

SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS GAY MEN AND LESBIANS IN NAMIBIA: RESULTS FROM AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript explores the attitudes towards gay men and lesbians of social work students in Namibia. While previous published research has explored social work students' attitudes towards this population in numerous international contexts, no published research presents the perspectives of students within Southern Africa. Results presented are based on a sample of 193 undergraduate social work students in an accredited social work degree programme at a Namibian public university. Results indicate an overall low level of open and accepting attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. Using both bivariate and multivariate analyses, the findings indicate that females, students from Namibia, students who know someone identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) and those who attend religious affiliations less often are more accepting of gay men and lesbians. Suggestions for addressing high levels of negative attitudes towards gay men and lesbians are addressed in terms of curricular integration and increasing opportunities for student exposure to LGBT populations.

Keywords: social work, students, gay, lesbian, attitudes, Namibia, Southern Africa

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world, social workers are charged with providing services to some of the most marginalised and vulnerable populations in society. Much of this work is driven by the belief that social workers have a unique role to play in addressing social and economic injustices in society. Historically, social workers also have a key role to play in reducing stigma and discrimination against vulnerable or at-risk populations, and promoting accepting and inclusive

societies where all citizens have access to the equal rights and responsibilities afforded to all citizens.

Because of this core professional value of recognising the dignity and worth of individuals, and embracing the goal of promoting social and economic justice, it follows that one component of social work education involves exposing social work students to diverse populations in an attempt to sensitise them to the common experiences and needs of these populations. It is thought that exposure to these unique situations while in the university environment will allow students to develop compassionate, empathetic attitudes towards those populations who are socially excluded, or deemed to be vulnerable or at-risk. It is against this backdrop that the current study, which focused on social work students' attitudes towards gay men and lesbians at one public university in Namibia, was conducted.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Namibian context

Sharing a border with South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Angola, Namibia is a large country (over 820,000 sq. km), and is one of the least densely populated countries in the world, with less than 2.5 people per square kilometre (Government of the Republic of Namibia 2012). Namibia was originally colonised by Germany in the late 1800's and then was administered as a region of South Africa from 1910–1990. Under South African administration, Namibia (then known as South West Africa) was subjected to the laws of the South African government, including enforcement of apartheid policies from 1948 until its independence in 1990. Today, Namibia is a culturally and linguistically diverse country of over 2.1 million inhabitants. While internet and satellite television are available, they are not accessible to the vast majority of Namibian citizens given that almost 65 per cent of the population live on less than USD\$2.00 per day (Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative 2009) and that the majority (57%) of the population continue to rely on wood for heating, light, and cooking (Laurea University of Applied Sciences 2012).

While persecution against gay men and lesbians is not as pronounced in Namibia as in many other African countries, there is clear evidence of marginalisation of the LGBT community. In the recent past, the negative attitudes towards this population came from the highest reaches of government, including the founding President of Namibia and the Minister of Home Affairs. In 2001, the former president declared in a speech at the University of Namibia, 'The Republic of Namibia does not allow homosexuality, lesbianism here. Police are ordered to arrest you and deport you and imprison you, too'. Several weeks later, the then-

President urged officials to root out gays and lesbians, adding they should not be allowed 'to do their bad things here' (BBC 2001, para. 6). During subsequent years in office, the President called homosexuality 'the devil at work' (Klauda 2010) and pledged to ban gay tourists from flying into Namibia (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2001). In line with comments from the Head of State, in 2001 the Minister of Home Affairs denied the existence of black gay or lesbian Namibians and told a group of 700 new police officers to eliminate gays from the face of the country (Munnion 2001).

While the forceful rhetoric from the Namibian government has decreased in recent years, considerable challenges remain. For example, incidents of corrective rape are reported, negative media comments persist, and assaults, including the physical assault on Namibia's first 'Mr. Gay Namibia' illustrate the continuing climate of hostility and fear in which many gay and lesbian Namibians exist (Garcia 2011).

Further, while very little formal research has been conducted or reported on the LGBT community in Namibia, several data sources support the authors' conclusions that LGBT persons experience high levels of marginalisation and social exclusion within Namibian society. For example, Baral et al. (2009) report that stigma and discrimination limit the access of men who have sex with men (MSM) to quality and non-discriminatory healthcare services. Further, 18 per cent of MSM in the capital city, Windhoek, reported that they are afraid to seek health services. In the same study, it was reported that 41.5 per cent of MSM have suffered some form of human rights abuse, including over twenty percent (21.7%) of respondent reporting being beaten by a government or police official (Baral et al. 2009).

