

Religious Fundamentalism, Right-Wing Authoritarianism, and the LGBTQ Community

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According to the advocacy group Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), gays and lesbians are victims of hate crimes seven times as often as straight peers. The question becomes what underlying ideology currently exists in American society to perpetuate this behavior? This paper explores the impact of conservatism and religious ideology to anti-gay prejudice in public schools. The paper presents a model of an intergroup program using prevention of harassment, bullying and rejection to gay members of the student body by attempting a change in attitudes regarding gay students. It also provides recommendations for school administrators and teachers for confronting these challenges in public education.

Keywords: anti-gay prejudice, conservatism, religious fundamentalism, right-wing authoritarianism

According to the advocacy group Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), gays and lesbians are victims of hate crimes seven times as often as straight peers. A nationwide survey by the National Conference for Community and Justice (2006) on intergroup relations in America revealed that, compared with African Americans, Muslims, and those who are poor, gay men and lesbians ranked the highest in group rankings of discrimination. One setting in which prejudice against this population is particularly problematic is within the public-school system. Nearly 30 percent of gay and lesbian juveniles drop out of high school in the face of frequent harassment over their sexuality (Burnett, 2012). Data supports the need to address this effort as 4%-10% of the US population is gay (Athanasos & Larrabee, 2003; Bailey & Pillard, 1991; Nesmith, Burton, & Cosgrove, 1999). The number of lesbian, gay, and bisexual children range from 2-3 million (Bochenek & Brown, 2001; Marinoble, 1998). The questions become what underlying ideology currently exists in American society to perpetuate this behavior? How do teachers address these difficult problems along with the other problems existing in public education?

Theoretical Framework

Conservatism is an ideology currently experiencing philosophical changes in American culture. Echebarria-Echabe and Fernandez-Guede (2006) described general traditional conservative values, however the authors of this paper are prepared to expand on the model for these researchers which attempts to test traditional "religious" values religious fundamentalism (RF), right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), and prejudice

toward Muslims. Their theoretical model also included a well-studied form of racism, and prejudice toward African Americans (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004). Their work was chosen for this position paper because it has been associated with prejudice toward a variety of out-groups, including racial out-groups, e.g., African Americans (Hall, Matz, & Wood, 2010), and value-violating out-groups, e.g., gay men (Whitley, 2009). RF is defined as a set of beliefs that are grounded in one fundamental, narrow set of teachings about humanity and religion (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Hill, Cohen, Terrell, & Nagoshi, 2010). Previous researchers have suggested that RF and RWA are directly linked to prejudiced attitudes along with discriminatory attitudes and violent behaviors (Altemeyer, 1981; 1988; 1996). Thus, the theoretical assertion of the current authors is that there is a direct correlation between these same prejudices related to homosexual students in public education. As a result, the previous model has been re-adjusted to include the appropriate constructs being discussed.

Theoretical model, including variables in the structural equation. The base model presented has been expanded to include homosexual students (see the figure below).

