alan Sears (1999) ‘Attitudes Toward Homosexuals Among Students at a Canadian University’ 40(1/2) Sex Roles 139-152.