Perceptions of gay men and lesbians in Africa

Many cultures within Southern Africa can be described as 'culturally conservative' with respect to gay and lesbian issues. It is quite common to view gayness as a 'European import' and something that is not endemic to traditional African cultures (Goering 2004). This attitude is further supported through the proliferation of sodomy laws that were enacted during the colonial period, and were largely left in place after independence (Murray and Viljoen 2007). One of the rare exceptions is South Africa, which ensures equality to all citizens in its 1994 democratic constitution (Cochrane 2006). Because of this inclusive constitution, South Africa was one of the first countries in the world to legalise marriage equality for same sex couples, and remains the only African country to do so (BBC 2006.)

However, there has recently been an increase in media visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues across the African continent. Unfortunately, most of this news is not encouraging for advocates of tolerance and social justice for marginalised populations.

For example, in 2009 Uganda proposed legislation that included life sentences for being gay or lesbian, and the option of invoking the death penalty for repeat offenders (Alsop 2009). It was only after international opposition, including threatened cuts in foreign aid from Western countries, that this proposed bill was dropped. However, a similar bill was reintroduced for consideration in 2012, but with the death penalty stripped from the bill in favour of life sentences for accused gay men and lesbians, and jail terms for those who fail to report suspected homosexuals to the police within 24 hours (Rizzo 2012). This bill was signed into law in 2014 by the President, but later nullified by the Constitutional Court (BBC 2014).

Also in Uganda, the names of 100 'suspected homosexuals' were published in a national newspaper with the tagline 'Hang them'. Just two months later, a prominent lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) activist was found murdered in his home (Rice 2011).

In Senegal, it was reported that bodies of suspected gay men have been dug up and dumped at the front door of their family's homes (Associated Press 2010). Furthermore, in 2010 in Malawi, the police arrested and imprisoned two gay men who held a private engagement ceremony symbolising their commitment to one another (Bearak 2010). It was only after international media attention that the government of Malawi dropped the charges against the couple.

As previously stated, South Africa's progressive constitution and recognition of marriage rights for gay and lesbian couples is generally regarded as an exemplar for recognition of the human rights of gay men and lesbians on the African continent. However, despite its inclusive constitution and formal commitment to equality, South Africa continues to struggle with LGBT issues. Cases of corrective rape, where a woman who is perceived as being a lesbian is raped in order to change her sexual orientation, are frequently reported in the local news (Middleton 2011; Smith 2011). This issue has received significant international news attention to try to pressure the government into addressing this issue as a violation of the constitution and a hate crime (Kinama 2011).

Global social work context

The professional recognition, practice, and education of social work varies from country to country. However, there are some typical elements of a social work education program, including content on human behaviour and development, social work practice methods, research and data analysis, policy, and human diversity/social justice. How exactly this gets implemented will vary from country to country. There are however, global standards for social work education that are codified in the work of the International Federation of Social Workers, which is a global federation of national organisations of social workers. This organisation is

striving for social justice, human rights and social development through the development of social work, best practices and international cooperation between social workers and their professional organisations (International Federation of Social Workers 2011). Additionally, there are country and regional level social work associations that assist in developing standards related to the education and practice standards of social work in that particular country. In the case of Namibia, a Council for Psychology and Social Work serves as the bearer of standards with respect to professional recognition of social workers in the country. This responsibility is outlined in the Social Work and Psychology Act (Government of the Republic of Namibia 2004), which was enacted by Parliament and formally recognises the professional of social work, and mandates the creation of a Health Professions Council to regulate the profession. Further, Namibia is a member of the African Association of Schools of Social Work (ASSWA), which serves as a professional networking body for social work education on the African continent.

Social workers and social work students' attitudes towards gay men and lesbians

For the past 25 years, a variety of social science research has been undertaken to better understanding the attitudes of practicing social workers and students towards the lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) community and illuminate the various ways in which attitudes influence practice behaviours. This area of scholarship, which has historically been concentrated in the USA, has also recently expanded to include social work educators' attitudes towards LGBT individuals not only in the USA, but worldwide. A review of the existing professional literature reveals published studies of attitudes of social workers on a variety of topics including gay and lesbian foster care (Brooks and Goldberg 2001), adoption (Newman, Dannenfelser and Benishek 2002), and marriage (Woodford et al. 2012). While this work largely utilises cross sectional designs using non-probability sampling techniques, some tentative conclusions can be drawn. For example, factors supporting a high level of anti-gay bias include religiosity (Cotton-Huston and Waite 1999), rural upbringing (Snively et al. 2004), and a lack of contact with gay men and lesbians (Hinrichs and Rosenberg 2002). Finally, there is some support that gay men may experience higher levels of stigma and discrimination than lesbians (Cramer 1997; Herek 2000).

