AN EXAMINATION OF ATTITUDES TOWARDS HOMOSEXUALITY IN THE UNITED STATES: AN ANALYSIS OF TRENDS AND PREDICTORS

Laura A. Tassinari

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Approved by

Advisory Committee

Jean-Anne Sutherland _____

Daniel Buffington _____

Susan Bullers
_____
Chair

Accepted by



_____
Dean, Graduate School

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ABSTRACT

This study examines changes in attitudes towards homosexuality and predictors of these attitudes in the United States between 1973 and 2010. The purpose of this research was to explore how attitudes and the predictors of these attitudes have changed over time and incorporate the theory of symbolic interactionism to explain these changes.

Means analysis of Approval of Homosexuality and Civil Liberties attitudes found that attitudes towards homosexuality have become increasingly liberal over time. This analysis also found two distinct trends regarding Approval of Homosexuality versus Civil Liberties attitudes. Multiple regression analysis identified several significant demographic predictors of approval of homosexuality over time. The study found that age, sex, race, level of education, religious affiliation, and political affiliation were consistent predictors of Approval of Homosexuality in 1988, 1998, and 2010. This research also highlighted changes in personal interaction with homosexual acquaintances over time and identified interpersonal contact as a potential predictor of attitudes towards homosexuality. The means analysis of gay acquaintance variables showed that the number of respondents who personally knew a homosexual individual had increased in the years between 1992 and 2006.

The symbolic interactionist framework is used to explain that attitudes have changed because the meaning society and individuals attach to homosexuality has changed over time. In addition, this research argues that the sources of information from which people derive meaning of homosexuality over their life course are more numerous and varied than ever before.
This research has not only expanded upon the current body of knowledge of attitude towards homosexuality in the United States, but also provided insight by applying the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism to the findings.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to all of my gay and lesbian friends, past, present, and future- whose courage to be who they are in a world which isn't always so accepting inspired me to explore the subject of attitudes towards homosexuality.

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INTRODUCTION

Homosexuality has traditionally been considered a controversial topic in American society. Historically, the mainstream United States culture has taken a condemning stance towards homosexuality and has viewed homosexuals as deviant members of society (Hess, Stein & Farrell, 2001). According to Chancey et al. (2003), gay men and women were seen as sexual deviants, degenerates, and sexual criminals by the medical profession, the government, and the mass media. The prevalence of anti-sodomy laws and other laws that prohibited homosexual sex acts is evidence of this negative view of homosexuality in American society.

However, in recent decades, American society has undergone a series of changes that seem to illustrate a shift in the way the American public perceives both homosexuality and gay and lesbian individuals. The launch of the Gay Rights movement and widespread political and cultural changes regarding homosexuality issues are indicators that attitudes towards homosexuality and gay and lesbians in American society are changing.

At the same time, the academic world has attempted to determine the scope of attitudes towards homosexuality in the United States. Research has emerged that indicates attitudes towards and the meaning of homosexuality are changing in the United States (Avery et al. 2007; Loftus 2001; Hicks & Lee 2006; Seidman, 2004; Treas, 2002). Additionally, literature has examined factors that may affect attitudes towards homosexuality and indicate possible predictors for such changes in attitudes (Andersen & Fetner, 2008, Jensen, Gambles & Olsen 1988; Ohlander, Batalova & Treas 2005; Schulte & Battle 2004). While the body of research documenting the changes in attitudes towards homosexuality and possible predictors of these changes continues to grow, there is little, if any, research that compares such predictors of these attitude changes over time. In addition, a review of previous research has indicated that the

majority of available literature does not attempt to explain changes in attitudes towards homosexuality from a theoretical standpoint.

Although recent research has certainly added to our knowledge of attitudes towards homosexuality in the United States, there is still much that can be explored and expanded upon. The purpose of this research is to build upon the previous knowledge of attitudes towards homosexuality in the United States by looking at the trends in attitudes in recent years and the predictors of such attitudes. This research will also fill a crucial gap by utilizing the theory of symbolic interactionism in order to develop a deeper understanding of these changes.

THE CONTEXT OF HOMOSEXUALITY IN THE UNITED STATES

In order to develop an understanding of attitudes towards homosexuality in the United States, it is first necessary to understand the social context of homosexuality in America in recent years. Over the past 40 years, American society has undergone a series of changes that seem to illustrate a change in the way the American public perceives homosexuality and the rights of gay and lesbian individuals. Many regard the Stonewall Riots of 1969 as the catalyst that launched the Gay Rights Movement in the United States and brought the discussion of homosexuality out of the "closet" and into the public sphere (McGarry & Wasserman 1998; Rupp 1999; Vaid 1995). This incident, in which New York City police conducted a routine raid on a gay bar aimed at harassing homosexual individuals, erupted into full blown riots when gay patrons fought back against police. According to Hess, Stein and Farrell (2001), the symbolism of this event encouraged many homosexual citizens to "come out" of the closet and publicly acknowledge their gay identity. In fact, work by Seidman (2004) indicates that the lives of gay citizens have changed dramatically in the years since Stonewall and these people live their lives outside the social framework of the closet.

In the years since the Stonewall Riots, there have been dramatic cultural and political changes in the United States regarding homosexuality. The portrayal of homosexuals in mass media and increased news coverage about gay rights issues are examples of such cultural changes. Academic research has indicated that between the 1960's and present day, the presence of homosexuality in the media and the way in which homosexuality are portrayed have changed drastically. According to Ferris and Stein (2008), prior to the 1960's, homosexuality was almost entirely absent from television, and when it did appear, it was usually treated in a negative manner. The work of Seidman (2004), found that the portrayals of gays in Hollywood movies between 1960 and 2000 shifted drastically from negative and homophobic representations of gay characters to more positive portrayals of what Seidman defines as the "normal gay". The increase in highly rated television shows with openly gay characters, such as *Will and Grace, Brothers and Sisters, Grey's Anatomy, the L-Word, Glee,* and *Desperate Housewives*, supports this claim. According to Chauncey et al. (2003), in the 2001-2002 television series season, 29 series featured major gay or lesbian characters. In addition, the success of major Hollywood movies with leading gay roles, such as *Milk* and *Brokeback Mountain*, are further testament to the cultural shift regarding homosexuality in the United States.

The increase in media coverage regarding homosexuality and gay rights is another example of the cultural shift that has been taking place in the last 40 years. One important turning point regarding media coverage of homosexuality was the AIDS epidemic of the 1980's. According to McGarry and Wasserman (1998), at the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, the mainstream media was slow to cover the epidemic and gay rights issues in general. When it did, AIDS was typically portrayed as the "gay plague", which further stigmatized the gay population in the United States. As a result of the mainstream media's lack of attention to the issue, the gay

press stepped up to publicize the health crisis and educate the community. This created a new wave of activism in the gay community resulting in AIDS and the homosexual community being brought into the forefront of American political and cultural life. The efforts of the gay media were so effective that according to McGarry and Wasserman, by the late eighties and early nineties, the extent and quality of media coverage on AIDS had improved drastically.

Media coverage of homosexuality and gay rights issues continued to increase in the nineties. According to Seidman (2004), the 1990's experienced a glacial shift in the fight for gay rights compared to previous decades. During this time, many public figures such as celebrities, writers, and politicians started to openly criticize homophobic statements and take up the cause of gay rights. In addition, public figures such as Ellen DeGeneres made headlines by publicly admitting to their sexual preference. Perhaps one of the more significant news stories to bring attention to the subject was the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepherd. Shepherd, a gay student at the University of Wyoming, was kidnapped, beaten and died after being tied to a fence post for 18 hours (Brewer, 2003). Brewer speculates that this event provoked Americans into questioning the legitimacy of beliefs about morality and emotional responses to homosexuals as the basis on which to form opinions about gay rights.

Perhaps even more important are the political changes that have occurred in recent years regarding homosexuality in the United States. In the years since the Stonewall riots, the laws of this country have gradually moved away from the persecution of gays to the protection of gay rights. Several states began to remove laws from the books that made homosexual acts criminal offenses. In 1961, Illinois became the first state to do away with its sodomy law, followed by Connecticut in 1971, and 19 other states throughout the 1970's (American Civil Liberties Union, 2003). In addition to removing laws that condemn homosexual acts, several states and the

federal government have passed legislation that made it illegal to discriminate against individuals based on their sexual orientation. In 1975, the U.S. Civil Service Commission lifted its ban on employment of gays and lesbians (Chauncey et al., 2003). In 1998, President Clinton signed an executive order into place that banned federal workplace discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and barred the use of sexual orientation as a criterion for determining security clearance (Chauncey et al., 2003, p.1). Since 1990, eleven states and the District of Columbia have passed laws which prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

The past decade has seen perhaps the most dramatic shift in regard to the laws concerning gay citizens with the introduction of gay marriage laws. In 2004, Massachusetts became the first state in the country to legalize same-sex marriage. Since then, a handful of other states have legalized same-sex marriage, and several others have adopted laws that recognize civil unions. As of the time of this writing, same-sex marriage licenses are currently issued in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Iowa, Vermont, New Hampshire, and the District of Columbia (Tweedie, 2011). In addition to same-sex marriage and civil union legislature, there continues to be an increase in legislation which protects the rights of gay citizens. In October 2009, President Barack Obama signed into law the Matthew Shepard Act, which added acts of violence against homosexual, bisexual, and transgender people to the list of federal hate crimes, thus becoming the first major piece of federal gay rights legislation (Talev, 2009).

