

Attitudes towards homosexuality in a sample of Novi Sad (Serbia) population

Pavlica Tatjana, Sikora Čaba, and Rakić Rada

University of Novi Sad, Serbia

Address correspondence to: Tatjana Pavlica, Department for Biology and Ecology, Faculty of Sciences, Trg Dositeja Obradovića 2, 21000 Novi Sad, Serbia. Ph.: +381641838887; Fax +38121450-620; E-mail: tatjana.pavlica@dbe.uns.ac.rs

Abstract

Objectives. Serbia is generally considered to be socially conservative with regard to the rights of homosexual individuals. The aim of this study was to investigate the attitudes towards homosexuality in a sample population of the city of Novi Sad.

Material and methods. The survey was conducted in 2014, and included high schools and institutions chosen as a combining random sample. The total number of respondents was 242 and their age ranged from 14 to 59 years. The instrument was an anonymous questionnaire (Homophobia Scale – HS) (Wright, Adams, and Bernat, 1999) that consisted of 25 statements. Respondents answer on a 5-point Likert scale of 1 (Strongly Agree) to 5 (Strongly Disagree).

Results. Analysis of the survey points to a moderate degree of homophobia in respondents. Males express higher homophobia (38.69 ± 22.56) than females (24.79 ± 17.37). In both males and females, inter-factor percentage of homonegativism is highest in Factor 3 – Cognitive Negativism, and lowest regarding Factor 2 – Behavioral Aggression. Higher means of total homophobia are detected in both male and female respondents with secondary education. Homophobia is most noticeable in youngest age category and least observable in the category 40-59 years of age.

Conclusion. The study contributes to enlarging the database on the attitudes of Serbian population toward homosexual individuals. The results indicate that negative attitudes are still present in the population. Similar studies in the future can contribute to widening public consciousness and reducing ignorance, prejudice and stereotypes regarding homosexuality.

Keywords: homosexuality, homophobia, index, homonegativism, and sexual orientation.

Introduction

Societal attitudes toward homosexuality vary greatly in different cultures and different historical periods (Murray, 2000). Many societies and cultures have their own values regarding appropriate and inappropriate sexuality. In modern society, heterosexuality represents a behavioral norm and still in many parts of the world, minority groups, such as homosexual individuals, are exposed to stereotypes. Generalizing negative experience to a whole group, stereotypes, prejudices, lack of knowledge can lead to unreal social distances and even unjustified discrimination (Rada, 2011). Although in some countries support for LGBT rights has been rising, such as legal recognition of same-sex marriage, anti-discrimination laws and others, in many parts of the world there is still disapproval and discrimination against LGBT people. A new Pew Research Center's 2013 Global Attitudes survey finds huge variance by region on the broader question of whether homosexuality should be accepted or rejected by society. The survey of public opinion in 39 countries finds a broad acceptance of homosexuality in richest countries, where religion is a less central issue, like North America, the European Union, most of Latin America and parts of Asia. On the contrary, in Muslim nations and Africa, as well as in some parts of Asia, a noticeable

disapproval and rejection of homosexuality is still present. A longitudinal research has demonstrated that legal rights for LGB people have been accompanied by a decrease in negative attitudes towards homosexuality among younger age groups (Andersen, Fetner, 2008). Some investigations (Lottes, Alkula, 2011) show that most of the post-communist countries differ from the rest of Europe in respect to low justifications of homosexuality.

Serbia is generally considered to be socially conservative with regard to the rights of homosexual individuals. (http://www.yucom.org.rs/upload/vestgalerija_61_18/1210849633_GS0_EWSSPECIAL-english-05142008-HomophobiaSurvey.pdf). A study conducted in 2009 (Radoman, 2011) on a sample of 2500 high school students from six Serbian cities has shown that 60% of the examinees approve of the violence over LGBT population. Homophobia was recorded in 28.7% of individuals, 29.1% of them showed moderate degree of homophobia; while in 27.9% of cases non-homophobic attitude was recorded. Males represented the majority of homophobic subjects, while females dominated in the non-homophobic group. A comparison with the study conducted in 2011 suggests that the number of more liberal attitudes has risen, while the number of extreme responses has remained the same (Radoman, 2011).

