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Heterosexist discourse among U.S. adolescents: A comparison of talk about race and sexuality

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Abstract

Much of the previous research on heterosexism has distinguished cultural heterosexism from psychological heterosexism, and has tended to focus on the latter. The present study builds on previous qualitative studies of heterosexism within their cultural contexts, using a discursive psychology framework to investigate adolescents' talk concerning sexual orientation, while contrasting it with talk about race. Our analysis revealed three broad themes in the adolescents' discourses around homosexuality: 1) Negative connotations of homosexuality, 2) Links between homosexuality and illegal or inappropriate behavior, and 3) Construction of homosexuality as unusual or abnormal. We argue that such expressions are inseparable from the societal context in which they occur, and that heterosexism is supported by legal, religious and social structures, within the U.S.

Heterosexist discourse among U.S. adolescents: A comparison of talk about race and sexuality

Many homosexual rights groups in the U.S. were revived, or first came into being during the post-World War II years (Hekma, Oosterhuis & Steakley, 1995), during a time when other movements, such as the civil rights and women's movements, became prominent. The gay movement gained political momentum after the 1969 Stonewall Riots (Thorstad, 1995), but the gay and lesbian liberation groups that sprung up in the wake of Stonewall, which aimed to attain sexual liberation by changing society as a whole, were generally marginalized and had little impact on sexual politics (Hekma et al., 1995). Even left wing and socialist movements tended to resist association with gay and lesbian rights groups, as "they were concerned that their political agenda would be sullied by any linkage with sexual deviance" (Hekma et al., 1995, p. 3).

More than three decades later, relatively modest social and political gains have been made by the gay movement, and its achievements in the U.S. in many ways stand in contrast to those of the (racial) civil rights movement. Changing norms around the expression of racial views have crystallized into strong taboos against blatant, Jim Crow-style racism, although a number of authors have suggested that its place has been taken by more subtle, but no less insidious forms of racism (see, for e.g., Bobo, Kluegel & Smith, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Goldberg, 1998; Sears, 1988). Although racism undeniably remains a serious issue, racial minorities have been guaranteed equal rights and freedom from discrimination under the law (if not in practice) for several decades, and the civil rights movement achieved several significant milestones during the 1950's and 60's: racial segregation of schools was abolished by the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case. The Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968 guaranteed legal protection against any form of discrimination on the basis of race/ethnicity, while the 1965 Voting Rights Act abolished the rights of states to impose restrictions on who could vote in elections. In 1967, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the *Loving v. Virginia* case that laws in 16 states against inter-racial marriage were unconstitutional, and a federal hate crime law was passed in 1968 to provide protection for individuals against crimes based on race, religion or national origin.

Homosexuals, on the other hand, are still denied a right as basic as marriage, along with the many other legal rights that accompany it, in 49 states. Massachusetts became the first state to rule in favor of full gay marriage rights as a result of the case of *Goodridge et al. v. Department of Public Health* in the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court in November 2003. Since 1995, 33 states have passed "Defense of Marriage Acts" banning same-sex-marriage, while an additional five states have passed ballot initiatives to the same effect. Furthermore, although approximately 15% of hate crimes are committed on the basis of the victim's perceived sexual orientation, with only race-based and religion-based crimes having higher prevalence (FBI, 2002), gays and lesbians are not afforded equal protection from hate crimes. However, a bill currently being considered in the Senate (the Local Law Enforcement Enhancement Act), would provide such protection if passed. Finally, anti-sodomy laws in a number of states that allowed gay men to be prosecuted for consensual, adult sexual acts, were only struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court in June 2003 (*Lawrence et al. v. Texas*).

