

# Covert Homophobia as a Function of Erotophobia and Social Restrictions

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## ABSTRACT

This study explored three research questions: (1) What is the relationship between male erotophobia and homophobia toward gay men? (2) How does the interaction with a gay or straight male affect the expressions of homophobia? (3) What are the combined effects of erotophobia and contact with a gay man on expressions of homophobia? Erotophobia is a learned negative emotional response to information of a sexual nature. Erotophobia was measured with the Sexual Opinion Survey (SOS). Participants completed the SOS, viewed a film clip, listened to a speaker, and completed the Homophobia Scale (HS). Independent variables were sexual orientation of the speaker and level of erotophobia expressed on the SOS; the dependent variable was homophobia as expressed on the HS. A significant positive correlation was found between erotophobia and homophobia. However, the examination of research questions (2) and (3) found no significant relationship. The results might have been affected by powerful social restrictions.

## INTRODUCTION

Homophobia is defined as negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians (Lock & Kleis, 1998). Yarber and Yee (1983) found support that men are more homophobic towards gay men than they are toward lesbians, and that men are generally more homophobic than women. These negative attitudes men have toward gay men are related to discriminatory, verbally abusive, and physically abusive behavior that is usually committed by men (Herek, 1989). These individual acts of hatred have been suggested to originate from a prevalent fear of sexuality, individual defense mechanisms, and a search for scapegoats (Lock & Kleis, 1998). Emotions that initiate the homophobic acts have been suggested to originate from many variables, e.g., traditional gender-role attitudes, no interaction with GLBT (i.e., Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender) people, or erotophobia (i.e., learned negative emotional responses to sexual cues) (Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Ficarrotto, 1990; Fisher, Byrne, White & Kelley, 1988).

Ficarrotto (1990) and Greendlinger (1985) suggested that there is a relationship between homophobia and erotophobia. It was suggested that people with high erotophobia tend to have high homophobia. In addition, people with low erotophobia tend to have low homophobia (Greendlinger, 1985). The rationale is that people with low erotophobia are more accepting of their own sexuality and more accepting of others sexuality as well (Yarber & Yee, 1983). Yarber and Yee (1983) found, however, no significant relationship between erotophobia and homophobia when male participants evaluated gay men. In essence, all of the male participants were homophobic toward gay males. Thus, research has both supported and

rejected the relationship between homophobia and erotophobia. Consequently, it was essential to find more evidence to support or reject the relationship between erotophobia and homophobia.

Research has suggested that social restrictions of expressing homophobia and the negative feeling toward homosexuals often conflict. Social restrictions are situations where it is not acceptable to express homophobia. People who are homophobic are reluctant to express their homophobia in socially restricted situations, because they are afraid of negative accusations (i.e., being called a bigot). Thus, in situations where contact with gay men occurs, creating social restrictions will lead people who are homophobic to express positive bias toward gay men in order to avoid being labeled as homophobic (Aberson, Swan & Emerson, 1999).

Little research has investigated how male erotophobes would react in situations where contact with gay men occurs. Both Greendlinger (1985) and Ficarrotto (1990) suggested that erotophobes are more homophobic. Aberson, et al. (1999), however, found that homophobes changed their expressed attitude when there were social restrictions against expressing homophobia. Consequently, erotophobes might be more likely to change their expressed attitude in situations where social restrictions limit the expression of homophobia.

This study focused on three research questions: (1) What is the relationship between male erotophobia and homophobia toward gay men? Greendlinger (1985) suggested that individuals with high erotophobia express more homophobia than individuals with low erotophobia. (2) How does the interaction with a gay or straight male affect the expressions of homophobia? Aberson, et al. (1999) found that individuals changed their results on a homophobia scale in order to be perceived as non-biased in situations with gay men. (3) What are the combined effects of erotophobia and contact with a gay man on expressions of homophobia? Most studies have been focused on erotophobia and attitudes toward gay men (Yarber & Yee, 1983; Fisher, Byrne, White & Kelley, 1988; Ficarrotto, 1990), and not the actual contact with gay men. It was expected, however, that males with high erotophobia would show a higher degree of positive bias toward gay men when social restrictions were present. Given the higher levels of homophobia in men, the proposed research surveyed men only (Yarber & Yee, 1983).