The studies conducted in Serbia on the attitudes towards homosexuality have been scarce. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to examine the attitudes towards homosexuality and to assess the cognitive, emotional and behavioral components of homophobia in the population of the city of Novi Sad.

Material and methods

The survey was conducted in 2014 in the city of Novi Sad and included high schools and institutions chosen as a combining random sample. The total number of respondents was 242 and their age ranged from 14 to 59 years. The study was conducted in direct contact with the examinees. Prior to completing the survey, the respondents were informed with the aim and purpose of the investigation and in general it took them 5 to 10 minutes to complete the survey.

The study implied nonexperimental research method and the data were obtained by means of a survey. The instrument was an anonymous questionnaire (Homophobia Scale – HS) (Wright, Adams, and Bernat, 1999) that consisted of 25 statements and demographic data such as sex, age and level of education. The respondents' answers included a 5-point Likert scale of 1 (Strongly Agree) to 5 (Strongly Disagree). The main characteristic of the scale is that it measures the attitudes towards homosexual individuals referring to homonegativism and excluding the entire construct of homophobia. The scale differs from other homophobia measuring instruments as it includes issues such as social avoidance and aggressive behaviour, apart from psychological statements. There are three factors in the scale: Behaviour/Negative Affect, Affect /Behavioral Aggression and Cognitive Negativism. For each of the three factors, inter-factor percentage of homonegativism was assessed. It is calculated by dividing a factor value with the highest number in the scale and the obtained result is multiplied by 100.

Microsoft Office Excel was used for data processing and the data was processed both qualitatively and quantitatively (percentages).

The formal consent for conducting the survey was obtained by the Scientific Board of Department of Biology and Ecology, University of Novi Sad, as well as by the principles of schools in which the questionnaires were distributed.

Results

There were 242 respondents, including more females (N = 151; 62.39%) than males (N = 91; 37.60%). The average age of the sample was 26.73 ± 9.36 years, with no great difference between the female and male respondents (females 26.54 ± 9.83 ; males 27.05 ± 8.89 years). The largest percentage of respondents (57.02%) is represented by adults between the ages 20 and 39, while the smallest percentage of them could be found in the age category 40-59 years (9.5%).

As for the level of education, 52.07% of respondents had secondary education, while the rest of the sample had higher education. There were no respondents with only primary education.

Table 1 shows the degree of homophobia in relation to the respondents' gender. There are results of total degree of homophobia, and in relation to one of the three factors: Behaviour/Negative Affect, Affect/Behavioral Aggression and Cognitive Negativism. The total degree of homophobia is assessed using the results of all three factors with final value representing the combined result distributed on the scale 0-100. It can be observed that the degree of homophobia in general equals 30.31 ± 20.57 , with males showing higher level of homophobia (38.69 ± 22.56) than females (24.79 ± 17.37). The male respondents also show higher values of individual factors, when compared to females. In both males and females, inter-factor percentage of homonegativism is highest in Factor 3, Cognitive Negativism, and lowest regarding Factor 2, Behavioral Aggression.

Table 1. Degree of homophobia in relation to the respondents' gender

Degree of homophobia	Females		Males		Total	
	X	SD	X	SD	X	SD
Total degree of homophobia 0 - 100	24.79	17.37	38.69	22.56	30.31	20.57
Factor 1	9.30 23.25*	7.79	15.93 39.83*	10.30	11.79 29.47*	9.37
Factor 2	7.81 19.53*	6.85	12.55 31.37*	8.63	9.59 23.97*	7.90
Factor 3	7.68 38.40*	4.60	10.21 51.05*	6.00	8.63 43.15*	5.30

* *Inter-factor percentage of homonegativism*

Table 2 presents the results of the degree of homophobia in relation to the respondents' education. Higher means of total homophobia are detected in both male and female respondents with secondary education (in females 30.72 ± 18.73 , in males 45.31 ± 25.00). The means of each of the three factors are also higher in respondents with secondary education, implying the presence of higher level of homonegativism in this population. In both groups of respondents the highest level of homonegativism is observed in Factor 3, i.e. the largest number of negative statements is related to cognitive negativism. Inter-factor percentage of homonegativism in female and male respondents equals 45.90% and 57.53%, respectively.