Consistent with the abovementioned discrepancies in legal status of homosexuals and racial minorities, Gallup polls show marked differences in public opinion regarding issues around race compared to those concerning sexuality. Recent polls show that almost 75 percent of white Americans approve of interracial marriage, and over 90 percent stated that they would vote for a qualified black presidential candidate. In contrast, only around 40 percent of Americans

believe that same-sex marriage should be legal, and less than 60 percent would vote for a well-qualified presidential candidate who was homosexual. Furthermore, while over 80 percent of white Americans stated that they would have no objections to living in racially integrated neighborhoods, and allowing their children to attend schools in which more than 50 percent of students were of other races, over 40 percent stated that they would object to having their children taught by homosexual teachers. While trends over time suggest that Americans' opinions concerning both sexual orientation and racial issues are becoming more liberal, it is clear that public opinion is still generally far less favorable towards gay and lesbian rights than it is regarding equivalent issues involving race (Marriage Equality California, 2001; Tuch & Martin, 1997).

It should be noted that opinion polls such as these provide only a crude, decontextualized measure of the complexities of opinions and attitudes about sexuality and race. However, at the very least, they give us an indication of the relative degrees to which people are willing to publicly endorse views for or against particular perspectives. In this sense, they provide us with a measure of some very basic differences in the standings of the racial and gay civil rights movements.

Research and heterosexism

Heterosexism refers to a set of social practices whereby heterosexuality is privileged and any form of non-heterosexual behavior is denied, derogated or penalized (Kitzinger, 1994). The notion of heterosexism was developed in preference to the term "homophobia," which has been criticized for reducing anti-homosexual behavior to individual pathology, while failing to account for the social context in which it occurs (Kitzinger, 1996).

Heterosexism remains understudied, relative to other forms of prejudice and discrimination, such as racism. Furthermore, much of the research on heterosexism has divided heterosexism into two distinct forms: cultural heterosexism is characterized by institutional, religious and legal manifestations of heterosexism, while psychological heterosexism relates to its behavioral and attitudinal manifestations (Speer & Potter, 2000). The majority of research on heterosexism tends to focus on the latter form and, as a result of this, heterosexism has been predominantly studied using attitude scales that tend to conceptualize it as an individual, psychological belief system (Speer & Potter, 2000). The social, cultural and institutional structures that support heterosexism are often ignored, which, in effect, "reinforces the very assumptions that the notion of 'heterosexism' was originally designed to replace" (Speer & Potter, 2000, p. 544).

Speer and Potter (2000) have argued that, when people talk about homosexuality (as when they talk about race, sex, and other topics in which being perceived as prejudiced is a potential concern), their talk is produced and managed in ways that orient towards the potentially problematic nature of what they are saying. "Speakers use various conversational and interactional resources to portray themselves as reasonable, rational, unprejudiced, responsive to potential or actual criticism, able to recognize their views as extreme, invested, and so on" (Speer & Potter, 2000). We take this point as a central assumption of the present study, but we aim to extend it by identifying some of the ways in which the nature of what speakers orient to as potentially problematic is related to the topic (e.g. race or sexuality) they are discussing.

Method

The specific aims of the present study were to identify some U.S. adolescents' commonsense notions and constructions of homosexuality, and to compare the ways in which the students discussed sexuality with the ways in which race and ethnicity were talked about. Furthermore, we aimed to examine the adolescents' discourses with reference to their implications for, and connections to, the broader context of contemporary U.S. society.

Our data were gathered from seven focus groups that were conducted in a large suburban public high school in Los Angeles County during the 2002-2003 academic year. Each focus group involved four to nine participants, who were drawn from seven ninth-grade social studies classes that had recently completed a prejudice-reduction program, coordinated by researchers at a large public comprehensive university. This program, known as STOP (Students Take Out Prejudice) consists of seven to eight one-hour-long lessons, each facilitated by a pair of trained service interns from the university. The facilitators present information to the participants and use activities and discussions to reinforce the messages of the lessons. The lessons focus on the themes of race, ethnicity and culture, friendship and dating, gender, gangs and responsibility, sexual orientation, and promoting equal human worth. The curriculum highlights the value of tolerance and encourages students to become allies to oppressed and stigmatized people by actively opposing all forms of prejudice.

