

Attitudes Toward Homosexuality: An Overview

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Abstract: In the last decade it has become clear that impairment of the psychological well-being of homosexuals has its origin in a society that discriminates and stigmatizes homosexuality. The article provides some basic information on homosexuality and continues with an overview of current knowledge on attitudes toward homosexuality. It gives special attention to the situation of homosexuality in Israel. Limited knowledge on the situation in Israel suggests that although there is an increase in tolerance toward homosexuality, it is not universally accepted and prejudice is common.

Introduction

The psychological well-being of homosexuals is perceived as related to a society that stigmatizes homosexuality, and fosters prejudice, discrimination and abuse (1-6). Proving this statistically is complicated and just a few tried to do this (7).

Abuse of homosexuals is rather common and its psychological effects detrimental. Although the United States metropolitan areas are viewed as relatively accepting of homosexuality, the National Gay Task Force reports that in these areas 90% of gay men and 75% of lesbians have been verbally harassed because of their homosexuality. Almost half of the men and more than a third of the women had been threatened with physical violence; a fifth of the men and a tenth of the women had actually been assaulted as a result of their homosexuality (8). Effects of abuse and discrimination are especially severe among youngsters. "Lesbian and gay youth are more vulnerable than other youth to psychosocial problems including substance abuse, chronic depression, school failure..." and other

problems. A great number of gay youth internalize a negative self-image, and up to 30% of completed youth suicides were by gay youth (2, p. 15).

In turn, psychological well-being may affect physical well-being. Substance abuse, though originating in psychological hardships, may have bodily consequences. Substance abuse was found to be more common among homosexuals than among heterosexuals, this difference being greater for women than for men (2, 6, 9). Also, research indicates a relationship between measures of psychological well-being and sexual behavior that enhances the risk of infection with HIV (10). AIDS-related research claims that in order to promote healthy behavior gay men and lesbians should be able to express their sexuality without feelings of guilt and fear of discrimination (11). This is only possible in an environment with positive attitudes toward homosexuality.

In order to promote the well-being of homosexuals, one thus needs to explore the attitudes of those people in the community

they live in and of the society at large. This article gives an overview of the complex attitude toward homosexuality. We tried to find commonalities among the many studies and are aware of the shortcomings of such an approach: First, in most instances we did not differentiate in the overview between lesbians and gay men. This decision was based on the idea that despite different characteristics, the overall attitude toward lesbians and gay men is similar (12). Second, in most instances we did not differentiate between attitudes toward same-sex behavior, homosexual identities and/or life-styles, but referred to "attitudes toward homosexuality" in its broadest sense. This stems from the fact that previous research often failed in making this differentiation (13). Third, studies on attitudes in non-western cultures are underrepresented, because most studies were performed in the west. Since attitudes are to a certain extent dependent on knowledge about the subject, we begin by providing some basic information on homosexuality. The article closes with a description of what is known about homosexuality in Israel.

Homosexuality

Models of sexual orientation

Sexual orientation is a compound concept. It has been proposed as referring to behavior, emotions, fantasies, attitudes and self-identification regarding one's choice of intimate partners. The term "sexual orientation" has been suggested as more appropriate than the term "sexual preference," because preference implies a degree of choice that psychological research has not verified (9). The term "sexual orientation" should not be confused with the term "sex (or gender) role orientation," referring to masculine and feminine personality traits, behaviors and attitudes (14). It should also be differentiated from the concept of "homosexual identity,"

since those with a homosexual orientation do not necessarily identify as homosexual or move through the stages of homosexual identity formation (for a review see 15).

Sexual orientation is often thought of as a continuum. Kinsey et al. (16), in their vast study on male sexuality, conclude that one may be on either end of this continuum (homosexual/heterosexual) or somewhere in the middle (bisexual). They report that ten percent of the white male population is more or less exclusively homosexual either in behavior or psychological reactions, for at least three years between the ages of 16 and 55. Although this percentage is often quoted, other studies sometimes found lower percentages of male homosexual contact (17). (Comparison between studies on homosexuality is complicated, because of differences in operational definitions.) In their study on female sexuality, Kinsey et al. (18) use the same continuum, and find a lower incidence as compared to males of two to six percent of unmarried women who are more or less exclusively homosexual.