Table 2. Degree of homophobia in relation to the respondents' education

Degree of homophobia	Secondary education				Higher education			
	X	SD	X	SD	X	SD	X	SD
Sex	F		M		F		M	
Total degree of homophobia <i>0 - 100</i>	X=36.38 SD=22.45				X=23.10 SD=15.69			
	30.72	18.73	45.31	25.00	18.63	13.38	30.98	16.50
Factor 1	11.51 28.77*	8.75	18.65 46.63*	11.04	7.00 17.50*	5.88	12.76 31.90*	8.44
Factor 2	10.03 25.07*	7.69	15.18 37.95*	9.66	5.51 13.77*	4.96	9.48 23.70*	6.05
Factor 3	9.18 45.90*	4.41	11.47 57.53*	6.59	6.12 30.60*	4.31	8.74 43.70*	4.91

* *Inter-factor percentage of homonegativism*

Table 3 shows degree of homophobia in relation to the age categories. As the results indicate, homophobia is most noticeable in the youngest age category (38.95±23.22), and least observable in the category 40-59 years of age (24.22±13.77). Similar results refer to each of the three factors. Male and female respondents aged 14-19 years show the highest means in all three factors. Older groups of respondents express similar degree of homophobia in relation to each of the factors and in that way show that their attitudes toward homosexuality are identical. The total results suggest that homonegativism is most noticeable in the youngest respondents.

Table 3. Degree of homophobia in relation to the age categories

Age category	14 – 19 years		20 – 39 years		40 – 59 years	
Sex	F	M	F	M	F	M
Total degree of homophobia <i>0 – 100</i>	X=38.95 SD=23.22		X=25.75 SD=18.12		X=24.22 SD=13.77	
X	32.46	50.58	20.82	32.95	20.46	34.83
SD	19.90	24.52	15.21	19.70	10.20	17.85
Factor 1	12.25 30.63*	20.45 51.13*	7.85 19.63*	13.73 34.33*	7.23 18.07*	14.67 35.93*
SD	9.39	10.93	6.70	9.43	4.21	9.60
Factor 2	11.15 27.87*	18.03 45.07*	6.01 15.03*	9.95 24.87*	6.29 15.73*	10.33 25.83*
SD	8.18	9.40	5.48	7.16	4.57	5.28
Factor 3	9.06 45.30*	12.10 60.05*	6.96 34.80*	9.27 46.35*	6.94 34.70*	9.83 49.15*
SD	4.53	7.10	4.75	5.32	3.19	5.04

* *Inter-factor percentage of homonegativism*

Discussion

The paper presents the level of homophobia expressed in a sample of Novi Sad population. The results point to a moderate degree of homophobia in respondents. Males express higher homophobia (38.69 ± 22.56) than females (24.79 ± 17.37). In comparison with the study conducted with American students of average age 22.38 ± 4.12 years (Wright, Adams, and Bernat, 1999), where the average degree of homophobia equaled 32.04 ± 19.76 , the sample of Novi Sad population expresses a slightly lower level of homophobia.

The respondents showed lowest level of negativism in relation to behavior aggression, i.e. aggressive behavior toward homosexuals. In males, this factor is present in 31.37%, while in females it is lower, 19.53 %. Negative behavior (Factor 1), however, appears to be more present among the respondents. This factor is also less observable in females, 23.25 %, than in males, 39.83%. The largest number of respondents in this survey expresses cognitive negativism (Factor 3), probably due to the social context and cultural norms of the Republic of Serbia. This means that homophobia is mostly expressed verbally by thoughts and ideas that reflect traditional values, the concept of family, religion etc. The results of the survey also show that behavior aggression and negative behaviour, although expressed in smaller percentage, are still present in the population of the city of Novi Sad. This implies that the concept of socially acceptable behaviour regarding the restriction of violence and discrimination of LGBT population is one of the frequent topics in public discourse.