One recent published article summarised the state of the current professional literature by systematically reviewing published research that focused on social work professionals and social work students' attitudes towards LGBT individuals. In this manuscript Chonody and Smith (2013) reviewed published research from 1980–2012 that focused primarily on anti-gay

bias. The authors initially identified 56 published articles for possible inclusion in the analysis, but specifically excluded articles that were theoretical in nature, or included participants from outside of the United States of America. After applying these exclusionary criteria, 31 articles were included in the systematic review, including eight focused on professionals' attitudes, one that focused on faculty attitudes; and 22 focusing on students' attitudes towards LGBT individuals.

There was considerable variation in the extrapolated findings among the studies that focused on social workers attitudes towards gay men and lesbians (Chonody and Smith 2013). First, social workers were found to be more homophobic than psychologists in a 1984 study, while a 1987 study found 90 per cent of the sample scored on the low end of a scale of homophobia. Further, a 1990 study found that 41 per cent of the sample (N=264) of social workers disagreed that homosexuality is a natural expression of love and affection. However, more recent scholarship (after 1997) indicates generally accepting positive and attitudes of practicing social workers, low levels of homophobia and anti-gay bias.

The student-focused studies included in the systematic review were grouped into several different themes, including heterosexism (defined as the assumption that all people are heterosexual and that heterosexuality is superior and more desirable than homosexuality or bisexuality (James Madison University nd.) and anti-gay bias; working with difficult family situations; using social work education to change attitudes and beliefs; and investigations into the differences between social work and non-social work students. Of particular interest given the context of the current study are studies that focus on heterosexism and anti-gay bias and the impact of choice in major (field of study) on attitudes towards LGBT individuals.

Chonody and Smith (2013) concluded that the existing scholarship focusing on social work students' attitudes towards LGBT individuals reveals mostly positive attitudes towards this population. Through this systematic analysis, the authors identified variables that may influence level of acceptance, including age, sex, having friends and family who identify as LGBT; and religiosity/religious affiliation. The authors noted that the existing literature is evenly split as to whether race or ethnicity is a relevant variable for independent consideration, or if it confounds relationships with other socio-demographic variables.

When examining the differences between social work and non-social work students, Chonody and Smith (2013) found in multiple studies that social work students tended to be more accepting than students from other majors, and that masters level students held more positive attitudes than undergraduates. However, this was not a universal truth, given that that three studies concluded that neither a major nor the years of study were significant. The research findings were also split as to whether urbanicity is a relevant predictor variable. However, existing literature were unambiguous that political affiliation, parental homophobia,

homophobic friends, belief that homosexuality is a choice, and adherence to traditional gender roles were statistically significant relationships.

While the identification of factors influencing social work students' attitudes towards gay men and lesbians is important, it is equally important to note that the bulk of literature in this area is published from the United States, and represents a different experience than those individuals living in Sub-Saharan Africa. It includes countries, like Namibia, which are large, primarily rural, developing countries that have traditionally had limited access to outside influence. However, this does not negate the lessons that can be learned through this scholarship. Rather, the accumulation of over two decades of social science research into the topic provide a useful basis for consideration when considering student attitudes in an African context.

METHOD

Research questions

The research questions guiding this inquiry included:

1. What is the general attitude towards gay men and lesbians among social work students in Namibia?
2. Are there significant differences between attitudes towards gay men and lesbians?
3. Are there significant levels of difference based on a student's age, sex, year of study, religiosity, country of origin, or knowledge of a person who is LGBT?

Ethical considerations

After review and approval by the University's Ethics Review Committee, questionnaires were administered in a classroom setting at the end of a regular course meeting. Given the lack of exposure to participating in research projects, the administering investigator explained the informed consent document, the study procedures, and reviewed the concepts of anonymity and voluntary participation. Participants were then provided with copies of the instrument, as well as copies of the informed consent document. Consistent with the Namibian Social Work Association's ethical guidelines, no inducements or incentives were offered to participants.