The focus groups were conducted two weeks after the completion of the STOP program, and were facilitated by trained research assistants. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling procedure (Silverman, 2000), ensuring that the ethnic and gender composition of the classes were adequately represented in the focus groups, and including only students who were present for the prejudice-reduction program. Permission from the participants' parents, informed consent of the participants themselves, and approval from the university's Institutional Review Board were obtained before the focus groups were conducted. The ages of the 47 participants ranged from 14 to 16 years. The gender breakdown of the sample was 45% male and 55% female, and, based on self-reports, the sample was 13% African American, 17% Asian/Asian American, 23% Euro-American, 13% Hispanic/Latino, 23% other/more than one ethnicity, and 11% declined to state.

The focus group participants were asked to discuss their opinions of various aspects of the STOP program, the program facilitators, and the relevance of, and need for, such programs in their high school. Each focus group was approximately one hour in duration, and transcription of the proceedings was conducted in real time by a qualified court stenographer. This method of transcription imposed limitations on our analysis, due to the absence of many important micro-level conversational details in the transcripts. However, this arrangement was necessitated by the wishes of the school administrators, who were reluctant to allow video or audio taping of the focus groups due to concerns about the anonymity of the student participants. The focus group facilitators were able to confirm the accuracy of the transcripts, and we believe that they were sufficiently detailed to allow some illuminating analytical insights to be made.

Our analysis used a discursive psychology framework to investigate adolescents' discourses concerning sexual orientation. We conducted our analysis in an inductive style, drawing on Billig's (1996) rhetorical approach to social psychology, and other discursive psychological approaches (e.g. Edwards, 1997; 2003; Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Rather than viewing attitudes as being stable, cognitively represented structures that underlie evaluative expressions, the discursive approach treats attitudes and evaluations as performing actions in a context-sensitive manner (Speer & Potter, 2000). The focus of this approach is on

examining the evaluative features of everyday language and the way in which they are managed within a particular social context, and thus pays analytical attention to both psychological and cultural heterosexism.

It is important to note that the participants in analyses such as this should not be seen as a representative sample of the population from which they are drawn (see, for e.g., Antaki, Billig, Edwards & Potter, 2003, Silverman, 2000). Rather, they are seen as members of a community or culture, drawing on cultural resources to construct particular versions of the world (Billig, 1996; Potter, 1996; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Generalization of findings is thus described in terms of what discursive practices and rhetorical constructions are possible, or hold currency, within a community or culture, rather than the degree to which these practices are used by many, or all, members of the target population (cf. Antaki et al., 2003; Billig, 1996; Silverman, 2000).

Our analysis identified three broad themes in the students' discourses concerning homosexuality, which we discuss at length in the sections that follow.

Negative connotations of homosexuality

Extract 1:
(04/24/03, p. 4-5)
1   *Facilitator*: Do you think it [the STOP Program] affected your everyday life?
2   *Student I*: It didn't really affect my life.
3   *Student E*: I think there was a little piece of everything that sort of affected me. Some of my
4   friends would say the word "fag," and I would be the one that would say "Don't say that." So
5   maybe there was a little bit of everything that stayed with you. If you see discrimination, you'll
6   know that's wrong, and you should say something. And you shouldn't discriminate against
7   someone with a different sexual orientation. It's not really your business. And it's something you
8   should stop if you see someone else prejudicing against someone.
9   *Student B*: I had a tendency to say "that's gay" a lot. And after that lesson we had about sexual
10   orientation we also had speakers. And every time I'd say "gay," or "you're gay," I had a feeling
11   don't say that. I'm working on it.