The increased creation of federal and state policies which prohibit discrimination against gays and lesbians has trickled over into the private work force as well. According to Chauncey et al. (2003), in addition to 151 state or local governments, more than 5389 private companies have adopted policies that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and extend health insurance and other benefits to same-sex domestic partners; thus representing a sharp increase

compared to 1986, when only four private companies and three government units offered such benefits.

In addition to the significant cultural and political changes regarding homosexuality in the United States, there has also been a shift in the way homosexuality is treated in the academic world. Historically, medical and social research stigmatized gays and lesbians and such stigmas were used as a basis for discrimination against homosexuals (Chancey et al., 2003). According to Beaman, Cannizarro and Goldman (2007), in the early twentieth century, homosexuality was seen by psychiatrists as a "disease" that could be cured through psychotherapy; however, in the years since the Stonewall riots, a paradigm shift took place in which theories of hormonal and genetic origins of homosexuality arose and became accepted among medical and social research. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders, the American Psychological Association and the American Medical Association quickly followed suit, illustrating the shift in way homosexuality was viewed by the medical community (Chauncey et al., 2003). In the years since, sociological research has shifted from looking into why homosexuals act the way they do to focusing more on why people have a problem with homosexuality (Ferris & Stein, 2008, p. 291).

Although recent decades have been a time for significant cultural, political, and academic changes in the United States regarding homosexuality, it is evidenced in both the cultural and political spheres that homophobia and negative attitudes towards homosexuality still exist in a country with a heterosexual majority. According to Hess, Stein, and Farrell (2001), "the sexual script for Americans is decidedly, some might say oppressingly, heterosexual" (p. 93). The murder of a gay teen in Puerto Rico and a recent string of suicides by gay teens who were bullied based on their sexuality highlight the presence of homophobia in our society. The current debate

over the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy in the United States military that prohibits gays from service and the passage of gay marriage bans and Defense of Marriage acts are further evidence of negative attitudes toward homosexuality. However, as of this writing, both the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy and gay marriage bans are being disputed in courts across the country, further indicating that attitudes towards homosexuality in the United States are continually changing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Approval of Homosexuality and Civil Liberties Attitudes over Time

The previous discussion of the context of homosexuality in the United States clearly illustrates that the years since the Stonewall riots have experienced a dramatic shift in the way homosexuality is viewed in America. In order to gain a deeper understanding of these changes, researchers have focused on the connection between attitudes towards homosexuality the previously discussed political and cultural changes. In recent years, several pieces of academic literature have emerged that document the change in attitudes towards homosexuality in the United States. The work of Loftus (2001) was one of the first attempts to systematically study the change in attitudes towards homosexuality in the United States. Using General Social Survey (GSS) data from 1973 to 1998, Loftus sought to determine the pattern of change in attitudes during that time and the extent to which changes could be attributed to demographic or cultural shifts in the American population. The work of Treas (2002) also used GSS data to look at attitudes towards homosexual sex between 1972 and 1998 and focused on the sources of changes in attitudes by examining the effect of cohorts in the years between 1988 and 1998. Hick and Lee (2006) sought to expand the work of Loftus and Treas by looking for trends in attitudes towards homosexuality in the years after 1998. Hicks and Lee analyzed Gallup Poll data between 1977

and 2003 to look for patterns of change as well as identify factors that predict anti-homosexual attitudes using analysis of data from the 2000 National Election Study.

This research shares similarities regarding findings on attitudes towards homosexuality. Loftus (2001), Treas (2002) and Hicks and Lee (2006) all found that overall public opinion towards homosexuality has become increasingly liberal over time. Both Loftus and Treas found the 1990's were the time in which Americans attitudes towards homosexual relations and gay civil liberties were most positive. Hicks and Lee found 2003, the last year in their study, to have the most positive responses in the study.

Additionally, all three studies found different trends for attitudes regarding the morality (or approval) of homosexuality versus the civil liberties of homosexuals. Loftus (2001) found that for questions on the GSS that asked for opinions about the civil liberties of homosexuals, the willingness to restrict such civil liberties declined steadily over time, with only a slight increase in negative attitudes in the late 1980's. For the question regarding the morality of homosexuality however, Loftus found that Americans' attitudes became slightly more liberal from 1973 to 1976, then became increasingly conservative through 1990, and became more liberal from 1990 to 1998. Treas (2002) and Hicks and Lee (2006) both found similar trends in their research regarding responses to questions about the morality of homosexuality and the civil liberties of gay citizens.

Demographic Predictors of Attitudes towards Homosexuality

In addition to research that identifies a clear shift in attitudes towards homosexuality in the United States, several pieces of research have been written that focus on some of the demographic predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality. The most common predictors explored in the research are age, sex, race, religious affiliation, education, social class, and

political affiliation. Using data from the European Values Study Group of basic human values, Jensen, Gambles and Olsen (1988) sought to determine predictors of accepting attitudes towards homosexuality in Spain, England, and Germany. Jensen, Gambles, and Olsen used multiple regression analysis to determine whether or not factors such social class, age, education, sex, family closeness, shared beliefs with parents, marital status, and urban versus rural area of residence were accurate predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality. In addition, the study explored other factors such as religious beliefs and political values to test their accuracy in serving as predictors of attitudes toward homosexuality. They found that in all three countries, younger, more educated individuals had more approval of homosexuality. In addition, the researchers found that individuals who were of a liberal political orientation in all three countries were more likely to approve of homosexuality. The research also found that the sex of a respondent was not a valid predictor of approving attitudes towards homosexuality.

Treas (2002) used GSS data from 1988-1998 to explore possible predictors of disapproval of homosexuality and how they changed over time. The study determined that during the 1988-1998 time period, women, young people, and the better educated were more approving of homosexuality. In addition, Treas found that individuals who were younger, less educated, and less religious showed the largest declines in disapproval of homosexuality from 1988 to 1998. The work of Hicks and Lee (2006) is another piece of research that sought to explore possible predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality in the United States. Hicks and Lee found that sex, age, education, religiosity, and political membership were all related to anti-gay attitudes. The results of Hicks and Lee's study demonstrated that women tended to have more positive attitudes towards homosexuals, as well as people who were younger, strong supporters of the Democratic Party, more educated, and less religious.

Research has also examined the role of some of the specific predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality just discussed. Schulte and Battle (2004) sought to explain whether ethnic differences in attitudes towards homosexuals among college students in the United States were a function of religious attendance. One important distinction to note in Schulte and Battle's research is that the research distinguished between gay men and lesbians when measuring attitudes and thus found different attitudinal reactions to gay men versus lesbians. However, it should also be noted that this research is limited in that it cannot be generalized to the general population due to the small sample size used (n= 315) and the sampling method used to recruit participants in the survey.

Schulte and Battle (2004) found that white women displayed the least negativity towards gay men and lesbians and that individuals living in the Northeast region of the United States were more positive towards gay men and lesbians than those in other regions of the country. Another significant finding of the research was that differences in attitudes towards homosexuals were not necessarily a function of race, but more a function of religious attendance of the individual, with those who attended religious services more frequently more likely to have more negative attitudes towards homosexuality.

The work of Ohlander, Batalova and Treas (2005) also focused on specific predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality. In their work, the authors sought to investigate the relationship between education and disapproval of same-sex relations with GSS data from 1988 to 1994. The research showed that those who were more disapproving of same-sex relations were "males, older respondents, blacks, married and widowed individuals, those who frequently attended religious services, those affiliated with fundamentalist denominations, those with more conservative views, and those living in rural areas" (p.792).

Most importantly, Ohlander, Batalova and Treas (2005) found a very strong association between education and tolerance toward homosexuality that persisted across time and across different attitudinal measures, thus concluding "that better-educated Americans are more tolerant of homosexuality than their less-educated counterparts" (p. 794). The fact that the authors examined the relationship between attitudes and education *over time* makes this an important and unique piece of literature in the study of predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality. Ohlander, Batalova and Treas attempted to further explore this finding by examining mechanisms that may account for why education operates to promote tolerance of homosexuality. The authors found that education's support for civil liberties and schooling's relationship with cognitive sophistication were two factors that contributed more liberal attitudes among the higher educated, thus disproving the theory that the relationship between liberal attitudes and education was a spurious one.

It is evident from the previous literature that interest in the changes in attitudes towards homosexuality has increased in recent years. In addition to documenting an increasingly positive view of homosexuality among individuals, the previous literature has also identified several demographic predictors for positive attitudes towards homosexuality. However, while previous research has certainly provided a good start for examining changes in attitudes, the literature does not provide the most current assessment of attitudes towards homosexuality because the data used does not go past the year 2003. This thesis was aimed at further exploring this change in attitudes by updating the current knowledge about trends in attitudes and examining the predictors just discussed over time. In addition, a review of recent literature on the subject of changes in attitudes towards homosexuality has found that a majority of this research does not utilize sociological theory while examining the change over time in attitudes toward

homosexuality in the United States. This research attempts to bridge this gap by using symbolic interactionism in order to further explore changes in attitudes towards homosexuality over time.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

"Symbolic interactionism" was first developed by Herbert Blumer, in the 1930's. Building on the work of Mead (1934), Blumer defined the term "symbolic interaction" as "the peculiar and distinctive character of interaction as it takes place between human beings" (Blumer, 1972, p. 145). The symbolic interactionist perspective focuses on group life and conduct and assumes that patterns and regularities in society cannot be fully explained without understanding the social processes in which they are created (Hewitt, 1991). Symbolic interactionism examines the central concepts of meaning, self, and identity and explores the relationship of these concepts with human behavior (Longmore, 1998). At the core of this paradigm is the notion that both society and the individual are transformed as a result of ongoing social interaction, and that an understanding of both the self and society are necessary in order to explain social interaction. This emphasis on interaction between the individual and society has allowed for symbolic interactionism to be used at varying levels of social research. As Stryker (1980) notes, symbolic interactionism has been utilized as both a general framework for the examination of society and as a more specialized social psychological theory for looking at micro level interactions.

The theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism is based on three premises originally developed by Herbert Blumer (1969). The first premise is that human beings act towards things on the basis of the meaning that they have for these things. Blumer defines "things" as everything an individual notices in their physical world. These "things" can include physical objects, other human beings, categories of human beings, institutions, guiding ideals,

activities of others, etc. The meaning of a "thing" is necessary in order to understand symbolic interaction. Symbolic interactionism sees meaning as something that arises and is transformed as people define and act in certain situations, it is not something that is just handed down or unchanged by culture and is not inherent in things themselves (Hewitt, 1991). Blumer (1936) contends that meanings are social products and represent the way in which an object in a situation is socially interpreted and the way it is likely to be interpreted in future occasions. This emphasis on the concept of meaning in symbolic interaction has is important because it implies that: people act with plans and purpose; meaning lies in intentions and actions and is found in conduct; and the possibility exists for meaning to be transformed (Hewitt, 1991).

The second premise of symbolic interaction assumes that meanings are not inherent; they are negotiated through interaction with others (Blumer, 1969). This process of interaction involves an individual noting, interpreting, and assessing a situation (Kinloch, 1977). The concept of interpretation is important in understanding the interaction process because it constructs meaning for an object or actions. It is on the basis of this interpretation that a person then responds to their physical and social surroundings. Mead (1934) conceptualizes the process of interpretation as being carried out through a conversation of gestures involving significant symbols, or words and gestures whose meanings are shared by those involved in the interaction.

The third premise of symbolic interactionism states that meanings can be changed or be modified through interaction with others (Blumer, 1969). In interaction, the individual participates in a form of role taking which results in interaction with their own self, in addition to interacting with the others in the situation.

Blumer (1936) outlined two levels on which human beings interact, a symbolic and a non-symbolic level. At the non-symbolic level, individuals interpret the gesture of the other and

base their response on it. At this level, people respond to the meaning or significance of each other's actions. Blumer's (1936) second level of interaction is the non-symbolic level, which he defines as the "spontaneous and direct response to the gestures and actions of the other individual, without the intermediation of interpretation" (p. 518). Blumer contends that non-symbolic interaction is an un-witting or unconscious response and occurs without a conscious or reflective fixing of attention to the gestures of others. Blumer stresses that this level of non-symbolic interaction is important because it forms the setting for the formation of feelings, which he argues are intrinsic to attitudes.

An important concept in the symbolic interactionist framework that is associated with the process of interaction is the notion of joint action. The ability of human beings to interact with each other allows for joint action to occur. Blumer (1969) defines joint action as "a societal organization of conduct of different acts of diverse participants" (p. 17). Joint action undergoes a process of formation in which action is formed new in each occurrence. Blumer stresses that even though new forms of joint action arise out of each new occurrence, they still emerge out of and are connected with the context of previous joint actions. The concept of joint action is important because it emphasizes how human beings are able to connect with another to form societies, and also illustrates how social change can occur within these societies.

While symbolic interactionism was founded on the three premises developed by Blumer, the perspective has evolved over time to include different orientations within the paradigm. The two most prevalent orientations of symbolic interactionism are the Situational and the Social Structural orientations. The research presented in this thesis borrows from the Situational orientation. The Situational orientation, or Chicago school, stems from the work of Herbert Blumer and his colleagues at the University of Chicago. This orientation focuses on the process

of social interaction in naturally occurring situations and looks at the emergence of self in face to face interactions (Longmore, 1998). The Situational approach places emphasis on how human beings define situations and develop the realities in which they live. Longmore (1998) describes the Situational orientation as emphasizing the fact that human beings create and re-create roles from one situation to the next, and that we all do this differently. This differentiation is possible because "individuals construct meaning, have selves, and relate to themselves and others in terms of shared meanings" (Longmore, 1998, p. 46). Other researchers who have contributed to this orientation include Becker (1964), Denzin (1988), and Goffman (1959, 1963, 1967).

The second major orientation of symbolic interactionism is the Social Structural approach, or Iowa School, which focuses on the structural aspects of social groups and the consequences of role relationships for individuals. According to Fine (1993), this approach was developed by Manford Kuhn and his colleagues at the University of Iowa and emphasizes using testable assumptions of Mead's notion of the situated self. This orientation views social structure as the main force in determining an individual's life chances and socially constructed realities. Stryker (1980), argues that it is in the context of the social process that social structure works "to constrain the conceptions of self, the definitions of the situation, and the behavioral opportunities and repertoires that bound and guide the interaction that takes place" (p. 52).

Contemporary work using the symbolic interactionist framework has been used to analyze a wide variety of topics in sociological research. Shott (1979) used a symbolic interactionist perspective to examine specific aspects of emotions and justify the sociological relevance of emotion. In her work, Shott emphasized the importance of the symbolic interactionist perspective in analyzing the creation and consequences of role taking emotions and the construction of feelings. Longmore (1998) evaluated the use of symbolic interaction in the

study of human sexuality. Longmore applied several key symbolic interactionist concepts and compared three contemporary orientations to the study of sex research. In addition to emotion and sexuality, the symbolic interactionist framework has been utilized to explore several other areas of social research. Fine (1993) discusses how symbolic interactionists have made major research contributions in the areas of social coordination theory, social constructionism, self and identity theory, macro-interactionism, and policy relevant research.

It is evident from previous research that the symbolic interactionist perspective has a wide range of uses in sociological research. . Blumer's (1936) conceptualization of attitudes indicates that this perspective could also provide a useful framework from which to explore attitudes and attitude change According to Blumer (1936), attitudes are comprised of two phases. The first is a symbolic phase which is represented in the specific direction of tendency. Blumer contends that an individual's attitude or approach towards an object becomes organized on the basis of the symbolic character of the object. This symbolic character reflects how the object has been seen and acted upon by others. The second is an affective, or "feeling" phase which assures the attitude in its liveliness, movement, vigor and tenacity. Blumer argues that this concept of "feeling" is important in attitudes because it is intrinsic to every social attitude and that sentiments and feelings are involved in how humans relate to objects. According to Blumer, in order for genuine change in an attitude to occur, the feelings one has towards that object must change.

Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Attitude Change

A review of recent literature on the subject of changes in attitudes towards homosexuality has found very little research that incorporates sociological theory into the examination of attitude change and homosexuality in the United States. In fact, according to MacKinnon and

Luke (2002), trend analysis in general and traditional surveys of attitudes and attitude change have been often criticized for lacking theoretical depth. While reports of survey research have yielded extensive information about the extent of differences in attitudes by predictors such as age, sex, race, etc., there is very little theoretical explanation as to why and how these differences in attitudes occur. Some of the notable exceptions will now be discussed.

A majority of the research that has explored attitudes towards homosexuality using a theoretical perspective has used the contact hypothesis to explain attitudes towards homosexuality (Baunach, Burgess & Muse, 2010; Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Herek & Glunt, 1993; Smith, Axelton & Saucier, 2009). The contact hypothesis contends that "intergroup contact promotes the development of cordial relations among members of majority and minority groups under certain conditions" (Baunach, Burgess & Muse, 2010, p. 32). These conditions include equal group status, shared goals, cooperation between groups, and institutional support. Without meeting these conditions, contact can actually lead to an increase in negative attitudes or stigmatization. Research that tests the contact hypothesis in explaining attitudes towards homosexuality has overwhelmingly shown that heterosexual individuals who report knowing a homosexual person generally exhibit more positive attitudes towards homosexual individuals than heterosexuals who do not (Herek & Glunt, 1993). Research using the contact hypothesis has explored factors such as the connections between intrapersonal contact and specific demographic variables, differences in interpersonal contact and heterosexual attitudes towards gay men versus lesbians, the nature of interpersonal relationships between heterosexuals and homosexuals, and frequency of contact (Baunach, Burgess & Muse, 2010; Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Herek & Glunt, 1993). The use of contact hypothesis in explaining attitudes towards homosexuality has clearly indicated that interpersonal contact has an effect on heterosexual attitudes towards

homosexuality. However, it does not account for why or how levels of contact have changed over time, or the reasons for changing levels of interpersonal contact.

Other research that has utilized theory to frame changing attitudes towards homosexuality has focused on the impact of larger cultural changes in society. MacKinnon and Luke (2002) focused on the effect of social and cultural change on identity attitudes among Canadian college students. MacKinnon and Luke describe identities as having both a cognitive and affective meaning; they define identity attitudes as the affective meaning of these identities. MacKinnon and Luke sought: 1) to assess the stability of collective attitudes for social identities over time, 2) to identify and describe patterns of change in identity attitudes, and 3) to interpret those changes as reflective of social and cultural change in Canadian society (p. 331). In this study of attitude change between 1981 and 1995 of cohorts from a population of young, well educated Canadians, the authors used affect control theory to explain changes in attitudes over time. The research found that identity attitudes did remain stable over time, with 75% to 85% of the variance of 1995 identity attitudes explained by 1981 values. In addition, MacKinnon and Luke found that between 16% and 25% percent of the unexplained variance corresponded to significant changes in attitudes for certain identities. MacKinnon and Luke also identified meaningful patterns among some the observed changes and connected historical events and social trends with the findings of their research. This study was limited by its small sample size and sampling methods, however, it is still important because it is one of the rare pieces of research that uses a sociological theory to understand attitude change. According to MacKinnon and Luke, it "is the first to connect changes in attitudes for social identities to social and cultural change" (p. 299).

