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## Attitudes towards homosexual and lesbians among Puerto Rican Public Health graduate students

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The objective of this study is to identify the attitude toward the homosexuals and lesbians among graduate students of General Public Health and Health Education Program at School of Public Health, Medical Sciences Campus of the University of Puerto Rico. A descriptive-92 graduate students of the correlational design was used to carry out the study participated in the study General Public Health and Health Education programs. The data collection was collected through a self-administered questionnaire. Descriptive and inferential statistics (Chi-square and t-test student) were used to

data analysis. The 82.6% of the participants had a prejudiced attitude toward the homosexuals and the lesbians. The 79.3% presented a low distance level. There is a significant association among the social distance, homosexual and lesbian educational exposure and the years of studies. To develop appropriate strategies to foment the acceptance and eliminate the prejudice toward the homosexuals and lesbians in the participants, what will impact in a better way of providing quality health services.

*Key words: Lesbian, Homosexual, Attitudes.*

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There are approximately 20 million gays and lesbians in the United States. One of the most important aspects of male and female homosexuality is its rejection by the society, against which many morals, religious and, sometimes, even legal punishments are meted out. This rejection forces the homosexual person to use his/her discretion when determining the degree in which his/her sexual orientation or preference can be publicly known. History provides ample evidence of the discrimination endured by gays and lesbians and the injustices committed against them as a consequence of the homophobia by the Judeo-Christian culture (1).

Furthermore, it is a well-known fact that when the AIDS epidemic first appeared, the syndrome was dubbed at once as the "homosexuals disease". In the same way, homosexuals who suffer the disease are often regarded as "immoral" because "they have become infected as a consequence of their gay or lesbian activity", and it is often said, "homosexuals get what they deserve".

Healthcare professionals, including physicians and nurses, teachers and students, among others (2,3), have upheld such beliefs.

Such negative reactions and statements against gays and lesbians pervade our culture and it is very difficult to handle the prejudices acquired during our upbringing. The attitude of rejection and discrimination against gays and lesbians among university students has already been demonstrated in the United States and Puerto Rico (2;4-6). Nevertheless, not much is known about the attitude of graduate students, specifically in the public health area. These professionals will be in charge of healthcare services offered to gays and lesbians in the future and certainly their attitude towards their patients' sexual orientation may affect the quality of such services. For this reason, the purpose of this study was to identify the attitude towards gays and lesbians of a group of graduate students from the School of Public Health of the Medical Sciences Campus at the University of Puerto Rico.

### Methodology

A descriptive-correlational design was applied to the research study. The participants were selected among enrolled graduate students of the General Public Health and Health Education specialties. These two specialization fields, among those provided by the School, are considered to be the ones with the higher number of healthcare professionals who will probably interact directly with gays

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or lesbians, as the jobs held by these professionals generally imply the direct interaction with the population. All the enrolled students, as reported by the Registrar's Office (n=151), were considered as candidates for participation in the study. From these, those who were working in their community laboratory or research projects were eliminated because they were not physically in the classroom. Finally, the total number of participants in the study was of 92 graduate students, which represented 60.9% of the total number of students from both specialization fields.

Data were collected through a survey, carried out through a self-questionnaire that consisted of two scales of measurement; the first was called Homosexual Prejudice Index and the second, Index of Social Distance Towards Gays and Lesbians. Both scales were adapted and validated within the Puerto Rican University population by García (4). The Homosexual Prejudice Index is based on 46 widespread premises about gays and lesbians. The higher the score, the deeper was the student's attitude of prejudice towards gays and lesbians. Likewise, in order to establish categories, it was considered that a prejudiced attitude occurred when participants obtained a total score of 138 points or more in the scale.

For the scale that measures the social distance placed by the participants between themselves and gays and lesbians, the study used a Bogardus-type scale (7) containing the description of 10 different common stereotypes used against gays and lesbians. Lower a score obtained in the scale, the smaller was the social distance found between the students and gays or lesbians. It was considered that social distance existed between the participants and gays or lesbian, when the total score obtained in the scale was 30 points or more. There was also one section that included social-demographic data about the participants. To the purposes of the statistical analyses, descriptive statistics, Chi-squared and t-student tests were used.