MEASURES

Demographic Questionnaire

The demographic questionnaire contained nine questions designed to yield data related to

participants gender, age, year of study, primary language, country of origin, religious affiliation, level of religious participation, sexual orientation, and whether the participants knew anyone who identified as gay or lesbian.

Attitudes towards gay men and lesbians scale

The primary data collection instrument utilised was the Attitudes towards Gays and Lesbians Scale (ATLG). The researchers opted to use the long-version (20 questions), with two subscales of 10 questions with one measuring attitudes towards gay men and the other towards lesbians. This instrument was first published in 1984 (Herek 1984) with subsequent research validating the psychometric properties of the instrument. The 20 statements on the ATLG scale were responded to using a likert-type scale, with responses ranging from 1 to 9, with 1 indicating strong disagreement with the statement and 9 indicating strong agreement. The total score was calculated by first reverse scoring any negatively worded statements, and then calculating a total score for the participant. Using a 9-point likert scale in the current study, the lowest possible score was 20 and the highest possible score was 180.

The ATLG and its subscales have consistently shown high levels of internal consistency. As would be expected, higher *alpha* levels have been reported when longer versions of the scale are used and when the scale is administered in paper-and-pencil format. With college student samples, completing a written version of the ATLG or its short forms, *alpha* levels are typically greater than .85 for the subscales and .90 for the full scale (Herek 1987a, 1987b, 1988).

The ATLG and its subscales are consistently correlated with other theoretically relevant constructs. Higher scores (more negative attitudes) correlate significantly with high religiosity, lack of contact with gay men and lesbians, adherence to traditional sex-role attitudes, belief in a traditional family ideology, and high levels of dogmatism (Herek 1987a, 1987b, 1988, 1994; Herek and Glunt 1993; Herek and Capitanio 1995, 1996). In addition, high ATLG scores (more negative attitudes toward gay men) are positively correlated with AIDS-related stigma (Herek 1994; Herek and Glunt 1991).

Finally, the ATLG's discriminant validity has also been established. Members of lesbian and gay organisations scored at the extreme positive end of the range (Herek 1988), and nonstudent adults who publicly supported a local gay rights initiative scored significantly lower on the ATLG than did community residents who publicly opposed the initiative (Herek 1994).

Cultural appropriateness of the instrument

With respect to the international application of this instrument, it has a long history of successful use in a variety of cultural and linguistic contexts. Recent successful studies using

this instrument were conducted in Turkey (Gelban and Duyan 2006) and Chile (Cardenas and Barrientos 2008).

The investigators made one minor change to the instrument to ensure that the instrument was relevant for the target population. Item six originally read '... decline in American values'. This statement was changed to read 'decline in African values'.

PARTICIPANTS

The sample for the current study was comprised of 193 individuals enrolled in a social work degree programme in Namibia. As is discussed in the results section (participants sub-section), the participants represented all four years of the baccalaureate social work degree programme, come from seven countries, speak 29 different native languages, and include students whose ages range from 18–50.

DATA MANAGEMENT AND ANALYSIS

Completed questionnaires were assigned a unique identification number and entered into Microsoft Excel. Upon entering the data, the investigator reviewed the spreadsheet and excluded any participants who failed to answer 10 per cent or more of the survey questions, or who did not complete the demographic questionnaire. Given these exclusionary criteria, no participants were excluded from the total analysis. However, all missing data were excluded from analysis of relevant questions, and the results indicate the (available) sample utilised in each statistical procedure as well as indicate the number of missing cases in the analysis from the overall sample of 193 students.

Once the data were entered and cleaned using Excel, they were analysed using Stata/SE 12.0. Data analysis procedures included initial univariate (descriptives), as well bivariate, analyses (t-tests), exploring the participants' attitudes based on the socio-demographic variables included in the demographic questionnaire. However, this analysis did not control for a spurious relationship between each correlate and participants' attitudes. Therefore, lastly, the data were analysed using multiple linear regression. The dependent variable has an acceptable range of 20–180 for linear regression modelling and it allows for the testing of independent variables that are both continuous and categorical. As the data were collected from students in the same social work programme the possibility of intragroup correlation was a concern, therefore the linear model used robust standard errors to account for possible correlated error structures.

RESULTS

Participants

Before beginning bivariate and multivariate analyses, descriptive analyses were run on the 193 students enrolled in a social work degree programme in Namibia who comprised the sample for this study. Table 1 shows the socio-demographic information of the participants.