Another study that utilized theory to understand attitudes is the work of McVeigh and Diaz (2009). In their research, McVeigh and Diaz used voting data from ballot initiatives

pertaining to same-sex marriage in 28 states between 2000 and 2008 to examine sources of support for, and against, same-sex marriage. In their research, McVeigh and Diaz use the symbolic interaction to frame the debate over same-sex marriage as "a competition over socially constructed meanings, as groups and individuals on both sides of the issue struggle to define the meanings of marriage, sexuality, morality, and civil rights, and to assert their own definitions of the situation in the face of organized opposition" (p. 892). McVeigh and Diaz focused their research on communities rather than individuals, because they argue that attitudes towards same-sex marriage are formed through social interaction, thus implying that the community in which an individual lives impacts a person's attitude towards homosexuality. In this study, communities were defined as individual counties in each of the 28 states that had same-sex ballot initiatives.

McVeigh and Diaz (2009) found that support for same-sex marriage bans in the counties studied ranged from a low of 23% to 95.4% and that various features of these counties contributed to varying levels of support for and opposition to same-sex marriage. When looking at these features, McVeigh and Diaz found that opposition to same-sex marriage was weaker in communities with higher median family incomes, higher levels of education, and higher percentages of the population enrolled in college and employed in professional occupations. They also found that counties with high percentages of Catholics and lower median ages displayed less opposition to same-sex marriage. These findings are important because they reiterate the findings of other research which identifies education, age, social class, and religion as predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality. In addition, McVeigh and Diaz's work is important in understanding the change in attitudes because it is one of the few that utilizes symbolic interaction to help explain the formation of attitudes towards homosexuality.

In looking at the change in attitudes towards homosexuality from a symbolic interactionist perspective, one could argue that attitudes towards homosexuality in the United States have become more liberal over time because the meaning that people attach to homosexuality and gay and lesbian individuals has changed over time. Historically, the meanings attached to homosexuality and gay and lesbian individuals were negative. Unfavorable portrayals of homosexuals in the media, laws that prohibited homosexual acts, and the stigmatization of homosexuals by the medical and social science communities illustrate the negative meanings American society attached to homosexuality and homosexual individuals. However, in the years since the Stonewall riots, various cultural, political and academic changes occurred which seem to correspond to a change in the meaning society attaches to homosexuality and homosexual individuals. Research on attitudes towards homosexuality has found that Americans have become increasingly more tolerant of homosexuality and protecting the civil liberties of homosexual citizens. These findings reinforce the idea that the meanings attached to homosexuality and homosexual people in American culture have changed over time.

A symbolic interaction framework would view these changes in meaning as a result of the various interactions people experience through their life course in which they are exposed to different views of homosexuality. It can be argued that the sources of information from which people derive meaning of homosexuality from are more numerous and varied than in previous time periods. The increased visibility and more positive portrayals of homosexuality in the media are examples of changes in sources of meaning. The fact that more and more homosexual citizens are choosing to live their lives openly and out of the closet (Seidman, 2004) thus increasing their visibility in American society, is another example of how sources of meaning are changing. This increase in personal contact with homosexual acquaintances is important because

it highlights Blumer's (1936) notion of the affective phase of attitude formation. While larger structural elements such as the media and laws regarding homosexuality may impact the symbolic aspect of an attitude, the interpersonal connections an individual has with someone who is gay may change the way an individual feels about homosexuality and homosexual people. This affective component is important in attitude formation, because as Blumer argues, in order for there to be a genuine attitude transformation, an individual's feelings towards an object must change.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Upon review of the previous literature, it is evident that there is a research gap in the area of attitudes towards homosexuality in the United States. The current study expands upon previous research by seeking to answer the following research questions:

1) How has approval of homosexuality and attitudes regarding the civil liberties of homosexuals changed between 1973 and 2010?

2) How have the demographic predictors of age, sex, race, level of education, social class, religion, and political affiliation changed over time?

3) How has personal interaction with homosexual acquaintances changed over time?

4) How can the main premises of the symbolic interactionist framework be used to explain changes in attitudes towards homosexuality in the United States between the years 1973 and 2010?

DATA AND METHODS

Part I: Analysis of Approval of Homosexuality, Civil Liberties Attitudes, and Demographic Predictors over Time

Data Source

To assess overall changes and predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality, this study used data from the General Social Survey (GSS) from the years 1973 (the earliest year data is available) and 2010 (the latest year data is available). The GSS is a national probability sample that is designed to track changes in social characteristics and attitudes of adults age 18 or older in the United States (Smith 2010). The GSS contains a standard 'core' of demographic, behavioral, and attitudinal questions, in addition to topics of special interest, such as issues related to homosexuality, that are asked consistently over time (Smith 2010). The GSS data set consists of 55087 respondents who are selected using probability sampling, thus enabling findings to be generalizable.

Variables

In order to measure how approval of homosexuality and civil liberties attitudes have changed in the United States between 1973 and 2010, the study used several variables from the GSS regarding homosexuality that have been asked consistently over the time period in question. The strength of using these variables is that they have been used in previous research on attitudes towards homosexuality and allow for comparison of the findings of this project to previous research.

Approval of homosexuality was a measure of approval of homosexual acts, rather than homosexual individuals. It was measured using a variable that asked about opinion of homosexual behavior. The Approval of Homosexuality variable asked, “What about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex? Do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all?”. This variable was recoded to create a new Approval of Homosexuality variable (N= 31468), with values ranging from 1-4, with 1 corresponding to “always wrong” and 4 corresponding to “not wrong at all”. In the original

variable, the value 5 was labeled “other” and would have been included in any mean analysis; the new approval of homosexuality variable labeled 5 as a missing value, and thus excluded it from analysis. In addition, the values 0 (NAP), 8 (DK), and 9(NA) were all coded as missing values.

Attitudes regarding the civil liberties of homosexuals were measured using four variables on the GSS. These variables include: 1.) the Gay Speaker variable (N= 32239), which asks “and what about a man who admits that he is a homosexual? Suppose this admitted homosexual wanted to make a speech in your community. Should he be allowed to speak, or not?”, 2.) the Gay College Teacher variable (N= 32010), which asks “And what about a man who admits that he is a homosexual? Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college, or university, or not?”, and the Gay Literature variable (N= 32209), which asks “and what about a man who admits that he is a homosexual? If some people in your community suggested that a book he wrote in favor of homosexuality should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing this book, or not?”.

The Gay Speaker and Gay College Teacher variables were recoded, so that the higher number response would equate to a more liberal attitude. For both variables, the values ranged from 1 to 2, with 1 corresponding to “not allowed” and 2 corresponding to “allowed”. For both variables, the values 0 (NAP), 8 (DK), and 9 (NA) were coded as missing values. The gay literature variable was kept in its original form, with values ranging from 1 to 2. In this variable, 1 corresponded to “remove” and 2 corresponded with “do not remove”, with 0 (NAP), 8 (DK), and 9 (NA) being treated as missing values.

The final variable used to measure civil liberties attitudes towards homosexuals was the Same-Sex Marriage variable (N= 7071), which asks “Do you agree or disagree? Homosexual

couples should have the right to marry one another." Unlike the other variables used in this analysis, the question has only been asked sporadically on the GSS, most likely because the issue of gay marriage has not been frequently discussed in the public sphere until recently. The years this question has been asked on the GSS are 1988, 2004, 2006, and 2010. However, while this has not been asked as consistently as other homosexuality attitude questions, it is important to examine how attitudes regarding same-sex marriage have changed in the years available because of the current same-sex marriage debate currently going on in the United States. This variable was recoded so that the higher values would correspond to more liberal responses. The values ranged from 1 to 5, with 1 corresponding with "strongly disagree" and 5 corresponding with "strongly agree". The values 0 (NAP), 8 (can't choose), and 9 (NA) were treated as missing values.

To explore how demographic predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality changed over time, the dependent Approval of Homosexuality variable was regressed on variables that measured age, race, sex, level of education, social class, religion and political affiliation. This variable was chosen because it is the one that has been asked most consistently over the course of the GSS and has largest sample size. The variables used to explore this question were those that have been discussed in previous literature as demographic predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality. Variables that measured age, sex, race, level of education, social class, religion, and political affiliation were chosen as the predictors to be studied.

The variables for age, educational level, and social class were interval level variables and thus kept in their original form for analysis. The values for the age variable represent the respondent's age in years and range from 18 to 89, with 89 representing "89 or older", 98 corresponding to "don't know" and 99 corresponding to "no answer". The values for the

education variable represent the highest year of school completed by the respondent and range from 0 to 20, with 97 corresponding to “not applicable, 98 corresponding to “ don’t know”, and 99 representing “no answer”. Social class was measured using a variable that represents occupational prestige whose values range from 17.1 to 97.2, with 99.8 corresponding to “DK” and 99.9 corresponding to “NA”.