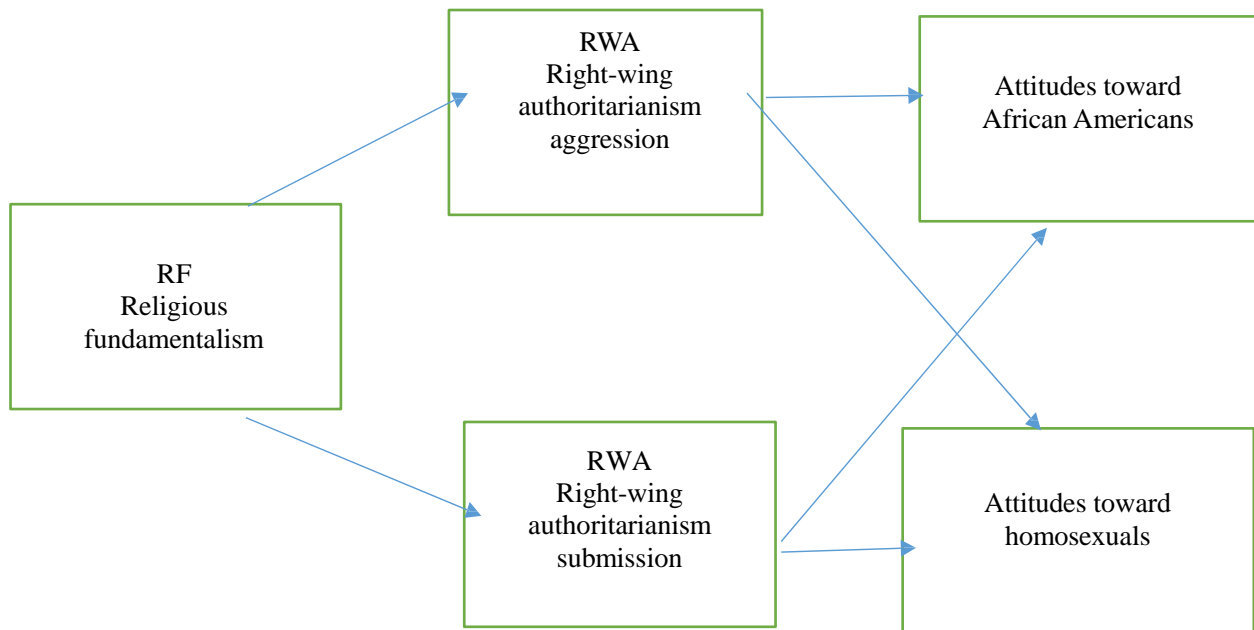


Figure 1. Theoretical frame work—revised model.

Literature Review

The Convergence of Religion and Homonegativity as a Problem in Europe

Doebler (2015) conducted a study to compare 43 European countries response to a multilevel analysis of the effects of religious beliefs, belonging, and the practice of religion. She collected two forms of homonegative data: moral rejection and intolerance. Her findings indicated both were prevalent in East and Western Europe. The outcomes indicated an increase in intolerance with strong religious convictions. Also, regular church attendance aligned with increased homonegativity beliefs. The only differences were the numbers were higher in the west.

In Eastern Europe persecution was blatant in Russia, Belarus, and the Ukraine. On the other side of Europe, the numbers were increased in London, Dublin, and Belfast. This report provides support for the premise of this position paper that religious beliefs have a major impact on homonegative attitudes. There was not enough data

to draw an alignment with religious denominations.

How Are Religion and Homonegativity Aligned in the United States?

Over the past two decades American society has begun to open its doors to acceptance attitudes regarding homosexuality and same sex marriage; however the US political world view has widened along party lines. The pew Research Center conducted a report in 2017, and gathered data to address questions related to attitudes and acceptance along party lines. In terms of Democrats, 83% report acceptance attitudes toward homosexuality vs. 54% among Republicans. In terms of religious attitudes that infer whether God is needed to be moral the breakdown was based upon the religious denomination.

Evangelicals: 65% yes/32% no

Black Protestants: 71% yes/26% no

Hispanic conservatives: 61% yes/37% no

Catholics: 49% yes/49% no

Nonaffiliated: 13% yes/32% no (Doebler, 2015)

The above data supports the premise that Christians ascribe to the ideology that homosexuality is sinful and immoral. This world view can impact and filter down to church based schools.

How Does the US Media Align Religion and Homosexuality?

One way to gain background knowledge is to turn to our media network. Hollywood has presented many actresses, actors, and films about homosexual adult life such as *Milk*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *Single Mountain*, and *The Band Played On*. The film director Dee Rees, and the Nigerian born actress Adepero Oduye provided background knowledge in their film “*Pariah*”. Until the work of Dee Rees, little serious drama focused on adolescent, lesbian, or African American homosexual life in general. This lack of media focus leaves little frame of reference or examples for K-12 teachers confronted with homosexual students in their classrooms.

Film Producer Rees suggests, one way to gain background knowledge is to see contemporary films or read contemporary literature on this topic. Oduye starred in the film “*Pariah*”. To help prepare for the role, Oduye read *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Lorde, 1982), the autobiography of lesbian Caribbean American poet and activist Audre Lorde, who grew up in New York City, married, had children, and divorced before she came out. Still, both Rees and Oduye agree their best experiences have been gauging audience reactions after screenings of the film. Oduye stated she observed screening audiences go from skeptical and borderline angry to weepy (“*Pariah*”, 2011), while Rees stated she’d seen her share of frowns and smirks change, too (“*Pariah*”, 2011).