Females comprised the majority of the sample, with 150 female participants representing 77.72 per cent of the sample. There were 16 males representing 8.29 per cent of the sample, and 27 participants, representing 13.99 per cent of the sample, who did not indicate their sex.

The modal age group of participants is 18–25. There were 118 students (61.14%) who were between the ages of 18–25, 57 students (29.53%) were ages 26–35, and 11 students (5.70%) who were 36 and above. The students were well represented across all four years of study, with slightly fewer participants in each subsequent year. There were 62 students (32.12%) in their first year of school, 53 (27.46%), in their second year, 41 (21.24%) in their third year, and 36 (18.65%) in their fourth year.

The vast majority of participants reported regular religious attendance with 156 participants (80.82%) attending a religious service at least monthly. The mode for religious attendance was weekly ($n=105$, 54.40%). Only 33 participants (17.10) reported attending religious services rarely or never, and 4 participants (2.07%) who did not respond.

Participants' country of origin varied across seven different countries, although 119 participants (61.66%) were from Namibia. The two other most common countries of origin were Zimbabwe, with 37 participants (19.17%), and Zambia, with 25 participants (12.95%).

Participants were also asked if they knew a person who was part of the LGBT community. The majority of participants ($n=135$, 69.95%) reported not knowing someone who was LGBT. Fifty-five participants (28.50%) reported that they knew a LGBT person, and three participants (1.55%) did not respond.

Attitudes toward gay men and lesbians

The aim of this research was to assess the general attitudes toward gay men and lesbians among social work students. Using the ATGL scale, it was found that many social work students in Namibia have low rates of acceptance of gay men and lesbians. The possible scores on this scale range from 20 to 180, with lower scores representing open and accepting attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. The mean score from the 161 valid survey responses was 100.94 with a standard deviation of 36.93. The scores ranged from 24–180 with a median of 97.

Table 1: Participant sociodemographics

	N	Percentage
<i>Sex</i>		
Male	16	8.29
Female	150	77.72
Missing	27	13.99
<i>Age</i>		
18–25	118	61.14
26–35	57	29.53
36 and up	11	5.70
Missing	7	3.63
<i>Year in University</i>		
First	62	32.12
Second	53	27.46
Third	41	21.24
Fourth	36	18.65
Missing	1	0.52
<i>Religious Attendance</i>		
Daily	14	7.25
Weekly	105	54.40
Monthly	37	19.17
Rarely or Never	33	17.10
Missing	4	2.07
<i>Country of Origin</i>		
Namibia	119	61.66
Zambia	25	12.95
Zimbabwe	37	19.17
Other	12	6.22
<i>Knowledge of LGBT person(s)</i>		
Yes	55	28.50
No	135	69.95
Missing	3	1.55

As the ATGL scale is comprised of two subsets of questions with a possible range of 10–90, one focusing on gay men and the other on lesbians, it was also possible to test if there is a difference in attitudes toward each group. Although the literature suggested that there might be significant differences, this was not the case in the current study. As illustrated in Table 2, the mean score for the sub-scale of attitudes toward lesbians was 49.34 with a standard deviation of 19.01, and the mean score for the sub-scale of attitudes toward gay men was 52.05 with a standard deviation of 20.13. A t-test showed that this was not a statistically significant

difference. In fact, it was not even close with a p-value of 0.2.

Table 2: Comparison of sub-scales for gay men and lesbians

	Mean	S.D.	s.e.	N	DF	T-score	P-value
Lesbian sub-scale	49.34	19.01	1.43	176			
Gay men sub-scale	52.05	20.13	1.54	172			
					346	1.29	0.2

Bivariate analysis of attitudes toward gay men and lesbians

In order to address what factors influenced students' attitudes, the researchers conducted bivariate analyses. Table 3 shows the distribution and t-tests for sex, country of origin, knowledge of someone who identifies as LGBT, religious frequency, and year in school. As Table 3 indicates, each of these variables was statistically significant at the .05 level other than year in school, which was not statistically significant.