The variables for sex, race, religion, and political affiliation were recoded so that dummy variables could be created. Sex is dummy coded so that females are coded as one and males coded as zero. Two race variables were created with white serving as the references group. The Black variable is a dummy variable with black coded as one and all others coded as zero. The variable Other Race is the second race dummy variable coded in the same fashion, with other coded as one and all others coded as zero. Religion was recoded so that various religious groups could be condensed. Dummy variables were then created for religious preference, with Protestant as the reference group and Catholic, Jewish, No Religion, and Other Religion as the dummy variables. The variable for political affiliation was also recoded into a condensed political affiliation variable and then transformed into dummy variables, using liberal as the reference group and Moderate and Conservative as the dummy variables.

Analysis

In order to measure approval of homosexuality and civil liberties attitudes, a means table was constructed using the means comparison function in SPSS. The Approval of homosexuality, Gay Speaker, Gay College Teacher, Gay Literature, and Same-Sex Marriage variables were entered as dependent variables, with Year serving as the independent variable. After determining the mean responses, a multiple line graph was created in SPSS which plotted mean responses to the variables by year.

The change in demographic predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality over time was determined using the statistical method of multiple linear regression. According to Allison (1999), multiple regression is a statistical method used to study the relationship between a single dependent variable and one or more independent variables (p. 1). Multiple linear regression is well suited for making predictions about the dependent variable. In this instance, it was used to predict which traits may result in positive or negative attitudes toward homosexuality over multiple time periods. Linear regression models were constructed from three decades using SPSS to examine how demographic predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality changed over time. Using data from 1988, 1998, and 2010, the predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality previously discussed were entered into the regression models in the same order.

Part II: Personal Interactions with Homosexual Acquaintances

Data Source

To determine how personal interaction with homosexual acquaintances has changed, a series of four public opinion polls was located using the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) database. The polls were conducted by CBS News and other partner organizations and solicited public opinion on politics and a wide range of social issues. These surveys included demographic and background information from respondents such as age, ethnicity, sex, political party, and religion. All polls were conducted via telephone and used a form of random digit dialing that stratified respondents by geographic region, area code, and size of place (CBS News and New York Times, 2010).

The first poll used in the series was the *CBS News/ New York Times Monthly Poll #3* from August 1992. The sample (N= 1804) consisted of members of the adult population of the United States aged 18 and over who had telephones at home (CBS News and New York Times,

2010). The second source of poll data used was the *CBS News/ New York Times Monthly Poll #3* from April 1998. The sample (N= 1998) consisted of youths aged 13 to 17 who had telephones at home (CBS News, and The New York Times, 2009a). The third poll used in the series was the *CBS News/ New York Times Monthly Poll #1* from March 2004. The sample (N= 1191) consisted of members of the adult population of the United States aged 18 and over who had telephones at home (CBS News and New York Times, 2009b). The fourth poll series used was the *CBS News/ MTV Monthly Poll #3* from May 2006. The sample (N= 2006) consisted of respondents aged 13 to 24 and over who had telephones at home (CBS News/MTV, 2008).

Variables

Personal interaction with homosexual acquaintances was measured using four variables from the CBS News series of polls that asked respondents if they know any homosexual individuals. All variables were recoded so that missing variables could be excluded and response values could be reversed. The values ranged from 1 to 2, with 1 corresponding to "no", 2 corresponding to "yes", and 9 representing "DK/NA" which was treated as a missing value.

The first two gay acquaintance variables were from the *CBS News/ New York Times Monthly Poll #3* taken in August 1992 (CBS News, and The New York Times, 2010) and the *CBS News/ New York Times Monthly Poll #1* taken in April 1998 (CBS News, and The New York Times, 2009a). Both polls ask "do you happen to personally know someone who is gay or lesbian?". The third gay acquaintance variable was from the *CBS News/ New York Times Monthly Poll #1* taken in March 2004 (CBS News, and The New York Times, 2009b), which asks "Do you have a work colleague, close friend, or relative who is gay or lesbian?" The final gay acquaintance variable was taken from the *CBS News/ MTV Monthly Poll #3* taken in May 2006 (CBS News/MTV, 2008), which asks " do you personally know anyone who is gay or

lesbian?" Respondents age 18-24 were excluded from this data in order to allow for comparison with the Gay Acquaintance 2 variable in 1998, which only included youths aged 13-17.

Analysis

To explore personal interaction with homosexual acquaintances over time, the mean responses to the gay acquaintance variables from the CBS News polls were determined by running descriptive tables in SPSS. Frequency tables were also run for each variable to obtain valid percents. The mean responses were then plotted on a multiple line graph to illustrate trends in the mean responses among the samples of youth (ages 13-17) and adults (ages 18-94).

RESULTS

Approval of Homosexuality and Civil Liberties Attitudes over Time

The results of the means analysis indicate that approval of homosexuality and civil liberties attitudes became increasingly positive between 1973 and 2010. Table 1 displays these results, with the mean response to each variable listed by year, paired with the sample size for each in parenthesis. The last row of the table gives the overall mean for each variable, along with the total sample size for each variable in parenthesis.

Mean responses for the Approval of Homosexuality variable increased from 1.56 in 1973 to 2.47 in 2010. Mean responses to the Civil Liberties variables also increased between these years. The Gay Speaker values went from 1.63 to 1.87, Gay College Teacher values went from 1.49 to 1.85, and Gay Literature responses went from 1.55 to 1.78. The measure of attitudes towards same-sex marriage experienced the most dramatic shift in mean response rates. Same-sex marriage approval increased from 1.96 in 1988 (the first year this variable was used) to 3.02 in 2010. The year with the highest mean response for all of the dependent variables was 2010,

which indicates that approval of homosexuality and civil liberties attitudes were most approving in this year.

The analysis of means found two different trends regarding approval of homosexuality versus civil liberties attitudes (see Figure 1). The trend for approval of homosexuality reflects differing periods of change in mean response rates over time. Mean responses to the Approval of Homosexuality variable rose slightly between 1973 (mean= 1.56) and 1976 (mean= 1.70), then went through a period of slight increase and decrease in the years between 1977 (mean= 1.65) and 1985 (mean= 1.59), before reaching the lowest year of approval, 1987 (mean= 1.51). In the years between 1988 (mean= 1.54) and 1994 (mean= 1.86), mean responses to Approval of Homosexuality once again fluctuated, before entering a period of gradual increase between 1996 (mean= 2.02) and 2010 (mean= 2.47). This indicates that between 1973 and 1994, approval of homosexuality varied slightly, but remained low. However, in the years after 1994, approval of homosexuality began to increase steadily over time.

Analysis of mean responses indicates a different trend for measures of homosexual civil liberties attitudes (Gay Speaker, Gay College Teacher, Gay Literature, & Same-Sex Marriage). The trend for these measures indicates that respondents grew less approving of denial of homosexual individuals certain civil liberties over time. The mean responses to the Gay Speaker, Gay College Teacher, and Gay Literature variables gradually increase at similar rates from the first year of data, 1973, to the last year, 2010. For these variables, 1973 was the year in which mean response values were lowest. The measure of same-sex marriage attitudes also illustrates this trend of decreasing approval of denial certain civil liberties to homosexuals. The steady increase in mean response rates between 1988 (mean= 1.96) and 2006 (mean= 3.02) indicates that respondents became increasingly in favor of allowing same-sex couples the right to marry.

This analysis shares similar findings with previous research on attitudes towards homosexuality in the United States. First, like the research of Loftus (2001), Treas (2002), and Hicks and Lee (2006), these findings indicate that attitudes towards homosexuality have become increasingly approving over time. Second, the highest year of approval for all variables studied was the most recent year of the data used in the research. In this study, 2010 had the highest mean response rates for all variables. The work of Loftus, Treas, and Hicks and Lee all found the last year of data to be the highest year of approval. Loftus (2001) and Treas (2002) both found 1998 to be the year of highest approval, while Hicks and Lee (2006) found 2003 to have the highest approval rates.

Also, similar to the previously discussed literature, these results indicate two separate trends regarding responses to variables that explore approval of homosexuality versus variables that pertain to the civil liberties of homosexuals. In all research findings, civil liberties questions seem to change at a steadily increasing rate, while responses to morality questions experienced periods of fluctuation and a more drastic change in responses overall (Loftus, 2001; Treas, 2002; Hicks & Lee, 2006).

Demographic Predictors of Attitudes towards Homosexuality over Time

To explore how demographic predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality have changed over time, the Approval of Homosexuality variable was regressed on predictor variables that measured age, race, sex, level of education, social class, religion and political affiliation to create models in three separate years, 1988, 1998, and 2010. Table 2 is a descriptive statistics table of the demographic predictor variables used in the regression models. The table includes the sample size, valid percent, and mean response rates of each group to the Approval of Homosexuality variable by year. With the exception of the Other Religion variable, the mean

responses for all demographic groups increased over time, which confirms the previous finding that attitudes towards homosexual relations have become increasingly approving over time. The other religion category decreased from a mean response of 2.00 in 1988 to 1.42 in 2010. This decrease in approval in the other religion category can probably be attributed to the fact that the variable included multiple religions which most likely varied in their views of homosexuality and the religious makeup of this variable did not remain consistent from year to year.

Table 2 also illustrates specific demographic differences in approval of homosexuality over time. Among the age categories, 18 to 24 year olds had the highest mean response rates in 1998 (mean= 2.51) and 2010 (mean= 2.96). This group also and had the largest increase (+1.27) in mean responses between 1988 and 2010, which was the highest overall change of all demographic categories. Between sex categories, females had slightly higher mean responses for all three years, indicating that females were more approving than males of homosexuality and moved from less approving to more approving over time. In addition, respondents who were white, Jewish, politically liberal, had between 17 and 20 years of education, and had social class ranks between 77.3 and 97.2 had the highest mean responses among their demographic categories.

