

University Students' Attitudes Toward Homophobia and Related Factors

Duygu Vefikuluçay Yılmaz¹, Filiz Degirmenci¹, Ahu Aksoy¹, Aysu Koptur¹, Aslihan Aksu¹

¹Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology Nursing, Faculty of Nursing, Mersin University, Mersin, Türkiye

Correspondence Author: Duygu Vefikuluçay Yılmaz

E-mail: duyguulu@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of this study was to determine the levels of homophobic attitudes and related factors among senior students at a university in Turkey.

Methods: The descriptive study sample consisted of 317 senior undergraduate students who met the inclusion criteria and accepted to participate in the study between March 20 and April 24, 2017. The study data were collected using the "Personal Information Form" to determine the socio-demographic characteristics of the students and "Hudson-Ricketts Index of Homophobia" to determine their homophobic attitudes. Descriptive statistics, the independent samples t-test (Student's t-test) for the comparison of two groups and the one-way ANOVA test for the comparison of the means of more than two groups were used in the analysis of the data.

Results: In the study, it was determined that 156 (49.2%) students had low levels homophobic attitudes and 148 (46.7%) students had high levels homophobic attitudes. In addition, it was found that 13 (4.1%) students got 87 points and had neutral level homophobic attitudes. Among the students who participated in the study. it was found that the homophobic attitude levels of the students who were women and who had individuals with different sexual orientation in their social environment were found to be lower ($p < 0.05$).

Conclusion: In this study, it was determined that university students have homophobic attitudes and the factors affecting homophobic attitudes of university students are gender and having different sexual orientation in the social environment.

Keywords: Homophobia, homophobic attitudes, homosexuality, university students, factors

1. INTRODUCTION

Sexual orientation is a phenomenon related to who an individual is attracted to in emotional romantic and sexual terms and is different from sexual identity. While sexual identity is about who the individual is (female, male, transgender), sexual orientation is related to the individual that the individual is interested in (1). Sexual orientation is not a feature chosen by the individual's own will, it is a condition that exists outside the will of the individual (2). Sexual orientation is not related to biological sex. Homosexuality, which emerges when the individual is directed to her/his own gender is not a disease but an orientation difference (2,3). The World Health Organization (WHO) states that homosexuality is a form of identity and existence that encompasses the private and public spheres of life (4).

Widely accepted opinion in the society is that each individual should be heterosexual, in other words, there should be no orientations other than heterosexuality. Homophobia resulting from this thought advocates the view that the identities of non-heterosexual individuals should be destroyed or kept secret (2). The Sexual Health Institute Association defines homophobia as behaviours and

attitudes involving unfair judgments against homosexuals and homosexuality such as irrational hatred hate and humiliation (7). Since homophobia is a situation that is shaped and learned in the society, attitudes and behaviours towards sexual orientation may change over time (8). Today attitudes and behaviours of the society towards individuals with a different sexual orientation are usually negative and therefore these individuals have problems about being a part of the society. These problems are seen as discrimination and exclusion at the level of interpersonal relations and as ignorance and marginalization at the level of the entire society (5,6). In male-dominated societies such as Turkish society, attitudes towards sexual orientation differences may often be negative. Children raised in patriarchal societies can more easily internalize the gender roles identified by the society. This causes development of gender inequality and homophobia indirectly (9).

The educational experience of individuals in the society is one of the important tools in the development of prejudices and attitudes towards individuals with a different sexual orientation. Studies with university students showed that the

majority of students had negative attitudes towards individuals with a different sexual orientation (10-21). Şah, for example found that university students' and graduates' knowledge of sexual orientations was neither scientific nor accurate and that this knowledge often emerged as daily information learned through social practices (22). The study conducted by Sadıç and Beydağ shows that nursing students' attitudes towards lesbians and gays are at a medium level (23). Strong and Folse's study with nursing students revealed that the participants' attitudes towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) individuals were more positive after their education than their pre-education period (24).