Table 3: Distribution and t-tests for students' attitudes toward gay men and lesbians

	N	Mean	s.e	S.D.	DF	t-score	P-value
Sex					136	2.91	0
Male	16	128.08	12.25	44.15			
Female	150	97.71	3.12	34.92			
Country					159	3.41	0
Namibia	119	93.14	3.49	34.36			
Other	69	112.77	4.73	37.8			
Know LGBT person(s)					158	3.51	0
No	135	107.72	3.48	36.86			
Yes	55	86.17	4.68	32.39			
Religious Frequency					156	-1.94	0.05
Weekly Minimum	119	105.97	3.76	35.29			
Less than once a week	70	94.29	4.59	37.36			
Year of Study					159	-0.74	0.46
First and Second	115	102.82	3.9	37.37			
Third and Fourth	78	98.45	4.39	36.46			

Multivariate analysis of attitudes toward gay men and lesbians

Lastly, to examine if these variables remained statistically significant when controlling for the other socio-demographic variables, as well as to determine how much variation in student attitudes these variables account for, multiple linear regression was employed. Nested model testing was applied to build the model beginning with regressing attitudes on students' age, then adding in each of the demographic variables in the order shown below in Table 4. Each model was a statistically significant improvement on the previous model at the .05 level using

an F-test for R-squared change with the exception of year in school, which was .08 and had a change in R-squared of 0.04. The full model has an R-squared value of .30; therefore this model explains 30 per cent of the variation in students' attitudes.

The regression model in Table 4 shows that when controlling for all other variables in the model, the students' sex, attending religious services daily, being from Zambia, and knowledge of someone who is LGBT are all still statistically significant. Age is not statistically significant with a p-value of 0.55, and neither is the year in school.

Correlates that increase accepting attitudes toward gay men and lesbians

One of the strongest influences is the student's sex. Women on average score 24.52 less on the scale of 20–180 of attitudes toward gay men and lesbians when controlling for all other variables in the model. This indicates more tolerance and acceptance of LGBT persons among women. The other statistically significant variable that increases acceptance is knowledge of someone who is LGBT. Students who know someone who identifies as gay or lesbian are on average 26.42 lower on the scale controlling for other variables in the model.

Correlates that decrease accepting attitudes toward gay men and lesbians

Two variables that are statistically significant, which increase on average the negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians, are country of origin and religious attendance frequency. Students whose country of origin is Zambia are on average 17.59 higher on the scale than students from Namibia. Additionally, students who have higher religious frequency have higher scores. The model shows that students who attend religious services daily are on average 26.08 higher than students who attend religious services only once a week. Students who attend religious services less than once a week were not statistically significantly different than those who attend weekly.

Table 4: Multiple regression of social work students' attitudes towards gay men and lesbians in Namibia

Independent Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
<i>Age</i>	.70 (.61)	.30 (.59)	.27 (.60)	.39 (.59)	.38 (.54)	.32 (.54)
<i>Sex¹</i>						
Female		-28.14* (12.41)	-32.42** (11.69)	-26.05* (11.04)	-26.57** (9.60)	-24.52** (9.37)
<i>Religious Attendance Frequency²</i>						
Daily			22.51* (11.24)	23.65* (12.10)	23.10* (10.62)	26.08* (11.16)
Monthly			-6.82 (7.47)	-1.56 (8.05)	4.65 (7.43)	5.67 (7.66)
Rarely/Never			-13.83 (8.91)	-9.96 (8.40)	-7.70 (8.19)	-9.14 (7.83)
<i>Country of Origin³</i>						
Zambia				22.58**	17.36*	17.59*

Independent Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
				(8.02)	(7.84)	(7.73)
Zimbabwe				19.71* (8.24)	12.06 (8.19)	10.76 (7.92)
Other				9.98 (17.30)	2.19 (17.64)	1.47 (18.43)
<i>Knowledge of LGBT person(s)⁴</i>						
Yes					-24.92*** (5.94)	-26.42*** (6.03)
<i>Year of Study⁵</i>						
First						-2.92 (3.92)
Second						4.73 (2.69)
Third						0.73 (2.30)
Intercept	84.07*** (15.48)	119.27*** (19.65)	126.15*** (19.69)	107.27*** (20.48)	116.99*** (18.70)	114.4*** (19.07)
N	133	133	133	133	133	133
F-test (d.f)	1.29 (131)	5.14* (130)	3.00* (127)	3.74* (124)	17.59*** (123)	2.34 (120)
R-squared	0.01	0.06	0.11	0.18	0.26	0.30

Reference category: ¹Male ²Weekly ³Namibia ⁴No ⁵Fourth *p > .01 **p > .05 ***p > .001

DISCUSSION

Though the study is exploratory in nature, the findings regarding Namibian social work students' attitudes toward lesbians and gay men have important implications. To begin, the participants indicated negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians overall, and these rates of disapproval were much higher than in many other contemporary studies (Brewer 2003; Loftus 2001). Further, the findings showed that participants' attitudes were similarly disapproving of both gay men and lesbians; this differs from most previous research, which has shown negativity regarding gay men to be much higher (e.g., Herek 2002; Herek 2000; Harry 1990; Schellenberg, Hirt, and Sears 1999; Louderback and Whitley 1997; LaMar and Kite 1998).

