

Modeling Discrimination against Gay People: Predictors of Homophobic Behavior against Gay Men among High School Students in Switzerland

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Abstract : Background and Purpose: Research has well documented the impact of discrimination and micro-aggressions on the wellbeing of gay men and, especially, adolescents. For the prevention of homophobic behavior against gay adolescents, however, the focus has to shift on those who discriminate: For the design and tailoring of prevention and intervention, it is important to understand the factors responsible for homophobic behavior such as, for example, verbal abuse. Against this background, the present study aimed to assess homophobic - in terms of verbally abusive - behavior against gay people among high school students. Furthermore, it aimed to establish the predictors of the reported behavior by testing an explanatory model. This model posits that homophobic behavior is determined by negative attitudes and knowledge. These variables are supposed to be predicted by the acceptance of traditional gender roles, religiosity, orientation toward social dominance, contact with gay men, and by the perceived expectations of parents, friends and teachers. These social-cognitive variables in turn are assumed to be determined by students' gender, age, immigration background, formal school level, and the discussion of gay issues in class. Method: From August to October 2016, we visited 58 high school classes in 22 public schools in a county in Switzerland, and asked the 8th and 9th year students on three formal school levels to participate in survey about gender and gay issues. For data collection, we used an anonymous self-administered questionnaire filled in during class. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and structural equation modelling (Generalized Least Square Estimates method). The sample included 897 students, 334 in the 8th and 563 in the 9th year, aged 12-17, 51.2% being female, 48.8% male, 50.3% with immigration background. Results: A proportion of 85.4% participants reported having made homophobic statements in the 12 month before survey, 4.7% often and very often. Analysis showed that respondents' homophobic behavior was predicted directly by negative attitudes ($\beta=0.20$), as well as by the acceptance of traditional gender roles ($\beta=0.06$), religiosity ($\beta=-0.07$), contact with gay people ($\beta=0.10$), expectations of parents ($\beta=-0.14$) and friends ($\beta=-0.19$), gender ($\beta=-0.22$) and having a South-East-European or Western- and Middle-Asian immigration background ($\beta=0.09$). These variables were predicted, in turn, by gender, age, immigration background, formal school level, and discussion of gay issues in class (GFI=0.995, AGFI=0.979, SRMR=0.0169, CMIN/df=1.199, $p>0.213$, adj. $R^2 = 0.384$). Conclusion: Findings evidence a high prevalence of homophobic behavior in the responding high school students. The tested explanatory model explained 38.4% of the assessed homophobic behavior. However, data did not found full support of the model. Knowledge did not turn out to be a predictor of behavior. Except for the perceived expectation of teachers and orientation toward social dominance, the social-cognitive variables were not fully mediated by attitudes. Equally, gender and immigration background predicted homophobic behavior directly. These findings demonstrate the importance of prevention and provide also leverage points for interventions against anti-gay bias in adolescents - also in social work settings as, for example, in school social work, open youth work or foster care.

Keywords : discrimination, high school students, gay men, predictors, Switzerland

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