In Extract 1, Student E and Student B provide accounts of how their participation in the STOP Program has changed their lives, noting how it increased their awareness of prejudice and discrimination against homosexual people. Both of these students make reference to the prevalence of negative symbolism of homosexuality in everyday language. Student E mentions the demeaning use of the word "fag," while Student B refers to the use of phrases such as "you're gay" and "that's gay." The word "gay" in the colloquial use of these phrases is roughly synonymous with "pathetic" or "uncool" (Armstrong, 1997), which gives the phrases a negative connotation when they are used in everyday speech. In other words, the suggestion that a person or object is "gay" in this context is intended as an insult, rather than a compliment, and "gay" symbolizes a negative state of being (Armstrong, 1997). This can be seen as the heterosexist equivalent of racist symbolism in the English language described by Moore (1988), whereby the symbolism of the word "white" is generally positive, while that of the word "black" is pervasively negative. However, the racist symbolism that Moore (1988) describes is generally subtler than the parallel use of the word "gay". It's hard to imagine such a direct colloquial phrase as "that's black" carrying similar negative connotations to "that's gay," and yet still being widely accepted for use in the everyday vocabulary of adolescents (or people of any other age).

In the above extract, both Student B and Student E visibly orient towards the message of the STOP program, displaying that they learned something from the program, and that it had a positive effect on their behavior. It is noteworthy, though, that the positions they adopt don't directly challenge the validity of the view that homosexuality is negative or undesirable: Student

B states that he "had a feeling don't say that", rather than a possible alternative formulation such as "homosexuality is not negative, so sayings like that don't make any sense." Similarly, Student E suggests that "you shouldn't discriminate against someone with a different sexual orientation" because "it's not really your business." This implies that such discrimination is wrong, not because homosexuality is in no way negative and thus should not be treated as such, but rather because it involves the misuse of private information. Student E's statement also serves to equate anti-homosexual discrimination with invasion of privacy, which is arguably a far lesser charge than the violations of human and constitutional rights that many would associate with such discrimination. In this way, both Student B and Student E can be seen to display that they have learned tolerance through their experiences in the STOP program, but the tolerant positions that they adopt fail to challenge the implicit view that homosexuality is negative in some way (cf. Speer & Potter, 2000). By contrast, throughout the focus groups, the students were unequivocal in their refusal to attach value to any racial/ethnic group (see Whitehead & Wittig, in press), exemplified by a student who stated that "there's only one race – the human race." This difference can be seen as a reflection of the positions adopted by the STOP facilitators regarding race and sexuality, as well as of the accepted ways of talking about race and sexuality in the broader society.

Similar affirmation of the values taught in the STOP program, accompanied by downplaying of the seriousness of anti-homosexual behavior, can be seen below in Extract 2:

Extract 2:
(04/23/02; p. 5)
1   *Facilitator*: Think back now about a positive experience you had in the class and how it might have
2   affected your everyday life outside the classroom.
3   *Student H*: People joke around and call people fags. And they said "Stop using it. You don't know if
4   there's a gay person around and they may be offended."
5   *Student D*: Yeah, I stopped calling people fags.
6   *Facilitator*: So how did you use that information in your everyday life?
7   *Student H*: Like stop playing around and stop calling them fags.

In this extract, Student H refers to anti-homosexual slurs as something that people do to "joke around" (line 3), and as "playing around" (line 7), rather than being the serious personal attacks that some might describe them as. Furthermore, both Student D and Student H affirm their acceptance of the norm of not using terms that refer to homosexuals in offensive ways, stating that following their participation in the STOP program, they stopped using them (lines 5 and 7). However, even in stating that they no longer use these terms, both students continue to use them, saying that they stopped "calling people fags," rather than avoiding the use of the words through an alternative formulation such as "I stopped using that word." An interesting contrast to this can be seen in the strong social taboo attached to racial slurs, which has resulted in the use of "polite" alternative formulations such as "the N-word" in order to avoid the risk of social sanction that could result from the utterance of the word "nigger," even in circumstances where no offense is intended (Lasky, 1998).

Of further note in Extract 2 is the reason given for discontinuing the use of terms that are offensive to homosexuals: Student H recounts how the facilitators of the program advised the students not to use terms such as "fags" because "You don't know if there's a gay person around and they might be offended" (lines 3-4). The rationale for not "calling people fags" is to avoid offending gay people who may overhear them. This implicitly suggests that only gay people, and not heterosexual people, would be offended by these terms. Furthermore, it suggests that the

reason for not using them should be to avoid offense, rather than because of the negative connotations that they lend to homosexuality. In this way, negative views of homosexuality are deemed acceptable as long as they are kept to oneself and are not expressed in obviously offensive ways. This differs from the students' overwhelming expressions of condemnation of racial prejudice seen elsewhere in the focus groups, not just in order to avoid offense, but because the students treated the moral incorrectness of racial prejudice as self-explanatory and undisputed (Whitehead & Wittig, in press).