As can be seen university education process is very important in adopting positive attitudes towards homosexuals. Also, exclusion and discrimination faced by individuals with a different sexual orientation can be prevented during this period. This process can become an effective tool for students to gain awareness of gender roles and to exhibit more tolerant attitudes towards sexual differences. Thus, it is thought that the exclusion and discrimination faced by homosexual individuals can be prevented. In this context, this study aimed to determine the levels of homophobic attitude of university students and related factors.

2. METHODS

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The population of this descriptive study consisted of 4505 senior students studying at the faculties and vocational schools in the central campuses of a state university in Turkey during 2016-2017 academic year. Prior to the data collection stage, necessary approval was obtained from this university Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Approval Date and Number: 15/03/2017, 2017/19). Before the data collection forms were administered, the students were informed about the purpose of the research and their verbal and written permission was obtained.

The study sample was selected using stratified sampling. The sampling formula with a known universe used in this study is shown below. The t value in this formula is the value for the selected alpha level 1.96 for a 95% confidence level. Based on the calculations, it was determined that a sample size of 354 students (171 female, 183 male students) would be large enough to represent the population. However, 37 students who could not be reached due to various reasons (e.g. student absenteeism, refusal to participate in the research, etc.) were not included in the sample and, therefore, the sample consisted of 317 (166 female, 151 male) students.

2.2. Data Collection and Instruments

Data were collected using a personal information form and the Hudson-Ricketts Index of Homophobia (HRIH). The data collection forms were filled in by the students between March 20 and April 24, 2017. It normally took 15 minutes on average to answer all the questions of the data collection forms.

The Personal Information Form

This form prepared by the researchers based on the relevant literature contains 12 questions about the students' descriptive information and the characteristics that are thought to affect their perspective on homosexuality (12-21,23-27).

The Hudson-Ricketts Index of Homophobia (HRIH)

The Hudson-Ricketts Index of Homophobia (HRIH) was developed as a 25-item scale by Hudson and Ricketts (1980) to measure attitudes towards homosexual individuals. The HRIH was adapted into Turkish by Sakallı and Uğurlu by omitting one of the 25 items in the original version. Each of the items is scored on a six-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 6=Strongly Agree). In the scale, the response "Strongly Disagree" is considered as a positive cultural value and the response "Strongly Agree" is considered as a negative cultural value. The scores range from 24 to 144 with higher scores indicating higher levels of homophobia. After reversing the polarity of several questions (i.e. Items 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 13, 17, 18, 23 and 24) and summing the individual items, the total score on the scale measures self-reported amount of homophobia. The median value of the total score was calculated and the participants were divided into two categories according these scores: low and high homophobia levels. The total Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the Turkish version of the HRIH was determined to be .94 (28). In our study, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of internal consistency was found to be .95.

2.3. Statistical Analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS 22.0 (Statistical Program for the Social Sciences) for Windows. Descriptive statistics were given as percentage, mean standard deviation, minimum and maximum values. As a result of the statistical analyses, it was found that the data showed normal distribution and the variances were homogeneous. An independent samples t test was used to compare two groups and a one-way ANOVA was used to compare three and more groups. The significance level of the tests was set at $p < 0.05$.

3. RESULTS

The sample comprised of 317 undergraduate university students, of which 166 (52.4%) were female and 151 (47.6%) were male, while 94.6% were single. The mean age of the students was 23.24 years (± 1.56). The students came from various departments of the university but majority were from faculty of science and literature (26.2%), faculty of engineering (19%) and faculty of economics and administrative sciences (14.6%). Other sociodemographic characteristics of the students are shown in Table 1. Descriptive analysis was carried out to evaluate the students' level of homophobic attitudes. The results showed that in total, almost half of the sample and namely 156 (49.2%) of the students had low levels homophobic attitudes, 148 (46.7%) had high levels homophobic attitudes and only 13 (4.1%) of the students had neutral level homophobic attitudes (Table 2).