As in many other studies, the participants' demographic characteristics and life experiences played an important, and often statistically significant, role in their attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. In bivariate analyses, several variables were significant predictors of negative attitudes, including sex (males were more negative), country of origin (Zambian participants were most negative), and religious frequency, with those who attend religious services daily having the most negative views. An important predictor of less negative attitudes was knowledge of someone who identifies as LGBT: those participants reported significantly less negative views. Similar to participants in many other studies (Barth and Overby 2003; Hinrichs and Rosenberg 2002; Lance 1994; Miller, Smith, and Mackie 2004), participants in the current study who knew someone who is LGBT reported much more favourable attitudes regarding LGBT issues.

Using multivariate analyses to control for all other variables in the model, the students' sex, daily religious attendance, Zambian origin, and knowledge of someone who is LGBT are all still statistically significant. When the other demographic variables are controlled for, the influence of the student's sex remained a strong predictor of attitudes. As in many studies worldwide (e.g., Herek 2002; Herek 2000), women in this study reported more favourable attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. Though there are more female social work students than male counterparts, both in this study and in general, the strength of this finding cannot be overstated. Among the male participants in this study, disapproval of LGBT people was alarmingly high.

More specifically related to the unique African contexts being studied, the participant's country of origin was also related to differential attitudes. Students from Zambia, even after other demographic variables had been controlled for, were significantly more negative in their views than students from Namibia. While other countries were well-represented in the sample, only Zambian participants were significantly more negative in their views. Van Klinken (2013) points to the need to critically analyse and understand the role of religion in many African societies, especially Zambia. Further, Van Klinken warns of the need to carefully interpret the politics of human rights (especially related to homosexuality) in Africa, especially in an attempt to help change attitudes toward same-sex relationships.

Additionally, students who reported more frequent religious participation had higher scores (more negative attitudes) on the ATLG instruments, which has been a consistent finding in other research on homophobia worldwide (Laythe et al. 2002; Wilkinson 2004; Herek 1984; and Hunsberger 1996). Interestingly, only those who attended daily religious services were significantly more negative, while those who attend weekly/monthly/rarely demonstrated attitudes that did not differ. Among the 'daily' group, attitudes toward LGBT people were overwhelmingly negative, while those who attend religious services weekly, monthly or rarely, reported significantly less negative views (albeit still negative). Given this major difference among the 'daily' vs. more rarely groups, interventions, including sensitisation workshops featuring LGBT speakers sharing their individual life stories might be best addressed to those who participate in religious services weekly or more rarely.

The existing literature addressing attitudes toward the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) offers multiple suggestions to reduce levels of homophobic attitudes among students – the two most prominent include greater integration of LGBT issues within the programme of study, and activities to increase sensitisation of students towards LGBT issues. This is an important distinction as negative attitudes do not always mean 'hatred of', but in some instances may reflect a genuine lack of exposure to the needs of this marginalised

population.

Implications for social work education

A more positive trend relates to the participants who reported knowing someone who is LGBT, which is directly connected to social work education strategies and classroom activities in Namibia and other parts of Africa. Because of the significantly less negative attitudes reported among those who knew someone gay or lesbian, it seems that intervention strategies and future research may consider incorporating personal connection among gay/lesbian individuals and future social workers. Accordingly, social work education efforts, especially in the Namibian context, would be well-served by involving personal stories and face-to-face examples given first-hand by LGBT people. In other contexts this education strategy has been associated with improved attitudes among social work students (Cramer, Oles, and Black 1997; Cramer 1997; Dongvillo and Ligon 2001; Chonody, Siebert, and Rutledge 2009).

Whether models of homophobia reduction in American classrooms may be fitting in the African context has yet to be investigated. Findings from previous studies (e.g. Dongvillo and Ligon 2001) of undergraduate social work students suggest that teaching strategies can impact attitudes toward homosexuality, but questions remain as to the effectiveness of these models in the Namibian context. Future studies aiming to investigate this, particularly with longitudinal data collection, are warranted.