## Results

76.1% of the participants were female, whereas the remaining 23.9% were male. Mean age was 32 years, within an age range between 23 and 58 years old. 46.7% were not married at the time of the study, followed by 40.2% who were legally married. The remaining 13.0% was separated, widowed, divorced, etc. As regards religion, 54.4% indicated that they practiced the Catholic religion, 20.0% did not profess any religion or were Protestant, respectively. 57.3% of the participants were taking the General Public Health major and the remaining 42.7% were taking the Health Education major. Specifically, 43.5% were

first-year students, 34.8% were second-year students and the remaining 21.7% were third-year students.

78.3% and 68.1% of the participants had received, formally or informally, education on the subject of male and female homosexuality, respectively. On the other hand, 21.7% reported they had not received any kind of education on male homosexuality and 31.9% had not received any education about female homosexuality. However, 71.4% and 75.8% of the participants reported they had not received any information on male or female homosexuality at the Graduate School of Public Health, respectively.

As to the sexual orientation of the participants, 88.0% were reported to be heterosexual, 4.3% gay or lesbian, 1.1% bisexual and the remaining 6.5% did not answer the question.

### *Prejudice against gays and lesbians*

82.6% of the participating students displayed a prejudiced attitude towards gays and lesbians, whereas 17.5% evinced a neutral or unprejudiced attitude towards gays and lesbians.

In the analysis by premises of the scale, it was found that:

- 29.3% would feel disappointed if he/she found out that his/her daughter was a lesbian.
- 30.4% would feel disappointed if he/she found out that his/her son was gay.
- 38.0% disagreed with the legalization of same-sex sexual relations by mutual consent between individuals older than 18.
- 33.7% would feel uncomfortable if they saw two men walking together hand in hand.

### *Index of Social Distance*

It was found that 79.3% of the participants evidenced a low social distance level, i.e., that a low level of social distance interposes itself between the participants and gays and lesbians. On the other hand, 20.7% displayed a high social distance level.

Specifically, it was found that 44.0% of the participants preferred to have lesbians who dress up as men as acquaintances and not as friends. 36.3% stated that they would accept them as friends. On the other hand, 14.3% of the participants would exclude gays who dress up as women from their social circle. 41.8% would accept them only as acquaintances and 36.3% as friends.

Only two statistical associations were found in this study. Specifically, there was a significant association between the index of social distance and the year the student was attending. There was a higher level of social distance among the second- and third-year students than among the first-year students (Table 1). Likewise, there

was a significant association between the index of social distance and formal/informal education. It was found that those students who had not received any kind of education about male or female homosexuality exhibited a higher level of social distance when compared to those who had received some kind of education, either formal or informal (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Chi-Squares between social distance index, years of study and educational level.

	Year of study				X <sup>2</sup> p	
	First		Second\Third			
Social Distance Index	n	%	n	%		
High	02	5.4	11	22.4	4.77*	0.03**
L w	35	94.6	38	77.6		

  

	Formal/Informal Education				X <sup>2</sup> p	
	Y		N			
Social Distance Index	n	%	n	%		
High	07	10.3	06	33.3	5.89	0.03**
Low	61	89.7	12	66.7		

\* Fisher Exact;  
\*\* p< 0.05.

## Discussion

This study found a prejudiced attitude of the participating students towards gays and lesbians. This is similar to the findings of a research study carried out in the United States among nursing personnel. In this study, it was found that these professionals suggested that the right of gays and lesbians to hold positions in the government should be restricted, that they considered gays and lesbians to be a threat to their children and that they assured they were able to thwart any gay/lesbian tendency perceived in their children (8). Furthermore, in a study carried out by the American Psychiatric Association, it was found that most members of that body regard homosexuality as a pathology and believe that homosexuals are less happy individuals, and less capable of maintaining a mature and loving relationship, in comparison with the heterosexual population (9).