The results for the multiple linear regressions with the Approval of Homosexuality variable are shown in Table 3. The table consists of three models, using data from three separate years (1988, 1998, and 2010). All independent predictor variables were entered in the same order. This regression table reports the values of the unstandardized regression coefficients (*b*) for the Approval of Homosexuality variable, and the standard error (*SE*).

In the 1988 model, age, sex, race if Black, level of education, social class, religion, and political affiliation were all statistically significant predictors of approval of homosexuality.

Respondents were more approving of homosexuality if they were younger (*b*= -.005), female (*b*= .267), not Black (*b*= -.340), had higher levels of education (*b*= .054), and had a higher social class ranking (*b*= .005). The measures of religious affiliation and political views were also significant predictors of approval of homosexuality in 1988. Respondents who were Catholic (*b*= .178), Jewish (*b*= .791), not religious (*b*= .604), or had other religious affiliations (*b*= .604), were more approving of homosexuality than the Protestant reference group. Respondents with conservative (*b*= -.477) or moderate (*b*= -.418) political views were less approving of homosexuality than the liberal reference group.

In the 1998 regression model, significance and direction of association remained consistent with all but two of the predictors in the 1988 model. Respondents were more approving of homosexuality if they were younger (*b*= -.013), female (*b*= .197), not Black (*b*= -.357), had higher levels of education (*b*= .067), Catholic (*b*= .381), Jewish (1.14), and not religious (*b*= .717). Respondents in this model were also less approving of homosexuality if they were politically conservative (*b*= -.885) or politically moderate (*b*= -.568). In the 1998 model, the measures for social class and other religion were not statistically significant, and therefore cannot be considered accurate predictors of approval of homosexuality in this year.

The 2010 regression model displayed many of the same statistically significant predictors as the previous two model years. Respondents in this model were more approving of homosexuality if they were younger (*b*= -.012), female (*b*= .286), not Black (*b*= -.718), had higher levels of education (*b*= .089), Catholic (*b*= .423), Jewish (*b*= .912), and not religious (*b*= .864), or had other religious affiliations (*b*= .476). Respondents who were politically conservative (*b*= -.937) or politically moderate (*b*= -.378) were less approving of homosexuality

than the liberal reference group. Continuing from 1998, the 2010 regression model did not find the measure for social class to be a significant predictor of approval of homosexuality.

The significance levels from the multiple linear regressions with the Approval of Homosexuality variable clearly demonstrate that sex, race if Black, level of education, political affiliation, Jewish religious affiliation, and no religious affiliation are highly significant predictors that remain significant over the three time periods studied. In addition, age and Catholic religious affiliation were predictors that became highly significant predictors in the 1998 and 2010 model years. The dummy variable used to represent Other Religious affiliation was significant in the 1988 and 2010 models, but not in 1998. This analysis included some variables which were not statistically significant, or lost significance between models, and therefore cannot be considered accurate predictors of approval of homosexuality. The measure for social class was only significant ($P<.05$) in the 1998 regression model. One reason for this may be that the social class variable used in this analysis was a measure of occupational prestige, and therefore may not have captured the important dimensions of social class. The dummy variable used to represent other race was not statistically significant any of the model years. The reason for this lack of significance is most likely due to the small sample size of this category compared to the other race categories.

One final value worth discussion in Table 3 is the adjusted R^2 value for each model year. According to Sweet & Grace-Martin (2008), the R^2 measures a regression model's usefulness in prediction outcomes and indicates how much of the dependent variable's variation is due to its relationship with the independent variables (p. 151). The R^2 values increased over time, from .180 in 1988, to .236 in 1988, to .273 in 2010. This can be interpreted as the percentage of variation explained by model 1988, 1998, and 2010. The models account for about 18%, 24%,

and 27%, respectively, of approval of homosexuality. While this analysis has clearly shown that age, sex, race, educational level, religious affiliation and political views are consistently valid predictors of attitudes towards homosexual relations, these only account for part of why and how attitudes towards homosexuality are changing in the United States. In order to further explain these changes in attitudes, the role of contact with homosexual individuals was explored.

Personal Interaction with Homosexual Acquaintances

To explore personal interaction with homosexual acquaintances over time, the mean responses to gay acquaintance variables were examined for youths (age 13-17) and adults (age 18-94) using polls from separate years. The results indicate that the number of respondents who personally know a homosexual individual has increased over time. Table 4 is a descriptive statistics table of the gay acquaintance variables on the CBS News poll data over four years (1992, 1998, 2004, and 2006). In 1992 (N= 1804) and 2004 (N= 1191), the age of respondents ranged from 18 to 94 years of age. The valid percent of adult respondents who knew someone who is gay increased from 48.7% in 1992 to 58.6% in 2004. The data from 1998 (n= 1041) and 2006 (n= 806) used youth samples with an age range of 13 to 17. The valid percent of youth respondents who knew someone who is gay increased from 42.2% in 1998 to 66.8% in 2006.

The increase in respondents who personally knew someone who is gay is illustrated in Figure 2, which plots the mean responses to the gay acquaintance variables by age groups (13-17 year olds, 18-94 year olds) over time. Among adults aged 18-94, the mean responses increased from 1.50 in 1992 to 1.59 in 2004. Among youths aged 13-17, the mean responses increased from 1.42 in 1998 to 1.67 in 2006. These results indicate that overall, the number of respondents who personally know someone who is gay has increased over time. The results also indicate that

youth respondents experienced a sharper increase in contact with homosexual acquaintances than adults.

DISCUSSION

The results of this research have yielded several important findings regarding attitude changes toward homosexuality in the United States between 1973 and 2010. The use of a symbolic interactionist framework is useful in developing a deeper understanding of many of these findings. The means analysis of Approval of Homosexuality and Civil Liberties attitudes found that attitudes towards homosexuality have become increasingly liberal over time. A symbolic interactionist framework explains this change in attitudes over time as a change in the meaning that individuals and United States society attach to homosexual acts and gay and lesbian individuals. The various cultural, legal, and academic changes previously discussed in this research are examples of how the meaning United States society as a whole attaches to homosexuality have changed.

This analysis also found two distinct trends regarding Approval of Homosexuality versus Civil Liberties attitudes. The trend for Approval of Homosexuality reflected slight variation, but overall remained low in the years between 1973 and 1994, before entering into a period of gradual increase in the years between 1996 and 2010. This trend can be partially explained by examining the cultural context of homosexuality in the United States during this time period. The AIDS epidemic of the 1980's and the stigmatization of the homosexual community associated with the epidemic can explain why Approval of Homosexuality was low during this time. However, the in the years following the epidemic, media coverage of homosexuality and gay rights issues increased, with the 1990's experiencing a drastic shift in media representations of homosexuality and gay rights issues. The increase in approval of homosexuality attitudes in the

years after 1996 seem to reflect this shift in the meanings associated with homosexuality during this time.

A different trend emerged for the measures of homosexual Civil Liberties attitudes (Gay Speaker, Gay College Teacher, Gay Literature, & Same-Sex Marriage) in which mean responses steadily increased in the years between 1973 and 2010. This trend seems to reflect the shift in the laws regarding homosexuality that have steadily and gradually moved away from the persecution of homosexuals to the protection of gay rights.

There is a clear connection between the context of homosexuality in the United States in recent years and the changes in attitudes towards homosexuality. The symbolic interactionist framework is useful in explaining the reason for the overall change in attitudes towards homosexuality as a change in the meaning society and individuals attach to homosexuality.

In addition, the concept of meaning is important in understanding the difference in trends regarding Approval of Homosexuality versus Civil Liberties attitudes. A symbolic interactionist perspective would argue that the Approval of Homosexuality variable has a different meaning associated with it than the civil liberties questions asked. Approval of Homosexuality asks about the morality of homosexual relations, and thus has a more personal or individual meaning attached to it. This touches upon Blumer's (1936) conceptualization of the affective or "feeling" aspect of an attitude, which he argues is intrinsic to every social attitude. The civil liberties questions represent Blumer's concept of the symbolic character of attitudes in that they concern the restriction of individual rights based on sexual orientation, and thus represent a more symbolic or abstract conceptualization of homosexuality attitudes. Using this perspective, it can be argued that the trends for Approval of Homosexuality and civil liberties attitudes varied because Approval of Homosexuality represents respondents' personal feelings towards

homosexuality, while the civil liberties measures represent more abstract notions of equality and freedom.

The multiple regression analysis conducted in this research identified several significant demographic predictors of approval of homosexuality over time. This research found that age, sex, race, level of education, religious affiliation, and political affiliation were consistent predictors of Approval of Homosexuality in 1988, 1998, and 2010. Specifically, the results indicate that respondents were more approving of homosexuality if they were younger, female, White, and had higher levels of education. In addition, respondents who were Catholic, Jewish, not religious, or of other religious affiliations were more approving of homosexuality than Protestants. However, it must be noted that in this regression analysis, the Other Religion variable was not significant in the 1998 regression model. One possible reason may be that this variable included respondents who belonged to a wide range of religious affiliations other than the specific ones tested, and the religious makeup of this variable would differ from year to year. This research found that respondents who were politically moderate or conservative were less approving of homosexuality than those with politically liberal affiliations. The results of this regression analysis also found that the demographic predictor for social class was not significant over time. In addition, the variable for Other Race was not significant in any of the model years. In this research, the Other Race variable should be seen as a holding category, not as a reliable demographic predictor. Future research into demographic predictors should include a more comprehensive measure for social class and a more specific race variable which measures more than just White, Black, or Other.

