The Constructions of Attitudes about Homosexuality based on Contacts with Gays and Lesbians

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Abstract

Main aim of this paper is to understand how discourse about homosexuality is premised upon the ways that people talk about homosexuality based in their personal contact with gays and lesbians. Evidences of this study suggest that people's affective attitudes and moral values regarding homosexuality are related to personal contact with gays and lesbians as the most important predictors of attitudes. The set of data analyzed in this paper is comprised of 10 in-depth interviews with participants with various demographic characteristics. Qualitative analysis of the individual interviews shows how people discursively construct opinions about homosexuality based in a specific conversational context, by drawing on elements of their cultural repertoires, such as life experiences relating to contacts with gays and lesbians.

First, I explain that people's understandings of homosexuality are of fundamental importance in shaping how they talk about it. Second, I analyze that people's understandings of homosexuality are composed of a variety of life experiences with gays and lesbians, which are themselves complex and not necessarily ideologically correlated. Of particular importance is a person's tacit definition of homosexuality. It is shaped by a person's cohort and religious ideologies, but it is also shaped by the extent of their contact with and acceptance of the cultural construction of homosexuality that is dominant during a given period. Finally, I interpret how the nature of a persons' contact with gays and lesbians, their exposure to gays and lesbians and the composition of their social networks complicates the analysis of social generational change with the homosexuality discourse.

Keywords: *Gay and lesbians, Homosexuality, Attitudes, Religion, Empathy.*

Introduction

The controversy surrounding homosexuality in Albania appears to be a summation of many of the most dramatic and important social changes that occurred in the last two decades. Since 1990, the structure and meanings of gender, homosexuality, marriage, and family in Albania have shifted. Due to the successes of liberation movements, there have been tremendous strides toward gender equality in many sectors of society, egalitarian gender ideologies have become more prevalent, attitudes about sexuality both inside and outside of marriage have liberalized, and the liberalization of attitudes about homosexuality has been especially pronounced. At the same time, Albania has witnessed an increase in divorce and cohabitation rates, the diversification of family forms, and consolidation the individualistic meanings of marriage as the hegemonic cultural ideal.

The fact that many people react negatively to the image of the stereotypical gay man, and the fact that so many people say that they don't want to have homosexuality "thrown in their faces," calls our attention to the relationship between attitudes about homosexuality and the nature of life experiences and personal contact that people

have with gays and lesbians. Several decades of research on the contact hypothesis show that personal contact with members of minority groups increases tolerance for extending civil rights and liberties to those groups, but that the effect only occurs under certain conditions (Allport 1954; Herek and Glunt 1993; Lee, Farrell and Link 2004; Lemm 2006; Sigelman et al. 1996; Sigelman and Welch 1993).

Attitudes towards homosexuality are socialized and not born. The reasons of this socialization process include parents, peers, and religious institutions. One of the main contributors in this socialization is the media as frequently cited as a source of sexual information. This influence of media is related in ways that the nature of the subject, the conversation may be missing from parents and peers and because the experience of youth in this topic may be missing. Representation of homosexuality can lead to the creation of attitudes to viewers playing an important role as sex educator. Portrayal in the media is related to the constant stereotyping on the one hand as immoral, infected with HIV, with a failed romantic relationships and on the other as people being always comics, entertainer or asexual at all.

In addition, the ways in which people talk about their life experiences with homosexuality shows that people's attitudes about same-sex marriage are related to their personal contact with gays and lesbians, but that whether it increases or decreases their support for same-sex marriage depends on the nature of the contact. In other words, exposure to homosexuality and people who identify with gays and lesbians can cut both ways.

Methodology

In this study I have used qualitative interview analysis with 10 participants from different cities of Albania that have various demographic characteristics with the criteria to come from a wide variety of socio-economic and religious backgrounds, from 18 to 55 years old. Qualitative data for this research were collected through semi-structured, qualitative individual interviews. The sampling strategy was based on Glaser and Strauss' (1967) theoretical sampling technique.

The qualitative interview analysis is important because it is not enough to know whether or not someone have positive or negative attitudes about homosexuality but what demographic or personal characteristics are related to that opinion. In order to understand the patterns of support and opposition to homosexuality, scholars must understand what homosexuality means to people in the social and cultural context in which they live. This includes understanding people's life experiences, knowing something about their networks of friends, families, and acquaintances, and learning what they think about homosexuality, marriage, gender and religion.