<div style="text-align:center">Links between homosexuality and illegal or inappropriate behavior</div>

Extract 4:
(04/23/03, p. 10)
1   *Student E*: Some lady was here and she was talking about gays and stuff and she goes "soccer coaches." I
2   play soccer and a lot of people stared at me. And I said "no, it's not even true."
3   *Student H*: We were making fun of--it was like a bunch of us making fun of him and the soccer team. They
4   said something about how 90% of soccer coaches rape their teammates.
5   *Student E*: I haven't even seen it happen.
6   *Facilitator*: Someone in your classroom said this?
7   *Student E*: No, it was a speaker.
8   *Facilitator*: Okay. So did somebody speak up and call the person on their stereotyping?
9   *Student E*: No, I just walked into class and everyone was looking at me.

The participants of both McCreanor's (1996) and Praat and Tuffin's (1996) studies of anti-homosexual discourse drew strong links between homosexuality and various forms of illegal or inappropriate behavior, including pedophilia, flashing and sexual promiscuity (see also Walters & Hayes, 1998). Similar links, which are exemplified in Extract 4, were apparent in our data. In this extract, Student H attributes a statement about the prevalence ("90%," line 4) of gay soccer coaches raping members of their teams to a guest speaker in the class. While it is unclear whether this exact statement was actually made by the guest speaker in question, or whether a different statement made by the speaker was simply misunderstood or misquoted by the students, it is clear that some of the students readily believed the claim. This is shown in Student E's account of how "a lot of people stared" at him, as well as Student H's open admission that "it was like a bunch of us making fun of him and the soccer team." The use of the word "us" (rather than an alternative, third-person, wording such as "it was like a bunch of people…") in this admission serves to include Student H as one of the people "making fun" of the soccer team (Edwards, 1997). Although the description of their behavior as "making fun" serves to downplay its seriousness (see also Extracts 1 and 2), Student H thus does not treat as problematic, or attempt to dissociate himself from, the claim about soccer coaches' illegal behavior, or the subsequent treatment of soccer players. In this way, Student E is cast as being isolated in the face of general acceptance of a claim about widespread sexual abuse by gay soccer coaches. This view is further reinforced by Student E's reply to the facilitator's question (line 8) about whether anybody in the class resisted the stereotyping of soccer coaches: "No, I just walked into the class and everyone was looking at me" (line 9).

Although U.S. society and media is replete with implicit links between ethnic minorities and various forms of criminal behavior (Entman, 1997), none of the students in our focus groups alluded to any such stereotypes. Furthermore, unlike Student H's report of his "making fun" on the basis of sexuality, none of the students oriented to potentially intolerant behavior on the basis of race/ethnicity as unproblematic. Instead, throughout the focus groups, all of the students were at pains to deny or neutralize the presence of any racial/ethnic prejudice, either with respect to

themselves, or to other students in their school (see Whitehead & Wittig, in press). The students also displayed unconditional tolerance towards people of all ethnicities, exemplified by statements such as "I *never* judge a person because of their skin color or their race" (emphasis added). This was contrasted with displays of conditional acceptance of homosexuality, as seen in Extract 5:

Extract 6:
(04/28/03; p. 4)
1   *Facilitator*: How about a negative experience?
2   *Student F*: I have one. You were talking about sexual orientation. Like they said there were some –
3   there were some gay people came. I'm Christian and they said they were Christian and that confused me.
4   They have a really big sin because like God made women for a reason. It kind of confused me. I told my
5   dad that and he said there's no such thing as gay Christians. I think he's homophobic. The other day we
6   saw this guy with really tight pants and he said, "Oh, he's gay." I didn't know what to say. It confused me.