Though the continuum model of sexual orientation is widely accepted, Chung and Katayama (19) among others argue that sexual orientation may not be uni-dimensional and suggest rating it on two independent scales, one for homosexuality and one for heterosexuality. They propose four dimensions of sexual orientation: 1) social behavior (actual social relationships and life-style); 2) sexual behavior (physical sexual activity); 3) affective preference (feelings, emotional attachment and social preference); 4) physical/sexual preference (sexual attraction and erotic fantasies). They claim that assessing sexual orientation according to "behavior," that is to say actually being socially or sexually involved with someone of the same sex, can provide a misrepresentation of sexual orientation. This is because societal oppression, internal homophobia (i.e., fear of homosexual con-

tact among those who experience homosexual attraction), or one's strivings for keeping a monogamous heterosexual relationship, may prevent someone from having homosexual contacts. One may object to these models and state that sexual orientation is not a stable personality characteristic and could change over time (20). Another objection is that these models are based on a male/female distinction. Thus several possibilities of sexual orientation are left out, like a sexual orientation toward an individual regardless of his/her gender and a primary orientation toward transsexuals.

Origins of Homosexuality

Research on the origins of homosexuality is most difficult. As yet, it remains unclear if the dominant origin of the direction of someone's sexual orientation is biological, psychological, sociocultural or self-determined. This issue, among others, has importance because theories label homosexuality as either normal or abnormal, and this label may have influence on the acceptance of homosexuality within a certain community.

Most theories on the development of homosexuality relate primarily to males. Psychodynamic thought presents explanations for the development of male homosexuality, based on the ideas of Freud, who theorized that sexual orientation was formed as a result of the child's working through of the Oedipal period. In this period, most boys come to identify with the father and thus learn to direct their libido toward members of the opposite sex. Various factors can result in the boy identifying with the mother and thus coming to seek homosexual gratification. This expression of sexuality is, according to Freud, a more primitive one than heterosexuality, since gratifications are projected on an object most like oneself. Shortcomings of psychodynamic theories

are that they assume homogeneity of the gay male population, the existence of a "homogenetic" family, and that homosexuality necessarily emerges as a result of developmental arrest (21).

There is some evidence that male homosexuality is genetically determined (National Cancer Institute report, cited in 22). There are findings pointing at a relationship between homosexuality and the influence of male hormones on the development of the brain. Dorner (23) suggests that the lack of male hormones for boys and an excess of male hormones for girls at a certain prenatal stage molds the hypothalamus in such a way as to predispose the embryo to homosexual attraction. Though there is evidence that biological factors regulate sexual behavior of mammals, no sound evidence was found showing that biological factors regulate sexual orientation in humans (24-26). It seems that even if sexual orientation is influenced by prenatal biological factors, it is strongly dependent on postnatal socialization (27).

In fact, the sociocultural and self-determined explanations are intertwined. Troiden (28) suggests that people are born with a diffuse capacity for bodily pleasure, decide what feelings they have and construct these into sexual (id)entities, using systems of sexual meanings articulated by the wider culture. Halwani (29) adds that historical evidence shows that homosexuality is an essential feature of human beings and that it could be found, in principle, in any culture and in any time. Since societal norms tend to guide people into heterosexuality, in many cultures people with homosexual contacts will have (had) heterosexual contacts as well and would be considered bisexual. The percentage of these bisexuals in a given society was suggested to be partly a function of the culture and customs of that society (27). The diversity of sociocultural differences regarding bisexuality and the

complexity of this field are enormous (11, 30, 31), and therefore beyond the scope of this paper.

Attitudes Toward Homosexuality

Related Terms

In order to understand the relationship between societal and individual attitudes toward homosexuality, we first take a look at some related constructs, to say “homophobia,” “homonegativism,” and “heterosexism.” Homophobia, as defined by Weinberg, in 1972, is “the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals” and has been redefined by Lehne, in 1976, as “the irrational fear or intolerance of homosexuality” (for a discussion, see 32). The term “homophobia” is in common use, and is often used not (only) as referring to a phobia of homosexuals, but in a broader sense, including other reactions and attitudes toward homosexuals. “Homonegativism” is a construct describing the entire domain of anti-homosexual responses. It can take on a variety of forms, and may range from passive resistance to the acceptance of homosexuals as equal members of society, to verbal or physical abuse. Homonegativism is not necessarily related to a fear of homosexuality. “Heterosexism” has been defined in several ways, but mainly refers to the promotion of heterosexual life-styles, while subordinating — or even ignoring the possibility of — other life-styles (4, 33, 34).