The films “*Pariah*” and “*Family*” portray the ongoing struggles of being a lesbian black woman in society. While all humans face some sort of ostracism in their lifetime, the woes of a black lesbian are often blinded through the heteronormativity of the masses. It is easy to expect non-African American heterosexuals to misunderstand the black lesbian as they are opposites in role set. However, these films paint the cruel truth that black lesbians are not accepted by their own culture, the black communities in which they come from! This is partially because of Christianity, but ultimately being “queer” is seen as a weakness or unfortunately even seen as mental illness in the black community.

One example is Adepero Oduye’s character “Alike” in the film “*Pariah*”. Alike is smart, excels in school, and is a poet. All of this is overlooked and disregarded because of her mother’s “hyper-Christianity”. Her mom has a “holier than thou” attitude which not only affects her relationship with Alike, it also affects her marriage,

work relationships, and the relationship with her younger daughter too. Alike is a part of a subculture of lesbians known as “AG” or aggressive girls. Other ways that these types of lesbians have been described would be masculine centered or masculine presenting. In “Pariah”, these women take the hip hop swagger of an early 2000’s rapper—baggy clothes, du-rags, jewelry, etc. Alike brings a change of clothes everywhere she goes to hide her style of dress from her mother. On the contrary, she also must hide that she does this from her friend Lara (Pernell Walker) so she doesn’t let her down. Alike must face the ongoing seesaw of faking out the people close to her to be accepted and loved, even if it’s within her own subculture. Her role set switches and is variant due to the fear of being abandoned, even if it is with the people who know her best, her family and friends.

Alike ends up falling in love with an arranged friend through the family church (ironic considering her mother’s behavior) named Bina (Aasha Davis) who is very similar to the character Sabrina (Tarina Pouncy) in the film “Family”. Both Sabrina and Bina have the same privilege of being a “fem” so they can “pass for straight” for a lack of words. Both these young women are maturing and discovering themselves to be attracted to masculine presenting women but again, because of religion they do everything in their power to deny and fight their true desires. Religion becomes dangerous and important in both films because it shows that both female (Sabrina) and a masculine presenting woman (Alike) receive domestic physical violence from their families due to their religious beliefs. The reason why that is critical is simple—it illustrates that how you present physically means nothing if someone is that homophobic or anti-gay. This is the same danger religion presented with the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the Spanish Inquisition the Holocaust, and Boko Haram and finally with ISIS. The bottom line is that people who let their view of God destroy humanity are a risk to everyone’s safety!

These films demonstrate sexual orientation fluidity. On one hand you have Bina and Sabrina who hate that they question their sexuality. But you also have the girlfriend of Melanie in “Pariah” who floats between being in a lesbian parent and being in a relationship with a man. You also have the fluidity in the relationship between Monifa and James. Monifa goes from a past of dating men, to dating women for seven years, to falling in love with James. Realistically using the sociological imagination, it is fair to say that her character is pansexual, or “not being limited in sexual choice about biological sex or gender identity”. These people go more for a connection which is why their partners may be variant. The directors of both “Pariah” and “Family” illustrate the experiences and inner workings of the black lesbian. This returns us to the question what underlying ideology exists in American society that generates this behavior. The authors of this paper suggest the current wave of religious fundamentalism, and its rejection of homosexuality is directing American culture and attempting to guide our public-school system.

What Are Factors That Impact Changes in the Homonegative Attitudes?