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Participants were 63 men with a mean age of 19.83 ( $SD=2.25$ ). Twenty-two percent of these participants were from rural areas, 44% were from suburban areas, and 33% were from urban areas. See Table 1 for demographic information regarding ethnicity and year in school.

### **Materials**

Participants completed two primary scales, the Sexual Opinion Survey (SOS) (Gilbert & Gamache, 1984; Fisher, Byrne, White & Kelley, 1988) and the Homophobia Scale (HS) (Roese, Olson, Borenstein, Martin & Shores, 1992). The SOS is the most frequently used assessment tool in the behavioral sciences measuring erotophobia. It is a 21-item self-report scale. Scores are anchored at 1 (strongly disagree) and 7 (strongly agree) (Gilbert & Gamache, 1984; Fisher, Byrne, White & Kelley, 1988) (Appendix A). Coefficient alpha based on the current data was .82. A median split of SOS scores was used to divide participants into two groups: those exhibiting high levels of erotophobia and those exhibiting low levels of erotophobia.

The HS is a 7 item self-report instrument assessing attitudes towards homosexuality. Scores are anchored at 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree) (Roese, Olson, Borenstein, Martin & Shores, 1992) (Appendix B). Roese, et al. (1992) based the HS on the Bouton, Gallaher, Garlinghouse, Leal, Rosenstein and Young (1987) HS that had a coefficient alpha of .89. Coefficient alpha based on the current data was .82.

**Table 1.** Demographic Information Regarding Ethnicity and Year in School

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Year in School</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Caucasians	57	90.5	Freshmen	34	54
African Americans	1	1.6	Sophomore	13	20.6
Hispanic	2	3.2	Junior	1	17.5
Asian	2	3.2	Senior	5	7.9
Other	1	1.6	—	—	—

## Procedure

The participants first completed the SOS (Gilbert & Gamache, 1984; Fisher, Byrne, White & Kelley, 1988) (see Appendix A). After completion, participants viewed a four-minute film clip showing a male couple kissing and holding hands. Then participants listened to a lecture based on the American Psychological Associations' pamphlet on Homosexuality (APA, 1998). The lecture varied by sexual orientation of the speaker. In the first condition the speaker conveyed that he was not gay, for example saying "them" when talking about gay men. In the second condition, the speaker conveyed that he was gay, for example saying "we" when talking about gay men. All other components of the lecture remained constant. After the discussion, participants completed the Homophobia Scale (Roese, Olson, Borenstein, Martin & Shores, 1992) (see Appendix B).

Independent variables were sexual orientation of the speaker and level of erotophobia; the dependent variable was homophobia as expressed on the Homophobia Scale. The design was a 2 x 2 factorial.

## RESULTS

A 2 x 2 factorial ANOVA was used to analyze the data. A median split on total Sexual Opinion Survey scores was used to divide the participants into two groups: one with high levels of erotophobia and one with low levels of erotophobia. Seven individuals at the median score were not included in the analysis. See Table 2 for the number of participants in each condition. There was a main effect of erotophobia [ $F(1,52)=15.3, p=.000$ ]; as expected men with higher levels of erotophobia also had higher levels of expressed homophobia (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Mean HS Scores as a Function of Sexual Orientation of Speaker and Level of Erotophobia

Sexual Orientation of Speaker		Level of Erotophobia	
		Erotophilic <sup>a</sup>	Erotophobic <sup>a</sup>
Gay	Mean	29.73	23.30
	SD	4.01	3.27
	n	15	10
Straight	Mean	28.08	22.84
	SD	5.63	6.91
	n	12	19

<sup>a</sup> Mean scores across 7 items anchored at 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate less homophobia. The midpoint of the scale is 21.

It should be noted that all of the group mean HS scores were above the midpoint of the scale (midpoint=21). In other words none of the groups were endorsing a homophobic attitude. See Table 3 for percentages of participants in each group expressing positive emotion on the HS.

**Table 3.** Percentages of Each Group Scoring At or Above the Midpoint of the HS

Sexual Orientation of Speaker	Level of Erotophobia	
	Erotophilic	Erotophobic
Gay	100.0%	70.0%
Straight	75.0%	47.4%

The correlation between erotophobia and homophobia was .45 ( $p=.000$ ) across all 63 participants. Neither the main effect of speaker sexual orientation nor the interaction was significant.