The relationship between the above mentioned constructs could be described as follows: A heterosexist society fosters homonegativism among its members, some of whom will develop homophobia. In this process a heterosexual majority institutes norms and the deviation of the homosexual minority is seen as a deficit. The minority becomes stereotyped, which often leads to severe social limitations and to considerable psychological disempowerment (35). Het-

erosexism is “the way things are” in most of the western world — also in those fields in which one wouldn’t expect it. Thus, educational institutes, which are presumed to give equal rights, provide homosexual students with fewer opportunities than their peers (36) and psychological teaching, which is supposed to be involved with well-being and empowerment, turns out to be oppressive (34).

In many societies there are organized communities of lesbians and gay men; these may be discriminatory as well. In these communities there may be a form of oppression, which could be termed “homosexism,” that is to say the promotion of homosexual life-styles, while subordinating other life-styles. Among homosexuals one may also encounter “biphobia,” the fear of, and prejudice toward, bisexuals (4). Through heterosexism, homosexuality and biphobia, bisexuals become rejected or ignored by both heterosexuals and homosexuals and may find themselves “caught between two worlds” (9).

Research Studies in the West

Heterosexism fosters homonegativism among individuals through a system of values and beliefs that justify prejudice of homosexuality (33). There are to date many studies on these values and beliefs. Some discuss the relationship between one’s attitudes toward homosexuality and one’s understanding of its origin. People who believed that homosexuality has a biological cause were found to hold more positive attitudes toward homosexuals than those who believed that is acquired (37) or has a psychological cause (38, p. 126). Others scrutinized the psychological set-up of the homophobic individual and found homophobia to be associated with homosexual arousal that the homophobic individual is either unaware of or denies (39), with the use

of coping strategies of denial or isolation, and with being less empathetic in general (40).

Homonegativism has been related to a variety of other characteristics. Negative attitudes were related to the subjects' being more religious (8, 41), conservative (42) and authoritarian (43). What these characteristics have in common seems to be a generally conservative position in issues of personal morality (44). It seems that older people hold less positive attitudes than younger adults (45), which may be explained by ongoing changes in societies (33). For contemporary youngsters, there may be a rise of homonegativity toward adolescence, which may be more pronounced and prolonged for boys (46), and tends to recede with college education (42). More educated people were found to have less prejudice toward homosexuality than those less educated. People who have experienced positive interactions with homosexuals tend to be less prejudiced toward them, this factor being more indicative of attitudes toward homosexuals than any other variable (8, 47).

Some studies on homonegativism address gender differences. In the western world, heterosexual men tend to be more prejudiced toward homosexuals than heterosexual women (45), and this prejudice is more pronounced toward gay men than toward lesbians (8). This differential attitude of men and women toward gay men and lesbians was found to be mediated by gender-role orientation, while those with a less traditional gender-role orientation had more positive attitudes (42, 48, 49). The explanation seems to be in the notion that deviations from traditional gender roles are perceived by heterosexual males as a threat to their social privilege and power, while gay men are perceived as more deviating than lesbians (49).

Sociocultural Differences

Most of the research on attitudes toward homosexuality relates to the contemporary western world, or risks being distorted by western ideas (50). When one looks at ancient cultures, it seems that more than a few were accepting of homosexual acts, though the Hebrews may be an exception (51). In the present era, one finds that in contrast with the west, in non-western cultures homosexuality as a primary outlet is less common, whereas bisexuality is sometimes sanctioned and even institutionalized (27). Despite large cultural differences, in many contemporary societies stigma and prejudice of homo/bisexuality prevail (30). Heterosexism in non-western cultures may be even more pronounced than it is in the west. In fact, in many countries individuals are exposed to threats from their environment or can be legally prosecuted for participating in homosexual acts (52). This may explain that overt homosexual identities and life-styles are less common in non-western cultures.

Differences in societal attitudes toward sexuality were described extensively by Foucault (53), and we will not dwell on this here. It is worth mentioning though that attitudes toward homosexuality are in part dependent on the degree of sexual freedom in a given society (54). Furthermore, differences in societal attitudes toward homosexuality may be due to differences in "homosociality," the degrees of preference for the company of members of one's own gender. Britton (55) suggests that in a sex-segregated society, in which there is a high level of homosociality, homophobia helps maintain the boundary between social and sexual interaction.