Nevertheless, it is positive that most participants evidenced a low social distance between them and the gay and lesbian population. This implies that the participants feel rejection towards gays and lesbians because they have been instilled such values by their cultural upbringing, rather than because of any true feeling. This can be concluded from the fact that the prejudice

scale includes premises based on social prejudice against gays and lesbians; whereas that of social distance contains premises that force the participant to ponder whether certain values they have been taught are actually in agreement with what, they consider to be right and fair. These findings are similar to those of other research studies, in which the health care professionals declare to believe in equal rights for the gay and lesbian population (low social distance), but at the same time exhibit attitudes towards said population that are highly tainted with prejudice (8).

Those who received some kind of education about male and female homosexuality exhibited lower social distance levels. Research studies have demonstrated that health care providers who admit to know less, for instance, about HIV/AIDS, exhibit higher levels of fear and rejection towards patients who suffer from this syndrome (a high proportion of which have been infected through homosexual practices) (10). Likewise, in the United States it was demonstrated that the higher the knowledge of nursing personnel about HIV/AIDS, the less homophobic they are (3, 8). In their respective research studies among university students, García (4) and Sáenz (11), demonstrated that, when faced with issues related to male or female homosexuality from a neutral and objective perspective, they have less prejudiced attitudes.

As regards the association between the year of study and the social distance, the behavior found was similar to the one described by García (4), who found that the higher the year of study, the greater the social distance. Specifically, he found that undergraduate students exhibited lower social distance levels than graduate students. A possible explanation for this result may be the fact that most first-year students at the School of Public Health come directly from the undergraduate level. It must be pointed out that most students indicated they had received some kind of education about male and female homosexuality, but that said education had not been received at the School of Public Health. This suggests that probably they received such education during their undergraduate years. Once they move onto the graduate level and to a School of Public Health that does not offer academic curricula that incorporate male and female homosexuality issues, this might contribute to a higher social distance level and more prejudiced attitudes against this population, as the years of study elapse. Nevertheless, further research must be carried out in order to corroborate this hypothesis.

It has been demonstrated that the educational area lacks the elements that are necessary to reduce prejudice and negative attitudes towards the gay and lesbian population (2). Furthermore, when a sexuality course is included, the

subject of sexually transmitted diseases or HIV/AIDS is considered supplementary, thus fostering the rejection and prejudice against gays and lesbians (2;3;9;11,12). In the health area, it is also recommended the development of adequate strategies to foster acceptance and lessen discrimination against gays and lesbians, something that should improve the quality of health services. Education, together with an effective and constant interaction with gays and lesbians, will help in the change of the negative attitudes found among health care providers (3,4).

### Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo es identificar las actitudes hacia los homosexuales y lesbianas entre los estudiantes de los Programas de Salud Pública General y Educación en Salud Pública de la Escuela Graduada de Salud Pública, Recinto de Ciencias Médicas, Universidad de Puerto Rico. Un diseño descriptivo-correlacional fue utilizado para llevar a cabo el estudio. Participaron en el estudio 92 estudiantes graduados. Una encuesta con un cuestionario autoadministrable fue utilizada para la recopilación de datos. Estadísticas descriptivas e inferenciales (Ji-cuadrada y t-test student) fueron utilizados en el análisis de los datos. El 82.6% de los/as participantes tuvieron una actitud prejuiciosa hacia los homosexuales y las lesbianas. El 79.3% presentó un bajo nivel de distancia social. Una asociación significativa existe entre la distancia social, exposición a información educativa sobre homosexualidad/lesbianismo y el año de estudio. Es importante desarrollar estrategias apropiadas para fomentar la aceptación y eliminar el prejuicio hacia los homosexuales y lesbianas en los/las participantes que impacte en una mejor forma la provisión de servicios de salud de calidad.

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