The mean HRIH scores of the male students (91.82 ± 26.57) were higher than the mean HRIH scores of the female students (81.04 ± 24.80) ($p < 0.05$). The mean HRIH scores of the students who had individuals around them with a different sexual orientation (73.61 ± 22.65) were lower than the HRIH mean scores of the students who did not have such individuals around them (90.49 ± 25.95) ($p < 0.05$). It was determined that there was no statistically significant relationship between the students' mean age and their mean HRIH scores ($r = -0.004$, $p > 0.001$) (Table 3).

Table 1. Distribution of the students' socio-demographic characteristics (n=317)

Socio-Demographic Characteristics	$\bar{X} \pm SS$	
Age	23.2 \pm 1.56	
	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Sex		
Female	166	52.4
Male	151	47.6
Marital status		
Single	300	94.6
Married	17	5.4
Departments		
Faculty of science and literature	83	26.2
Faculty of engineering	60	19.0
Faculty of economics and administrative sciences	46	14.6
Faculty of education	38	11.7
Faculty of nursing	20	6.3
Faculty of communication	14	4.5
Faculty of medicine	11	3.5
Faculty of fine arts	11	3.5
Faculty of architecture	8	2.5
Faculty of tourism	8	2.5
Faculty of pharmacy	8	2.5
Faculty of sports science	5	1.6
Faculty of aquaculture	5	1.6
Type of high school graduated		
Anatolian high school	154	48.6
Regular high school	126	39.7
Vocational high school	37	11.7
Family income status		
Income equals to spending	203	64.0
Income more than spending	71	22.4
Income less than spending	43	13.6
Type of family		
Nuclear	237	74.8
Extended	80	25.2
Longest living place		
City	191	60.3
District	92	29.0
Village	34	10.7
Presence of individuals with a different sexual orientation in social environment		
No	236	74.4
Yes	81	25.6

Table 2. Distribution of the students' Hudson-Ricketts Index of Homophobia score means (n=317)

	Hudson-Ricketts Index of Homophobia Median Values	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Total Score $\bar{X} \pm SS$
Low Level of Homophobia	<87	156	49.2	64.86 \pm 15.67
High Level of Homophobia	>87	148	46.7	108.58 \pm 15.07
Neutral Homophobia	87	13	4.1	87.00

Table 3. Distribution of the students' Hudson-Ricketts Index of Homophobia score means according to their characteristics (n=317)

Socio-Demographic Characteristics	Frequency (n)	Total Score $\bar{X} \pm SS$	P
Age	317	23.2 \pm 1.56	0.947* r = -0.004
Sex			
Female	166	81.04 \pm 24.80	<0.001**
Male	151	91.82 \pm 26.57	
Marital status			
Single	300	85.92 \pm 26.14	0.465**
Married	17	90.70 \pm 27.18	
Type of high school graduated			
Anatolian high school	154	87.67 \pm 25.97	0.365***
Regular high school	126	83.63 \pm 26.36	
Vocational high school	37	88.64 \pm 26.42	
Family income status			
Income equals to spending	203	87.56 \pm 26.00	0.458***
Income more than spending	71	83.64 \pm 26.44	
Income less than spending	43	83.86 \pm 26.71	
Type of family			
Nuclear	237	85.08 \pm 26.81	0.197**
Extended	80	89.45 \pm 24.08	
Longest living place			
City	191	85.82 \pm 26.75	0.365***
District	92	84.75 \pm 24.03	
Village	34	92.05 \pm 28.44	
Presence of individuals with a different sexual orientation in social environment			
No	236	90.49 \pm 25.95	<0.001**
Yes	81	73.61 \pm 22.65	

* Pearson Correlation Coefficient

** Student's t-test

***ANOVA Test

4. DISCUSSION

Negative attitudes towards homosexuality in the society lead to many social problems such as the exclusion and discrimination of homosexual individuals and their inability to express their sexual preferences. Therefore, homophobia appears as an important research topic to be investigated.