The results of this regression analysis indicate that a number of specific demographic characteristics can serve as accurate predictors of Approval of Homosexuality. In addition, the

R^2 values of the regression models from 1988, 1998, 2010 data indicate that these demographic variables account for about 18%, 24%, and 27%, respectively, of how attitudes towards homosexuality are changing in the United States. In order to further explain these changes, the role of contact with homosexual individuals was explored.

This research highlighted changes in personal interaction with homosexual acquaintances over time. The means analysis of gay acquaintance variables showed that the number of respondents who personally knew a homosexual individual had increased in the years between 1992 and 2006. In addition, the comparison of mean responses found that youth respondents (ages 13-17) experienced a sharper increase in contact with homosexuals than adults (ages 18-94). This comparison of mean responses to gay acquaintance questions indicates that interpersonal contact with homosexual individuals has increased during the same time span in which approval of homosexuality and civil liberties attitudes have become more liberal. This indicates that interpersonal contact with gay acquaintances could be an important predictor in attitudes towards homosexuality and needs to be further researched. However, it must be noted that since this research did not use interpersonal contact as a predictor in the regression model, it cannot be directly correlated with changes in Approval of Homosexuality.

The role of demographic predictors and interpersonal contact can be explained by the premises of symbolic interaction which state that meanings of objects are not inherent and can be changed or modified through various interactions with others. The sources of information from which people derive meaning of homosexuality from over their life course are more numerous and varied than ever before. The increased visibility and more positive portrayals of homosexuality in the media are structural examples of changes in sources of meaning. The increased visibility of openly gay or lesbian individuals in society is an example of how the

sources of meaning attached to homosexuality have changed on an individual level. The results of this research reflect this change in visibility by finding that personal contact with homosexual acquaintances has increased in recent years. Additionally, when looking at demographic predictors of approval of homosexuality, this research found that age and level of education were significant predictors. Respondents who were younger and had higher levels of education have been shown to have more approving attitudes towards homosexuality. From a symbolic interactionist standpoint, these demographic groups may hold more approving attitudes because they have been exposed to more diverse and numerous sources from which to derive meaning of homosexuality.

Conversely, the examination of the role of demographic predictors and interpersonal contact through a symbolic interactionist framework also accounts for why some attitudes have changed and others have not. Various demographic characteristics may also inhibit the sources of meaning an individual has access to from which they construct their view of homosexuality from. This research found that respondents who were older, politically Conservative, and had a Protestant religious affiliation had less approving attitudes towards homosexuality. From a symbolic interactionist standpoint, older individuals may have less approving attitudes towards homosexuality because they grew up in an era in which homosexuality was not culturally accepted and they were not exposed to diverse sources from which to derive meaning. In addition, certain groups, such as political conservatives and various Protestant denominations, have traditionally taken a condemning stance towards homosexuality, thus limiting sources for individuals to construct a more positive meaning of homosexuality, and restricting the chances that homosexual individuals would be open about their sexuality in these groups.

Although the symbolic interactionism framework is useful in explaining some of the findings of this research, there are some weaknesses associated with using this as a theoretical explanation for the change in attitudes towards homosexuality in the United States. Primarily, although the theory can explain how the meaning of homosexuality has changed over time, it does not account for why. In other words, while events such as the change in attitudes, laws, and culture can be explained by the fact that the meaning of homosexuality has changed over time, symbolic interaction does not provide a sufficient paradigm with which to isolate specific factors that initially caused a change in meaning.

In addition to the theoretical weakness just discussed, there are some weaknesses of this study which must be considered. First, the measure for approval of homosexuality used a question that measured opinion of homosexual acts, not homosexual people. It can be argued that this does not paint a complete picture of public opinion regarding homosexuality and gay and lesbian individuals because it only uses one variable to measure approval. However, the variable was chosen as an indicator of approval due to the limited options available in the GSS data and because it had been used as such in previous research. Future research would benefit from the use of a more complete measure of approval of homosexuality that takes into account measures of tolerance for homosexual people and homosexual acts.

Additionally, the data used to measure interpersonal contact had several limitations that created weaknesses in this research. The CBS News data used to measure interpersonal contact did not allow for it to be included in a regression model with other predictors from the GSS data set; therefore this research does not consider interpersonal contact to be a predictor of attitudes, it merely suggests its importance as a possible predictor in future research and examines changes in contact with gay acquaintances over time. In addition, the variables used to measure

interpersonal contact were very crude measures of contact which did not specify the conditions of contact or nature of relationships. Further research would benefit from a more complete measure of contact with gay acquaintances over time.

CONCLUSIONS

This research has successfully built upon the previous knowledge of attitudes towards homosexuality in the United States by looking at the trends in attitudes in recent years and the predictors of such attitudes over time. In addition, this study explored changes in personal interaction with homosexual individuals over time and has attempted to fill a crucial gap by framing these changes with the sociological theory of symbolic interactionism.

While this study has added to the knowledge base of attitudes towards homosexuality, there are limitations to this research that should be improved upon in future studies. First, while the regression analysis used in this research found several significant demographic predictors of Approval of Homosexuality, it did not include all possible predictors of attitudes and some of the predictors tested lacked depth in the demographic options available for response. Future research could benefit by further exploring other demographic variables which may predict attitudes towards homosexuality and use more detailed demographic data. Specifically, more complete measures of social class, racial categories, and religious affiliation should be utilized.

Second, the data used to assess changes in interpersonal contact with homosexual individuals over time was limited in both sample size and years available. While this research identifies personal contact with homosexuals as a possible predictor of approval of homosexuality, there was no way to include it in a regression model due to the limitations of the data. Future research should incorporate measures of interpersonal contact with other demographic predictors to determine its strength as a predictor. Additionally, since the gay

acquaintance questions were only asked over four years in the 1990's and 2000's, the data does not give the most complete picture of interpersonal contact with gay acquaintances over time. One of the initial goals of this research was to compare trends in gay acquaintance responses with approval of homosexuality and civil liberties attitudes between 1973 and 2010; however due to the limited gay acquaintance data, a complete comparison was not possible. Future research would benefit from more complete data collection of gay acquaintance variables over time.

Finally, this was only a preliminary exploration of attitude change from a symbolic interactionist perspective using Blumer's three premises from the Situational orientation of the paradigm. Future research would benefit from using a more complete symbolic interactionist framework and should incorporate more of the theory's key concepts as well as contemporary symbolic interactionist perspectives, such as the Structural approach.

This study has built upon the previous research on attitudes towards homosexuality in two ways. First, this study updated previous research by comparing trends in mean responses to measures of morality of homosexuality and gay civil liberties attitudes between 1973 and 2010. Second, this study expanded upon research that examined demographic predictors of approval of homosexuality by investigating the significance of previously used demographic predictors over time.

The significance of this study is that it has connected several aspects of measures of attitudes towards homosexuality in a way so that future research may further explore this subject. This study was a preliminary attempt to use the symbolic interactionist framework to explain the patterns of change in homosexuality attitudes. The application of the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism has the potential not just to explain attitudinal change towards

homosexuality, but also a number of other issues. Additionally, this research examined interaction with gay acquaintances over time and suggests the future implications for testing interpersonal contact as a predictor of attitudes towards homosexuality, in conjunction with other previously used demographic predictors.

The change in attitudes towards homosexuality in the United States is a subject relevant to the current social context in the United States. The past decade in the United States has witnessed a dramatic increase in the portrayal of homosexuality in the media, public discourse over gay rights and homosexuality in general, and the legislation that affects America's homosexual citizens. Further research into how and why attitudes towards homosexuality have changed in the United States is essential, not only to inform academic knowledge, but also to inform public policy.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1: Approval of Homosexuality and Civil Liberties Attitudes Over Time (1973- 2010)

GSS year for respondent	Approval of Homosexuality[a]	Gay Speaker[b]	Gay College Teacher[b]	Gay Literature[c]	Same-sex marriage[d]
	Mean (N)	Mean (N)	Mean (N)	Mean (N)	Mean (N)
1973	1.56 (1417)	1.63 (1445)	1.49 (1438)	1.55 (1463)	
1974	1.62 (1361)	1.65 (1416)	1.53 (1404)	1.57 (1421)	
1976	1.70 (1426)	1.64 (1449)	1.54 (1448)	1.57 (1444)	
1977	1.65 (1453)	1.64 (1472)	1.51 (1462)	1.57 (1475)	
1980	1.62 (1397)	1.68 (1422)	1.57 (1410)	1.59 (1434)	
1982	1.59 (1771)	1.69 (1767)	1.57 (1757)	1.57 (1772)	
1984	1.63 (1412)	1.71 (1416)	1.61 (1409)	1.61 (1425)	
1985	1.59 (1484)	1.69 (1478)	1.60 (1483)	1.57 (1484)	
1987	1.51 (1750)	1.69 (1765)	1.58 (1749)	1.58 (1767)	
1988	1.54 (937)	1.73 (938)	1.59 (927)	1.63 (939)	1.96 (1307)
1989	1.63 (980)	1.78 (1003)	1.67 (982)	1.66 (996)	
1990	1.56 (872)	1.77 (880)	1.66 (871)	1.66 (889)	
1991	1.61 (926)	1.78 (966)	1.66 (954)	1.71 (960)	
1993	1.85 (1012)	1.81 (1038)	1.72 (1023)	1.69 (1026)	
1994	1.86 (1884)	1.81 (1941)	1.73 (1931)	1.71 (1928)	
1996	2.02 (1784)	1.83 (1878)	1.77 (1864)	1.71 (1861)	
1998	2.08 (1753)	1.83 (1825)	1.77 (1802)	1.73 (1795)	
2000	2.07 (1697)	1.83 (1799)	1.79 (1779)	1.73 (1795)	
2002	2.18 (884)	1.85 (900)	1.80 (900)	1.77 (900)	
2004	2.11 (868)	1.84 (890)	1.80 (886)	1.74 (887)	
2006	2.17 (1908)	1.83 (1961)	1.79 (1957)	1.76 (1966)	2.64 (1982)
2008	2.32 (1269)	1.83 (1322)	1.80 (1319)	1.76 (1324)	2.77 (1336)
2010	2.47 (1223)	1.87 (1258)	1.85 (1255)	1.78 (1258)	3.02 (1262)
Total	1.83 (31468)	1.75(32239)	1.67(32010)	1.66(32209)	2.58 (7071)