Stigma against homosexuality has reduced in the last 30 years (Smith and Mathews, 2007). European Parliament has recently passed a resolution on condemning homophobia in European Union (Cavanagh, 2006). In some countries of Central and Eastern Europe, however, there is still a severe political and public disapproval on the rights of homosexuals (Sheeter, 2006). The reason for expressing homonegativism in these countries lies in socio-cultural norms and normative dimensions of collective history (Brajdić-Vuković and Štulhofer, 2012). Some studies (Štulhofer and Rimac, 2008) have confirmed that economically stronger countries (such as Scandinavian countries) show less prejudice toward homosexuality. Prior studies conducted in Europe (Štulhofer and Rimac, 2008, Gerhards, 2010), focusing on the influence of macro determinants on the attitudes toward homosexuality, report that countries with economic stability, higher level of modernization and urbanization and lower religious influence show more acceptable attitudes toward homosexuality.

In Serbia, as well as in other Eastern European countries, the issue of homosexuality has been marginalized. After decriminalization of homosexuality in Serbia in 1994, it took 15 years to pass the law against discrimination based on sexual orientation. The first verdict for hate speech against LGBT population has recently been pronounced (Dunjić-Kostić et al., 2012).

The present study has confirmed that females express more liberal attitudes and lower level of homophobia than males. Other studies report (Steffens and Wagner, 2004, Verweij et al., 2008) that in almost all other cultures males express more negative attitudes toward homosexuality and are more likely to condemn male homosexuals than female ones. They also appear to possess less knowledge regarding homosexuality and this fact can be explained by their negative attitude in general (Arnold et al., 2004, Dunjić-Kostić et al., 2012). The reason for these differences lies in the fact that the concept of homosexuality is more associated with male homosexuality and therefore there is more chance that a homosexual individual may become attracted to a man who does not express homonegativism (Brajdić-Vuković and Štulhofer, 2012). In their study among student population, Grabovac et al. (2014) report on differences in attitudes between males and females, pointing to less negative attitudes expressed by females. They also report that senior students show

more positive attitudes and greater knowledge concerning homosexuality in contrast to younger students.

The present results suggest that males express higher level of homonegativism than females and that this attitude has the highest prevalence among teenagers. The reason for this may be found in socialization and strong influence of school, media and idols on this population. On the other hand, middle-aged respondents express lowest level of homonegativism, as they leave the period of prolonged adolescence when their self-sensibility reduces. A study conducted in some countries of Southeast Europe (Brajdić-Vuković and Štulhofer, 2012) has shown that the age represents the most reliable predictor of homonegativism. Age is one of the most influential factors in the context of stigmatization. Dunjić-Kostić et al. (2012) found no correlation between age and stigmatization. However, some other studies (Herek&Gonzalkez-Rivera, 2006) report that older participants show increased tendency to condemn homosexual and bisexual individuals than younger generation. In Belgium (Hooghe, 2011), homophobia is widely spread among adolescents, particularly boys. In Italian high schools (Prati, Prietrantoni, D'Augelli, 2011) homonegativism is widely spread in forms of verbal abuse, written insults, social exclusion and physical harassment, particularly towards male students.

This study has shown that education is a factor that considerably influences the attitudes toward homosexuality. Higher level of homophobia, in both males and females, is detected in respondents with secondary education. The results suggest that homonegativism lowers with higher level of education. Other studies (Brajdić-Vuković and Štulhofer, 2012) also suggest that education eliminates homonegativism, as it has been observed in Croatia, Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo. The study conducted with medical students in Belgrade (Dunjić-Kostić et al., 2012) shows that substantial knowledge on homosexuality reduces stigmatization.

Conclusion

The results of the study represent a small segment of investigations conducted on this research question. In spite of including a small number of participants, the study contributes to enlarging the database on the attitudes of Serbian population toward homosexual individuals. One of the limitations of the study is the fact that people with primary education did not take part in the survey. The obtained results point to moderate level of homophobia among the respondents. At the same time, they indicate that negative attitudes are still present in the population. The results point to the necessity of conducting similar studies in the future, as they can contribute to widening public consciousness and reducing ignorance, prejudice and stereotypes regarding homosexuality. Gaining better knowledge on this issue enables better understanding and acceptance of this sort of sexual orientation and builds healthy social relations that have effect on mental health.

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