In Extract 6, Student F draws on an interpretation of religious (Christian) doctrines to claim that homosexuality is "a really big sin" (line 4). Interestingly, in stating that "God made women for a reason" Student F appears to exclude females from his conception of homosexuals, or to make their homosexuality less accountable than that of gay men. Despite this seemingly intolerant statement, however, Student F expresses his confusion about the issue of homosexuality on numerous occasions (lines 3, 4 and 6). He can thus be seen as expressing a dilemma between the tolerance encouraged by the program he participated in, and what he sees as the anti-homosexual views of his religion and his father, who he quotes as saying that "there's no such thing as gay Christians" (line 5). This illustrates the extent to which prejudiced views are seldom one-dimensional and uncompromising, but often involve conflicts between competing values and commonplaces that may be mobilized when evaluating others (cf. Billig et al., 1988).

Religious, and particularly Christian, discourses like those employed by Student F are often at the center of anti-homosexual movements, both in the U.S. (Dennis, 2002; Wood, 2000; Yip, 1999) and in other countries (e.g. McCreanor, 1996; Praat & Tuffin, 1996). The mobilization of religion is an effective strategy in achieving political ends, especially in particularly religious societies like the U.S. (Walters & Hayes, 1998, Wood, 2000), as it provides a strong moral basis for actions, rather than locating them solely in a political or legal arena (Deacon, 2000; Wood, 2000). This strategy becomes even more effective, and gains greater acceptability, when it is adopted by prominent political and legal figures, as it has been in the U.S. For example, President G. W. Bush has consistently used religious language in his stands against gay marriage, referring to his belief in "the sanctity of marriage", and referring to homosexuality in a religious context by stating "I'm mindful that we're all sinners" when asked about his views on homosexuality (Lewis, 2003). Similarly, Attorney General John Ashcroft, during his time as a Senator, declared his belief that homosexuality is a sin, and opposed the extension of hate-crimes laws as a means of protecting homosexuals from violence (Lichtblau, 2003).

It is interesting to note that religious doctrines were often at the center of the oppression of ethnic minorities, and beliefs about racial superiority and inferiority. Practices of slavery, and later segregation and other forms of discrimination were justified as "God's will" through the selective quotation of religious texts, particularly from the Bible **(refs?)**. While the use of religion to justify racism is no longer deemed acceptable, similar arguments are employed to excuse anti-homosexual prejudice and discrimination (Deacon, 2000; Morrish, 1997), and even

to reverse charges of prejudice through the claim that anti-heterosexist activists are guilty of not respecting the religious beliefs of those who oppose them.

<div align="center">Construction of homosexuality as unusual or abnormal</div>

Extract 7:
(04/24/03, p. 2)

1   *Student F*: I also liked the sexual orientation one. It's not everyday--we see girls and everyone thinks it's
2   fine when girls kiss but it's not every day we see guys holding hands. Everyone's like that's wrong and
3   gross. But since that, I'm still open. I used to think oh, guys kissing that's gross. But now, my friend just
4   told me he was gay, so it really brought out the perspective that guys can be gay too.
5   *Facilitator*: Do you think the lesson helped out with your reaction?
6   *Student F*: Yeah. Yeah. Normally I would be, like, okay. But now, that's cool, just don't hit on me.
7   *Facilitator*: What part of the lesson impacted you?
8   *Student F*: When she told us that people all the around the world are gay, not just one race. Yeah, that's
9   true. It's not just African American or Asian or whites, it's everybody.
10   *Facilitator*: How did the overall class respond?
11   *Student F*: Yes, they were respectful. Mr. K. brought in other gay people. We were all respectful.
12   We didn't pick on them or think less of them. We treated them like normal human beings.