Schroeder (2004) explores several studies in her research and concluded education and religious world views have the greatest impact on change. When the level of education is increased, there is a demonstration in increased liberal acceptance (Kelcher & Smith, 2012). Equally when there is a strong conservative religious influence, there is a significant decrease in liberal acceptance (Hicks & Lee, 2006). The homonegativity attitudes are grounded in the doctrines of the three Abrahamic religions which address passages condemning homosexuality. The best known Abrahamic religions are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The cultural behavior for each is that parishioners believe that people should pray to and worship God on a regular basis. Again, these views lead to policies structured in Christian schools. Many Christian schools are open to

accepting minority students but are often closed minded to homosexual students for religious reasons (Doebler, 2015). This paper accepts the rejection of the LGBTQ community from some religious schools as their legal right, however it wishes to address how to handle and accept these students in public schools where faculty and other students may have homonegative attitudes.

How Can Teachers in K-12 Address This Alignment of Religion and Subcultures?

Over the past three decades, research has demonstrated the importance of a safe K-12 school climate (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). Regarding LGBT students, the work by Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, and Greytak (2013) demonstrated the negative impact of peer victimization on psychological adjustment and this establishes a pathway to low quality academic outcomes. These same scholars concluded how affirmative and positive supports for LGBT students at school can contribute to academic success (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014; Kosciw et al., 2013; Toomey & Russell, 2013).

Once educators understand the RF-RWA conceptual framework, and how it drives anti-gay prejudice, as well as understanding the world view of the gay community along with their own, they can formulate an action plan. This is necessary considering the increased gay population in American schools. Creating safer and more inclusive school environments is critical for the wellbeing and learning of all students.

School safety is a high priority issue in all US public schools. Although gun safety is making headlines in US schools, the issue of bullying is often the underlying precipitating factor (citation). The overall incidence of bullying in schools, as measured by percent of 15-year-old reporting that they were bullied at least once in the previous couple of months, is higher for boys 31.3% than for girls 26.25 (Pizmony-Levy & Kosciw, 2016). In recent years in the United States, bullying has gained significant national media coverage. In 2001, very few states had antibullying laws; as of 2015, most U.S. do, including 18 that include protections for sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.

Dessel (2011) recommended the use of an intergroup approach as a viable starting point for educators. Intergroup dialogue is a facilitated group experience, often sustained over time that may incorporate educational or experiential material, and engages participants in "listening and being listened to with care speaking and being spoken to in a respectful manner sharing air time learning about the perspectives of others (and) reflecting on one's own views" (Herzig & Chasin, 2006, p. 138). Such dialogue involves processes of appreciation of difference, critical self-reflection, and alliance building. The primary goal of an intergroup is prevention of harassment, bullying, and rejection to gay members of the student body by attempting a change in attitudes regarding gay students. When these three factors are addressed, there is a documented increase in self-worth and a decrease in suicide among gay students (Dessel, 2011). Direct benefits include support to the gay student body and emotional support for gay families.

Discussion/Results

The work of Dessel (2011) reported positive changes in attitudes, feelings, and behaviors regarding LGBTQ students and parents occurred to varying degrees for a cohort of 10 high school teachers. The teachers reported a shift toward acceptance and connection about LGBTQ students and parents, and being more aware of the issues these students face. Some teachers were surprised as they learned that lesbian and gay community members were deeply Christian and religious. Teachers reported feeling compassion, empathy, and general concern for the difficulties that LGBTQ students and parents face. Most important, changes in intended or

actual behaviors were also documented because of the dialogues. The results of designing and utilizing the intergroup model provided an appreciation for differences, self-reflection, and alliance building.

Qualitative data analysis confirmed positive changes because of dialogue participation. First, recruitment for this topic faced real-world barriers that are not present in laboratory settings. As evidenced by the data, teachers expressed fear, reluctance, and disagreement in response to even the invitation to face this issue. Teachers were concerned about parents not being comfortable, or being sued by parents for raising the issue with students, and “getting into big trouble “with their superiors and potentially risking their jobs. Some teachers disagreed that affirming same-sex relationships was appropriate to do in a public-school setting. Others cited a lack of support from administrators and a silencing or general discomfort with discussing the topic. The goal was for the school to demonstrate social justice within this community.

Implications to Research

This position paper has implications about recruiting participants for future research on topics of a sensitive and controversial nature, for school policies regarding education and training of teachers on LGBTQ issues, and for practitioners of intergroup dialogue. This high level of discomfort should be further explored in future research by professors committed to the theme of social justice.

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