On a smaller scale, it may be possible to build field placements in agencies serving socially excluded populations, such as the LGBT community and other key affected populations who are at high risk of contracting HIV. This may help create conditions for positive interactions and movement towards acceptance of this population by Namibian social work students. With appropriate supervision and adequate access to training resources, this may be an effective strategy for on-going and significant interaction between students and this underserved population.

Social work programmes may benefit from a critical examination of their teaching resources. Many diversity and social justice textbooks are written from a Western perspective and may make assumptions about foundation concepts, such as equality, equity, and social justice. As such, these materials may inadvertently present the challenges of LGBT persons in a much more complex manner than is necessary to be useful in an African context. For example, these texts may focus on specific issues of contemporary relevance to the LGBT community in Western societies, such as marriage equality and parenting rights as opposed to general discussions about fundamental human rights issues relevant to LGBT persons. Given this, it is important for programmes to identify curriculum resources that are not only relevant and

culturally sensitive, but that underscore the myriad ways in which LGBT persons experience stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion in their daily lives while often also living in fear due to the criminality of LGBT relationships, and persecution of those who publicly identify as LGBT in many African countries.

Finally, the author's advocate for the integration of LGBT content across all core areas of the social work curriculum, including: human behaviour, practice methods, ethics, policy, and research. Historically, the typical approach to teaching students about diverse populations was to silo this content in a specially designed course about diversity or diverse populations, with learning units focusing on specific populations, such the disabled, people of colour, and LGBT persons. This is useful as a first exposure, but is not necessary and sufficient for culturally competent practice. Rather than having a separate course on LGBT issues that reinforces the notion of difference, students may gain greater exposure to the challenges faced by LGBT persons through policy and research discussions that highlight areas of formal social exclusion. Students may also learn about effective practice approaches used to work with this population through discussions and case studies that include LGBT persons in social work practice courses focusing on individuals, couples, and families. Finally, discussions of LGBT issues in ethics courses may provide increased opportunities for students to reflect upon core professional social work values and how these ethical standards apply when working with this community. This approach to curricular integration may allow for a more complex, holistic understanding of the unique challenges faced by the LGBT community while also reinforcing commonalities with other historically excluded groups. Further, this approach may serve to reduce the dichotomous categorisation of persons as 'us' or 'them' that is common among people with negative attitudes towards particular groups or populations.

Limitations

The results show overall negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians among social work students in Namibia. While the analyses reveal some of the correlates, it is not a comprehensive list of all possible factors that may influence participants' attitudes towards members of the LGBT community, such as access to media images or education surrounding safer sex, sexuality, and HIV. Additionally, religious attendance was addressed in terms of frequency, but we were not able to compare different religions or denominations.

Additionally, the sample size was relatively small and consisted entirely of students who voluntarily chose to enrol in a social work education programme. All attitudes were self-reported and participants may have been exposed to a curriculum suggesting that social work ethics promote acceptance of diverse groups, including LGBT persons. However, the findings related

to 'year in school' did not show significant movement in this domain; still, further study is merited. The cross-sectional nature of the study did not provide time to directly measure the impact of any curricular change on the participants.

It is important to note the challenges of conducting research such as this in this region. Sexual identity/behaviour is largely considered a private matter that is not openly discussed. However, some of this has tempered in part, based on the HIV prevention programming targeting key populations at risk of contracting HIV, including men who have sex with men (MSM), transgendered individuals, prisoners, sex workers, and substance abusers that is prevalent in the country. Additionally, the participants were not socialised into the methods and procedures associated with being participants in a research study, and thus may not have been confident of assurances of confidentiality or anonymity. Each of these factors may have influenced the results of this study.

Directions for future research

The current research project has explored social work student's attitudes towards gay men and lesbians at one public university in Namibia. Data analysis revealed similarities with previous research, as well as unique factors, such as similar levels of negative attitudes towards both gay men and lesbians and significantly different levels of negative attitudes when considering participants' country of origin. Researchers looking to extend this line of inquiry in the future may consider a cohort study to track students' attitudes over the course of degree programmes. This suggested study design has the potential to contribute valuable knowledge regarding the ability of the social work curriculum to shape professional social workers' attitudes and practice behaviours towards marginalised populations such as gay men and lesbians.

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