[a.] Score range 1 (always wrong) to 4 (not wrong at all); [b.] score range is 1 (not allowed) to 2 (allowed); [c.] score range is 1 (remove) to 2 (do not remove); [d.] score range is 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Figure 1: Approval of Homosexuality and Civil Liberties Attitudes Over Time (1973- 2010)

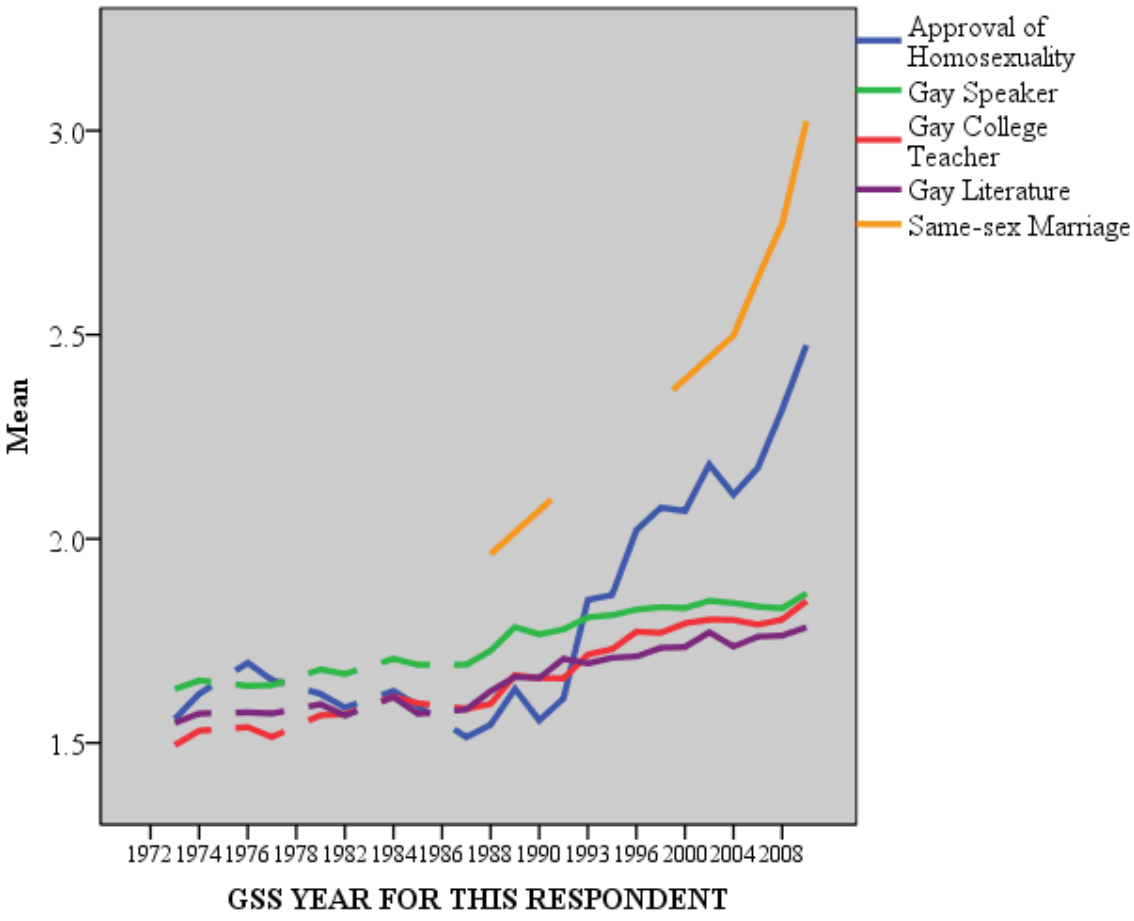


Table 2: Sample Sizes (with valid %) and Mean Responses by Demographic to Homosexual Relations Variable (1988, 1998, and 2010)

	1988		1998		2010	
	n (%)	**mean***	**n (%)**	**mean***	**n (%)**	**mean***
Age						
18-24	170 (11.5)	1.69	242 (8.5)	2.51	181 (8.9)	2.96
25-39	510 (34.4)	1.71	982 (34.7)	2.32	557 (27.3)	2.71
40-59	398 (26.9)	1.51	985 (34.8)	2.05	746 (36.5)	2.44
60-89	399 (26.9)	1.30	619 (21.9)	1.56	557 (27.3)	2.14
Sex						
Female	843 (56.9)	1.57	1600 (56.5)	2.13	1153 (56.4)	2.58
Male	638 (43.1)	1.51	1232 (43.5)	2.01	891 (43.6)	2.35
Race						
White	1234 (83.3)	1.59	2241 (79.1)	2.13	1550 (75.8)	2.58
Black	186 (12.6)	1.26	400 (14.1)	1.74	311 (15.2)	1.92
Other	61(4.1)	1.51	191 (6.7)	2.17	183 (9.0)	2.50
Education						
0-12	846 (57.1)	1.31	1337 (47.2)	1.78	904 (44.2)	2.08
13-16	512 (34.6)	1.81	1178 (41.6)	2.29	858 (42.0)	2.67
17-20	120 (8.1)	2.13	305 (10.8)	2.55	277 (13.6)	3.05
Social Class						
17.1-37.2	578 (39.0)	1.39	947 (33.4)	1.85	673 (32.9)	2.23
37.3-57.2	423 (28.6)	1.47	753 (26.6)	2.08	532 (26.0)	2.44
57.3-77.2	272 (18.4)	1.88	707 (25.0)	2.38	463 (22.7)	2.67
77.3-97.2	114 (7.7)	2.03	265 (9.4)	2.19	207 (10.1)	2.90
Religion						
Protestant	906 (61.2)	1.39	1524 (54.5)	1.78	973 (47.9)	2.05
Catholic	384 (25.9)	1.60	705 (25.2)	2.26	482 (23.7)	2.55
Jewish	30 (2.0)	2.76	50 (1.8)	3.23	37 (1.8)	3.34
No religion	118 (8.0)	2.33	396 (14.2)	2.83	363 (17.9)	3.26
Other relig.	42 (2.8)	2.00	122 (4.4)	2.01	176 (8.7)	1.42
Political Views						
Liberal	399 (28.2)	1.95	772 (28.7)	2.74	567 (28.7)	3.02
Conservative	503 (35.5)	1.39	933 (34.7)	1.66	660 (33.5)	1.98
Moderate	514 (36.3)	1.43	986 (36.6)	1.97	746 (37.8)	2.55

*mean= Approval of Homosexuality variable by predictor variable. Score range 1 (always wrong) to 4 (not wrong at all).

Table 3: Results of Multiple Regression Analysis of Predictors of Approval of Homosexual Relations by Year

Variable	1988		1998		2010	
	b	***SE***	***b***	***SE***	***b***	***SE***
Constant	.973	.213	1.89	.203	1.87	.240
Age	-.005*	.002	-.013***	.002	-.012***	.002
Female[a]	.267***	.071	.197**	.061	.286***	.074
Black[b]	-.340**	.108	-.357***	.092	-.718***	.114
Other race[b]	-.127	.176	-.236	.134	-.237	.141
Education	.054***	.014	.067***	.013	.089***	.015
Social Class	.005*	.002	.004	.002	.002	.002
Catholic[c]	.178*	.080	.381***	.076	.423***	.097
Jewish[c]	.791**	.260	1.14***	.231	.912***	.243
No religion[c]	.717***	.416	.717***	.095	.864***	.105
Other religion[c]	.604**	.221	-.023	.142	.476**	.140
Pol. Conservative[d]	-.477***	.089	-.885***	.077	-.937***	.098
Pol. Moderate[d]	-.418***	.089	-.568***	.076	-.378***	.092
R^2 (adjusted)	.180		.236		.273	
N=	841		1553		1103	

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***<.001.

a. Reference category is male; b. Reference category is white; c. reference category is Protestant; d. reference category is politically liberal.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for CBS News Poll Data (1992-2006)

Variable	Year	Age range	N	% Yes**
Gay acquaintance 1*	1992	18-94	1804	48.7
Gay acquaintance 2*	1998	13-17	1041	42.2
Gay acquaintance 3*	2004	18-94	1191	58.6
Gay acquaintance 4*	2006	13-17	310	66.8

* Score range is 1 (no) to 2 (yes).
** % = valid percent

Figure 2: Mean Responses to Gay Acquaintance Questions by Age Group