There are relatively few studies that make cultural comparisons. Findings from these studies are puzzling and show the complexity of the process of internalization

of societal attitudes. Ross (56) reports that men in Australia anticipated more negative reactions from heterosexuals to their homosexuality than those in Sweden did, whereas no differences were found between the two countries in the actual reactions of heterosexuals. It was anticipated societal reaction which was related to measures of psychological adjustment. Proulx (57) reports that Brazilian students' attitudes toward lesbians were more negative than toward gay men, which contrasts with findings from the west (8).

Attitudes Toward Homosexuality in Israel

Israeli Society

Israeli society has certain characteristics that are different from those of western societies. The many immigrants bring with them values from cultures from the world over and the Israeli Jewish community is extremely heterogeneous, complex and dynamic. This makes it difficult to obtain a general view on societal attitudes. Nonetheless, there are two dominant forces in Israeli society, namely its state of defense and religion. Most citizens are drafted into the Israeli Defense Force (usually at age 18) for up to two years (women) or three years (men); men continue to fulfil reserve duties throughout most of their adult lives. The army is viewed as typically male oriented, fostering homosociality, machoism and gender-role division (58). The army creates an atmosphere in which prejudice towards homosexuality can thrive, and people may bring this prejudice back to their civilian lives.

Religion is central in Israel, but attitudes toward its traditional values and norms are divided. On one hand, there are the ultra-orthodox Jews, who live their lives to a certain extent segregated from the rest of society, with strict sex-segregation and gender-role division. They adhere to Jewish

religious law, which provides homosexuality with an inferior status than heterosexuality. Schindler (59, p. 50) writes that "the Jewish religious law defines overt homosexuality as a kind of disease... it functions to prevent social stigma and is deeply concerned about preventing the phenomenon and rehabilitating perverts" [translated from Hebrew by the author]. He suggests that changing homosexual behavior into a normative direction is of utmost value in Jewish thought. On the other hand, there are the secular Jews, who are highly influenced by social and value changes throughout the western world. However, a — perhaps outdated — study on Israeli adolescents shows that traditional values regarding sexuality are held not only by those coming from traditional families, but also to a certain extent by those from secular families (60).

Israeli Arabs form another somewhat separate part of society and are the largest minority. They are partly Christian and partly Moslem. In Israeli Arab society, interaction between the sexes is less limited than is the norm in Arab countries, but there is a clear gender-role division and a high level of homosociality. This society is affected by modernization, but in general holds a very traditional, conservative view of sexuality. Sexual stereotypes and gender-roles are very sensitive issues and Arab educators may deny the existence of homosexuality in their society (61). To some extent this is comparable with the attitudes of ultra-orthodox Jews.

Taking into account that there is little research in Israel on attitudes toward homosexuality, we shortly will observe this issue from different points of view. Attitudes are reflected in the judicial, political, medical and educational systems, among others. In politics, the situation seems complex, partly because there is no clear differentiation in Israel between religion and state. Though

there are a few openly gay and lesbian politicians (62), several leading religious politicians have expressed themselves vehemently against homosexuality (63). The Israeli judicial system does not regard homosexual acts between consenting adults as criminal, and includes laws protecting homosexuals from discrimination. Still, it seems that the system is under constant pressure from conservative elements in the Israeli society (64). The medical system officially goes along with the APA (65), not viewing homosexuality per se as a disorder. However, conversion therapies are offered (66), something which would be considered unethical by the APA. The only — and not widely accepted — information pamphlet in this field for educators calls for understanding of homosexuality. At the same time, it postulates that large parts of Israeli society view homosexuality as a perversion, a severe disease or a crime without atonement and that it is difficult to grow up as a homosexual in Israel (67). It seems that in these fields official policy is progressive, but that there is a gap between policy and practice.

Attitudes are also reflected in the development of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender movement and the media. Kama (68) postulates that in the last decade Israeli gay men have taken a tumultuous course in their struggles to claim a visible and audible place within the public sphere. Public happenings by organizations such as the Association of Homosexuals, Lesbians, Bisexuals and Transgenders, and the recent establishment of the Jerusalem Open House, a Lesbian Community Center Advancing the Cause of Social Tolerance, give the impression that there is a positive change in societal attitudes toward homosexuality. (This change resembles developments in western societies in the 1970s and 1980s.) Israeli media also provides a relatively

optimistic picture of the Israeli homosexual (69, 70).