## DISCUSSION

The first research question addressed the possible relationship between erotophobia and homophobia. The data support a significant relationship. Specifically, results indicate that there is a direct relationship between homophobia and erotophobia, the higher a person's erotophobia, the higher their homophobia. The significance of the relationship adds support to Greendlinger's (1985) hypothesis that individuals with high erotophobia express more homophobia than individuals with low erotophobia. This is based on erotophobic individuals' tendency to have a negative emotional response to homosexuality. However, the data failed to support the projections regarding second and third research questions. Interaction with a gay

or straight male failed to affect the expressions of homophobia. Moreover, the interaction of erotophobia and contact with a gay man failed to affect expressions of homophobia.

While the data failed to confirm hypotheses regarding the second and third research questions, the predicted patterns were supported. Specifically, we expected erotophobic men who heard a gay presenter to express less homophobia than erotophobic men who heard a straight presenter. In fact, 70% of erotophobic men who heard the gay presenter expressed a positive attitude toward homosexuality, while only 47.4% of the erotophobic men who heard the straight presenter expressed similar attitudes. The failure to find a statistically significant result may have been influenced by the number of participants per cell. We had hoped to have at least 30 participants per cell. The limited number of participants, and small effect size, led to a power of .107 for the main effect of the acting and .068 for the interaction. Future research should try to improve the power by obtaining more participants.

It is important to note that almost all participants displayed overtly positive attitudes towards gay men through consistently high scores on the HS. This is inconsistent with previous research, since Yarber and Yee (1983) found that all of the male participants were homophobic toward gay males. Additionally, they found no significant relationship between erotophobia and homophobia when male participants evaluated gay men. These inconsistencies might be a result of the social restrictions due to the content of the speech and not due to the perceived sexual orientation of the presenter. The speech was, as mentioned, based on the American Psychological Association's pamphlet on Homosexuality (APA, 1998). It conveys a strong positive attitude toward gay men and women. In essence, the social restrictions might have been too strong to allow us to detect any differences between the erotophilic and erotophobic men in contact with gay or straight males. Further research should address the relationships among levels of social restriction, erotophobia, and expressions of homophobia.

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## Appendix A

### Sexual opinion survey (SOS)

1. I think it would be very entertaining to look at hard-core pornography.
2. Pornography is obviously filthy and people should not try to describe it as anything else.
3. Swimming in the nude with a number of the opposite sex would be an exciting experience.
4. Masturbation can be an exciting experience.
5. If I found out that a close friend of mine was homosexual, it would annoy me.
6. If people thought I was interested in oral sex, I would be embarrassed.
7. Engaging in group sex is an entertaining idea.
8. I personally find that thinking about engaging in sexual intercourse is arousing.
9. Seeing a pornography movie would be sexually arousing to me.
10. Thoughts that I may have homosexual tendencies would not worry me at all.
11. The idea of being physically attracted to members of the same sex is not depressing.
12. Almost all pornographic material is nauseating.
13. It would be emotionally upsetting to me to see someone exposing themselves publicly.
14. Watching a gogo dancer of the opposite sex would not be very exciting.
15. I would not enjoy seeing a pornographic movie.
16. When I think about seeing pictures showing someone of the same sex as myself masturbating, it nauseates me.
17. The thought of engaging in unusual sex practices is highly arousing.
18. Manipulating my genitals would probably be an arousing experience.
19. I do not enjoy daydreaming about sexual matters.
20. I am not curious about explicit pornography.
21. The thought of having long-term sexual relations with more than one sex partner is not disgusting to me.

## Appendix B

### Homophobia Scale (HS)

1. There is nothing particularly wrong with homosexual behavior.
2. Homosexual behavior disgusts me.
3. Homosexuality is merely a different kind of lifestyle and should not be condemned.
4. If a person has homosexual feelings, then he/she should do everything to overcome them.
5. I would not change my feelings toward a friend if I learned that he/she was homosexual.
6. Homosexuality is a sin and just plain wrong.
7. Homosexuals have as much right as heterosexuals to teach young children.