Extract 7 exemplifies a prominent conceptualization in our data, of homosexuality as unusual. This can be seen explicitly in Student F's statement that "it's not every day we see guys holding hands," which constructs male homosexuality as something not commonly seen by students such as himself. The use of the words "we" and "everyone" (lines 2-3) serve to construct this view as shared knowledge, being held by many or all students, rather than only Student F (Edwards, 2003). In this way, Student F is able to state that he used "to think oh, guys kissing, that's gross" without appearing any more intolerant than any of his peers, thus making this view non-accountable by virtue of its status as routinely occurring (Pomerantz, 1986). Student F further refutes any possible inference that he is intolerant by providing an account of the way in which he has changed as a result of participating in the STOP program, stating that "since that, I'm still open."

In lines 6-7, Student F can be seen to be dealing with a dilemma: his earlier statement that he "liked the sexual orientation one" (line 1), and his accounts about how he has changed since participating in the program, might be taken as evidence of his own sexual orientation (cf. Speer & Potter, 2000). Student F orients to the potential claim that he himself is homosexual, and reinforces his heterosexual status, by saying "But now, that's cool, just don't hit on me." It is important to note that the politeness and absence of hostility ("that's cool") in this statement underlines Student F's earlier (and subsequent) claims about his tolerance of homosexuality, while simultaneously constructing conditions for acceptance of homosexuality ("just don't hit on me") (Praat & Tuffin, 1996; Speer & Potter, 2000). According to Praat and Tuffin (1996), this type of formulation serves to allow the speaker "to present positively, while still voicing some reservations about homosexuals. Such arguments ultimately indicated a lack of acceptance of homosexuals" (p. 64-65).

Student F shows further evidence of his concern about heterosexism in lines 11-12 of Extract 7. In recalling the response of his class to homosexual guest speakers, he states, "we were all respectful. We didn't pick on them or think less of them. We treated them like normal human beings." These claims orient to the potential counter-claims that students in the class would be disrespectful towards, or pick on, homosexuals, or treat them as anything other than normal human beings (Billig, 1996; Speer & Potter, 2000). This statement thus reveals that, even if the students and their classmates behaved respectfully towards homosexuals, and treated them

as "normal human beings," Student F is aware of socio-cultural norms or expectations that the opposite might be the case (Speer & Potter, 2000). Furthermore, it serves to mark the humanity and tolerance of the students, rather than affirming the humanity of the homosexual guest speakers (cf. Morrish, 1997). The problematic nature of this statement by Student F can perhaps best be illustrated by repeating it with the words "gay people" replaced by "ethnic minorities." The statement would then be, "Mr. K. brought in other ethnic minorities. We were all respectful. We didn't pick on them or think less of them. We treated them like normal human beings." The degree to which this sounds inappropriate, and unlikely ever to be uttered without negative reaction, indicates the invisibility that such statements about homosexuals are afforded.

Extract 8:
(12/05/02; p. 14)
1   *Student D*: It should be things like new like the gay lesbian thing that was new. In class,
2   your teachers don't say, "you should be nice to gay people." You really didn't know what gay people
3   were until elementary school.
4   *Student F:* It was like a new topic.

In Extract 8, which is taken from a discussion of how the STOP program could be improved, Student D refers to the portion of the program dealing with sexual orientation as "new." Student F concurs that "it was like a new topic." With this statement, Student D displays a lack of previous exposure to, and awareness of, gay and lesbian issues prior to their participation in the program. Furthermore, by suggesting that "*You* really didn't know what gay people were until elementary school" (line 2, emphasis added), rather than "*I* didn't know," Student D constructs this lack of awareness as common to all students, rather than being due only to his personal ignorance (Billig, 1989, Edwards, 2003). These discourses of the "newness" of gay and lesbian issues serve to reinforce the notion of homosexuals as a marginalized group in society, whose voice is seldom heard, and whose issues are not common knowledge or common discussion topics (cf. Walters & Hayes, 1998). The students' descriptions of the novelty of anti-heterosexist ideas was in sharp contrast to their representations of the lessons dealing with race and racism, which were overwhelmingly described in the focus groups as "boring," "things we already knew about," and other similar constructions (Whitehead & Wittig, in press).