Research Studies in Israel

One can learn about attitudes in Israel through studies on homosexuality in general. Sofer (71), based on interviews from the 1970s, concludes that most Israelis who engage in sex between males did not develop a homosexual identity, which is in contrast with contemporary findings in the west (72). Kaplan (58) interviewed tens of homosexual men who had been in combat units of the Israel Defense Force. He found that most were disturbed by their homosexual feelings, felt lonely and in need of talking with someone concerning their sense of “being different,” though this was not a hindrance in their army-lives. Subjects identified as homosexual only after the army, which is late compared to western reports of homosexual self-identification between the ages of 14 and 21 (28). Elizur and Mintzer (73) report that Israeli gay men reach milestones in homosexual identity development at a later age than Americans. They found a relationship between homosexual identity development, mental health and self-esteem. These findings on no or late self-identification by homosexuals may be a sign of societal heterosexism and prejudice.

Limited self-disclosure and lack of perceived support are other indicators of negative societal attitudes toward homosexuality. Soskolne and Bentwich (74) report in an AIDS-related study that most homo/bisexual men can get support from their friends, but almost half feel they cannot get support from organizations. Weishut (75) addresses the lack of support for and insensitivity of the health system to those infected with HIV, which contrasts with the situation in western societies. Kaplan (58) recounts the fear and reluctance of Israeli soldiers to disclose their homosexuality.

Elizur and Mintzer (73) describe two studies on gay men, both showing a relationship between perceived family support and self-disclosure of one's homosexuality. They emphasize the conservatism of Israeli society and the culture-specificity of their findings, especially in regard to self-disclosure and homosexual identity development.

Two studies portray societal attitudes from the point of view of lesbians. Rabin (76) depicts the situation for an Israeli lesbian couple, with social isolation, and rejection by family and society. Oppenheimer (77), in her description of the development of Israeli lesbian organizations, mentions the Holocaust and the many wars as contributing to the pressure to marry, especially on women. Furthermore, she considers living in Israel to be like living in a small town, where privacy is difficult to maintain and women will be closeted in order to "protect" their families.

Rubinstein (78) reports on prejudice among Israeli psychotherapists. He found that therapists perceive the mental state of an imaginary person as more severe if he is homosexual than if he is heterosexual. The mental state of the homosexual person was perceived as more severe by male psychotherapists than by female psychotherapists; this coincides with gender differences found in western studies (e.g. 45).

Most of the Israeli attitude studies were performed on students. Lieblich and Friedman (79) found that Israeli students held more negative attitudes toward homosexuals than American students, though the difference in attitudes was smaller toward lesbians than toward gay men. A positive relationship was found between gender-role polarization and rejection of homosexuality. Ben-Ari (80) studied the attitude change of social work students enrolled in a course on homosexuality in an Israeli university. At the start of the course, students' associations to the word "homosexuality" were predomi-

nantly stigmatized and negative. A positive change in attitudes during the course was attributed by the subjects to both its experiential and theoretical ingredients. Another study of Israeli students shows that prejudice and verbal abuse of others based on perceived homosexuality is common. Prejudice was reported to be higher among religious than among secular students and more pronounced toward gay men than toward lesbians. Acquaintance with homosexuals was found to be related to more positive attitudes (81). Findings from these studies suggest that Israeli students are seldom acquainted with homosexuality.

Conclusion

Impairment of the psychological well-being of homosexuals has been related to societal heterosexism. The study of this field is complex not only because homosexuality is much more than one end of a continuum of sexual orientation, but also because homonegativism takes different forms and is dependent on a variety of societal and individual factors. The number of studies on attitudes toward homosexuality in Israel is limited and the existing studies relatively small in scope. Various sources point at an overall attitudinal change toward the positive, with differences between communities within Israeli society, but prejudice still seems commonplace. Little is known about the relatedness between societal factors and psychological well-being among homosexual Israelis. While verbal and physical abuse of homosexuals in Israel seem to be not uncommon (82), it has never been investigated academically. There seems to be a need in Israel to investigate both the well-being of people with homosexual inclinations and attitudes toward homosexuality, taking into account religion and other societal factors.

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