In this study, the majority of the senior students (49.2%) were found to have low levels of homophobic attitudes. On the

other hand, in our study, it was striking that there were also a considerable number of students (46.7%) with high levels of homophobic attitudes. The study of Sadiç and Beydağ shows that nursing students' attitudes towards lesbians and gays are at a moderate level (23). In the study of Gromer et al., it was found that students displayed a moderate amount of sexual prejudice toward lesbian and gay people (27). The fact that the homophobic attitudes of senior students were low in our study made us think that the students gained awareness about homophobia during the university education process.

Considering other studies conducted with university students, it was seen that contrary to the results of our study, students mostly exhibited homophobic attitudes (10,19-21) and had negative attitudes towards lesbians and gays (11-14,16,18,22). In the study conducted by Bakır Ayğar et al. (2015) with students studying at Mersin University Faculty of Education, it was determined that students' homophobic attitudes were high (15). Kara's study with 97 university students (2018) found that 55 students had lower levels of homophobic attitudes while 42 students had higher (29). In a study by Varol et al. (2016), more than half of the students (53.6%) agreed with the statement, "I hate it when I see a man acting like a woman" (30). To sum up, we found that the homophobic attitudes were found to be low in the majority of the senior students in contrast with other similar studies in the literature. This result could have been caused by education given to the students until the senior year. University education and the different social interactions that might occur during this period may be effective in reducing homophobic attitudes.

In our study, the levels of homophobic attitudes of male students were found to be higher than female students. This result is also confirmed by other studies in the literature (11,12,14-17,20-23,27,29,31). In the studies, it is striking that male students have more negative attitudes towards male homosexuals (gays). In some of these studies, it is also emphasized that male individuals see gays as a "threat to the ideal male perception in society" (27,32). Additionally it is stated in these studies that men adopt the attributed gender roles especially by the patriarchal society more than women (10,31,33). This finding we obtained in the study may be due to the adoption of gender roles by male students who grew up in patriarchal societies.

In our study, homophobic attitude levels of students who have communication with individuals with different sexual orientations in their social environment were found to be lower than other students (Table 3). Consistent with our findings, similar studies found that participants who were acquainted with homosexual individuals and who had social relations with such individuals had more positive attitudes towards homosexuality than others (11,14,19-21,23,31). A study conducted by Rowniak found that students who stated that there were no individuals in their social environment with a different sexual orientation had higher levels of homophobic attitudes (34).

In the study of Gromer et al., it was found that, contrary to our findings, the levels of homophobic attitudes of university students did not change with personal acquaintance with a gay or lesbian person (27). As shown by the findings from our study and other comparable studies, prejudice and negative attitudes towards individuals with a different sexual orientation may change positively with the presence of social connections with these individuals. These social ties can help students to understand the difficulties experienced and felt by individuals with a different sexual orientation, to enable students to empathize with them, and to decrease their homophobic attitudes gradually.

5. CONCLUSION

In this study, university students were found to have homophobic attitudes. In addition, the homophobia level of male students and students who are not gay or lesbian in their social environment were determined to be higher.

In many courses and field practices during the education process, university students should be informed about the psychosocial and cultural characteristics of groups such as children, youth, women, elderly, refugees who are exposed to prejudice, discrimination, marginalization, exclusion and even stigmatization. In the courses included in the curriculum, efforts should be made to increase awareness and acceptance of human and professional values, especially social justice, human rights, respect for differences and the right to self-determination. Different and various educational or drama-type practices should be carried out that positively change homophobic and heterosexist perceptions and attitudes towards students. The fact that individuals have social relations and connections with is homosexual individuals effective in reducing homophobic attitudes should be taken into consideration. The inclusion of homosexual individuals as participants in educational studies and lessons can have positive effects on the perception and attitude change of students. In addition, seminars and panels focusing on workshops aimed at reducing homophobic attitudes and behaviors can be organized. In all these activities, the participation of especially male students can be increased.

Limitation of the Study

The research is limited to university students. Since this research was conducted with students of only one university the results cannot be generalized to students studying at different universities.

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