Student D further suggests that teachers should inform students about the importance of being "nice to gay people" (line 2). This statement is oriented to the opposing position, namely that of *not* being "nice to gay people" (Edwards, 1997; Billig, 1996), which, by implication, will occur if teachers remain silent on the issue. A norm, or default position, is thus constructed whereby students are not nice to gay people, unless teachers intervene in order to change this norm. In this way, Student D is able to displace personal responsibility for the prevalence of anti-homosexual sentiments in society, by showing how he has never been taught anything different, while simultaneously reflecting and reinforcing the dominant view of a society that treats homosexuals as a negative reference group (Wood, 2000).

The students' accounts of their awareness of the expectation that they should not be racist, on the other hand, suggested that anti-racist norms were so self-evident that it was demeaning to teach them to high school students. This was shown most starkly in one student's description of the lessons about race and ethnicity as being akin to "singing little songs in elementary school" (see Whitehead & Wittig, in press).

Conclusion

As we mentioned earlier, Speer and Potter (2000) showed the problematic nature of separating heterosexism into individual and cultural forms. Consistent with their arguments, we view the discourses discussed above as manifestations of a culture, as much as of the particular individuals who produced them. Edwards (1997) noted that talk, like any other action, is subject to societal rules and constraints, tailored to the demands of the situation, while also being deeply normative and scripted. Normative forms of expression surrounding sexual orientation are thus adapted to broader historical contexts, and attitudes about homosexuality evolve with changes in the accepted norms of the society in which they take place (cf. Billig, 1988). This means that opinion giving is inseparable from the societal context in which it occurs, and only certain forms and contents of opinions are appropriate in any particular situation. The rhetorical form, and substantive content, of the discourses described in our analysis would not have been employed by the students if they were not consistent with accepted and persuasive ways of speaking about homosexuality in society at large.

In light of this view, it is important to recognize the links between heterosexist expressions and the societal context in which they occur, and in which they are *allowed* to occur. It is also important to note that these expressions took place in the context of focus groups conducted by individuals who the students knew to be associated with the STOP program; a context in which one might expect, if anything, to observe exaggerated displays on the part of participants of the values of anti-prejudice represented in the STOP program. We would argue that the problem is not that the students failed to display tolerance and acceptance toward homosexuals, as they generally did, but rather that the definitions of tolerance and acceptance implicit in these displays would not stand up to scrutiny if applied to other stigmatized groups. We thus argue that the discourses described in our analysis are both constitutive *and* reflective of a cultural context characterized by strong heterosexist norms and lack of acceptance of homosexual individuals and behavior. For example, while racist views are generally marginalized or unpopular in U.S. society (Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Sears, 1988), anti-homosexual views frequently appear in the mainstream of everyday public opinion and institutions, as well as in the discourses of social and political elites (Deacon, 2000; Dennis, 2002; Hekma et al., 1995; Lewis, 2003; Lichtblau, 2003; Walters & Hayes, 1998; Yip, 1999).

It is our view that, in order to relegate anti-homosexual views and discrimination on the part of individuals to the marginal status that racist views and behavior are afforded, it is necessary to implement structural changes that would give full rights and protection to people of all sexual orientations. In other words, the best way to promote acceptance of sexual minorities is to make this acceptance an integral part of the legal, political and social fabric of U.S. society, demanded by law as well as by everyday standards of politeness (cf. Kitzinger, 1996; Samar, 1994).

Recent events, such as the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to strike down anti-sodomy laws (*Lawrence et al. v. Texas*), the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court's ruling in favor of gay marriage (*Goodridge et al. v. Department of Public Health*) and the performing of gay marriages in San Francisco, Oregon, New Mexico and New York (Nieves & Garcia, 2004), represent strong normative shifts in favor of gay rights. However, the proposed constitutional amendment that would ban gay marriage (Nieves & Garcia, 2004) represents a potentially more powerful anti-homosexual shift. The coming months and years may thus be a crucial period in the Gay Civil Rights struggle.

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