My approach to qualitative interviewing is a communication-theoretic variant of what Rubin and Rubin (2005) call "responsive interviewing". Responsive interviewing follows a theoretical logic that is "interpretive constructionist" rather than positivist, meaning that the interview data do not provide an unbiased measure of reality but a measure of a person's social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1980).

Results

People's discourses about homosexuality cannot be understood in terms of simple dichotomies: right vs. wrong, positive vs. negative, inherent attribute vs. lifestyle choice. Not only are each of these cultural elements complex on their own, but the combinations of beliefs, attitudes, and values that people express in their discourse are also numerous and varied. There is no ideological imperative that certain elements of people's cultural repertoires go with others. To the extent that there are correlations, however, they are likely due to social influences. For example, people may be more likely to oppose homosexuality if they know and interact with more people who also oppose homosexuality.

Many people use the fact of significant personal contact with gays and lesbians as a reason that they support homosexuality. Informants often immediately mentioned knowing gays and lesbians personally when I asked them about homosexuality, implying that personal contact is a culturally legitimate justification for having positive attitudes on homosexuality.

Question: As you know, the issue of same-sex marriage has been one of these issues that has been brought up a lot.

Response: Yeah. One of my friends is gay. I know people who are gay…I honest don't care. I see it as a civil rights thing. You can't restrict it to one group or another. Let them get married. (B, age 26)

Not only do many people offer personal contact as a reason that they support homosexuality, but people also typically report positive attitudes in relation to people that they know who are gay or lesbian. In talking about her friend, who is gay, one informant describes how getting to know gay people leads to more positive attitudes: It was relatively, right after high school, and it wasn't just him. I met other [gay] people, too. And of course, then the more people you are, associate with, the more you meet, too. I became very strongly pro-gay, I guess I should say, if that makes sense, after I became friends with them because then I'm like, "You don't know my friend, don't be talkin' crap about my friend…". (H, age 24)

People who report that their attitudes about homosexuality have changed over the course of their life frequently attribute their more positive attitudes to personal contact. When asked to explain why he thought his attitudes toward gays and lesbians had changed, another informant said:

I think I was just kind of ignorant about it. It was one of those things that, when you were growing up, I mean, it was unheard of, you never heard of anybody doing it… And then, you know, all the sudden, you live nine months with a person, you have the chance to kind of experience it. Not personally, but be around it. All the sudden, it's just like, "Oh, okay, I kind of understand now. (H, age 22)

One reason that personal contact may be associated with positive attitudes is that a person might develop empathy for the individual, and by extension, others that they classify as being in that

group:

Q: Do you think your feelings about homosexuality have changed over the course of your life?

R: In the sense that I realized they have a lot—you think everybody's equal, and because of [name], I realized that's not true…. I don't think I was aware of the struggle even in college before I met [name], I never, it never consciously played on me. Until you have a friend that's, you know, struggling, it's hard to be empathetic. (M, age 53)

The effect of personal contact with gays and lesbians also extends to how people define homosexuality. Most common are reports of people coming to believe that homosexuality is not

a choice because of contact with gays and lesbians. For example, (A.) reported how her cousin's struggles with his homosexuality convinced her that homosexuality is not a choice:

I think people are ignorant. And that's why I learned so much, because I was too and didn't understand it. So anything I could get, I was reading or I was watching just to help me. Because I know he wouldn't have made a choice to live like that. Nobody would. Why would anybody want to do that to themselves? But I think it's great that people are learning and it's being talked about. (A, age 47)

Similarly, (J.) recalls how people he has known seemed to be gay even when they were very

young:

I believe it's something you're born with because I've known people like before they hit puberty and before the age of sexual maturity that you just kind of thought, "oh, they might be gay, and then, but yeah, then they turn out to be gay. So yeah, I don't think it's a choice; I think it's something you're born with. (J, age 25)

Some people's tolerant attitudes about homosexuality appear to come from personal contact with gays and lesbians, such that the religious teachings that homosexuality is wrong does not seem to fit their personal experience. For example, (S.), a 38 year-old religious beliver, has a relative who is gay and says that she supports him. At the same time, she worries that homosexuality might be "normalized" in our society:

I think I'm a little bothered by it only in the sense that I have mixed feelings about it. Because sometimes I think it becomes so overwhelmingly acceptable, then maybe, maybe this is not founded in anything, but you know, younger people feel that this is just another way to be. I have mixed feelings about it…. If we make it so widespread, would kids feel that it's just another easy choice? "Well, I don't like this, so let me try that". (S, age 38)

(S.) has mixed feelings about homosexuality because she does not think that is normal or should be viewed as equal to heterosexuality. While her personal contact with a gay person has led her to have positive attitudes about him, the older religious and moral teachings that homosexuality is unnatural or wrong still influences how she talks about the issue.

Even in the absence of direct personal contact with gays and lesbians, many people who are religious still nevertheless appear to take an empathetic stance towards gays and lesbians as a group. For example, (E.) had always grown up learning that homosexuality was wrong, due to her religious upbringing. But the morning that I interviewed her, one of her classes held a debate about same-sex marriage, and she learned about the rights and benefits that are denied to gays and lesbians as a result of their inability to be legally married:

As far as gay marriage, I don't know a lot about the topic from the other point of view, so it's interesting to hear the person's speech in support of it. I found out things like, you know, they aren't given a lot of the rights that they should be. So, I see that to be kind of upsetting… (E, age 19)

Personal contact with gays and lesbians often convinces people that homosexuality is just inherent in a person, that it is not something that they consciously choose. However, not everyone who has significant personal contact with gays and lesbians reports more liberal attitudes, values, or beliefs. To the contrary, many people's experiences with gays or lesbians have been negative. For example, (H.) reports negative reactions to his contact with people that he identifies as homosexual:

We went to a coffee, and like, I saw this guy, I saw this girl in line, but she looked like she had facial hair. I kind of thought it was a guy in a dress, and I was just like "what" I was like "what is that". Or you know, if I would get approached by a guy who's gay, and he'd really try to talk to me, and I'm sitting there like, "this guy's gay." (H, age 23)

Some people, like (H.), simply do not get over the person's sexual orientation that they dislike. Other people, especially religious believers, interpret life experiences with homosexuality as evidence that homosexuality is a lifestyle choice that is wrong and that should not be accommodated by society:

Coming from the dance field, my dance partner was gay. I saw it from the inside. You can like the person, and I liked him very much—he was a good person—but it was a weakness in him, and it opened up doors to a lot of other areas in his life that I don't think would have been opened up to if he would've not been in that lifestyle.... It's not, "I'm struggling with this, and I want help" but it's "I enjoy it and I have no intention of changing". That's where I have the problem. (D, age 37)

In this quote, (D.) interprets her former dance partner's homosexuality as evidence of a deep social problem because it led to lifestyle choices that she disagreed with and because he saw nothing wrong with homosexuality.

Thus, people with negative attitudes toward homosexuality or who have strong religious beliefs about homosexuality tend to interpret contact with gays and lesbians negatively. In fact, two religious believers who are in heterosexual marriages interpreted their own previous homosexual feelings or activity as evidence that homosexuality is wrong, is a choice, and should be changed. The consequences of a person's life experiences and personal contact with gays and lesbians therefore depend upon both the nature of the contact and on their interpretation of that experience.

Conclusions

This study that aimed to understand how discourse about homosexuality is premised upon the ways that people talk about homosexuality based in their personal contact with gays and lesbians has reached the following conclusions:

- Significant personal contact with gays and lesbians serves as a reason for supporting homosexuality.
- Informants often immediately mentioned knowing gays and lesbians personally when they were asked about homosexuality.
- Most of informant reported positive attitudes in relation to people that they

know who are gay or lesbian.

•   People who report that their attitudes about homosexuality have changed over the course of their life frequently attribute their more positive attitudes to personal contact.

•   One reason that personal contact may be associated with positive attitudes is that a person might develop empathy for the individual, and by extension, others that they classify as being in that group.

•   The effect of personal contact with gays and lesbians also extends to how people define homosexuality. Most common are reports of people coming to believe that homosexuality is not a choice because of contact with gays and lesbians.

•   People with negative attitudes toward homosexuality or who have strong religious beliefs about homosexuality tend to interpret contact with gays and lesbians negatively.

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