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Teaching and sexual prejudices. New training needs.

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Abstract

This study focused on the future trainers' attitude in respect of gender, sex and sexual orientation. Contrary to previous research studies, which associate to a greater knowledge a better attitude, our results shown that prejudices are still present even for graduate students. Therefore, it urges a reflection on a new teaching paradigm able to provide a plural gender identity vision. Training processes must be more than a mere intellectual education: a reflection on professional future.

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According to public opinion, the evolution of the medical view on sexual orientation has not proven useful in the review of opinions on homosexuality. Homosexuals, victims of sexual prejudice, are in fact forced to fight against false beliefs, mistrusts and consequently for the vindication of their rights (example: Stonewall Riots (NY), June 1969).

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The distorted and stereotypical picture that emerges from shared representations, in spite of the progress of the research, encourages us in fact to anchor the homosexual to the figure of a sick man: in other words to that of a different man because it barely connects with male-female and man-woman dichotomies.

1. Sexual Prejudice

Prejudice, usually associated with a negative connotation, represents a type of ongoing attitude which is able to resist change due to a lack of sensitivity towards a reasonable argument, despite evidence of the subject's irrationality. One characteristic, which can be attributed not only to the origin of prejudice, seen in the automatic elaboration of information that escapes individual control, but also in affective and cognitive aspects of their attitudes:

1. Cognitive component: information and beliefs towards a subject
2. Affective component: emotional reaction towards the subject
3. Behavioural component: approaching or distancing actions towards/away from the subject.

Specifically for this research, attention has been focused on sexual prejudice towards sexual orientation, in general on the LGBT Community (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) and in particular on Gays and Lesbians. It is based on the attitudes which create intergroup tension as they are expressed through appreciation or judgement of a social group (in-group vs out-group), whose members are perceived as similar in virtues, in belonging to a specific group, and worthy of contempt or hostility (Herek, 2000). A different response, in other words, than what is manifested by heterosexuals who have the possibility to interact with friends or family belonging to the LGBT Community; in these cases, in fact, one feels inclined to focus primarily on the personality traits of single individuals instead of the exaltation of the similarities of homosexual subjects (Tajfel, 1959). The minority group, in the absence of interaction, is therefore perceived and perceives itself as inferior, a subordinate segment to the broad social framework of belonging, with poorly considered characteristics displayed by the surrounding environment (Altman, 1982). It is a disadvantaged situation for its protagonists, not only in psychological terms but also social terms, as it implies discrimination and aggressive behaviour (Meyer, 2003).

The use of the term sexual prejudice is, in Herek's opinion (2000), favourable to that of Homophobia, an expression that has crystallised social opinion towards sexual orientation since the end of the sixties; in other words, when it was coined by heterosexual psychologist, Weinberg (1972).

The rigidity of the concept of homophobia is, in the Author's opinion, identifiable in its own content. Although that does not help us to understand it in its entirety, the aversion towards Gays and Lesbians, as it seems to be associated with anxiety and an irrational aversion towards homosexuality, is likened to a similar fear to that of infection and to the terror of being in a closed space with homosexual people.

The difference between the terms sexual prejudice and homophobia is therefore clear: the first is descriptive and makes reference to extensive, traditional research of social psychology related to attitudes, and highlights the dynamics which animate antigay behaviour, whilst homophobia does not define the origins, the dynamics and the motivation of antigay attitudes (Herek, 2000). The appeal of

the concept of homophobia, in fact, can be useful when highlighting poor tolerance in general and repulsion against homosexuality, of homosexual people and the actions connected with them. Poor acceptance is shown in physical violence, in murder or in the instigation of suicide (gay bashing). Previous research has demonstrated, in fact, that the increased number of suicide attempts, especially in youngsters, represents a positively correlated link to sexual discrimination (Haas et al., 2010).

Studies dedicated to such a theme have been able to identify possible motivations behind such attitudes when assuming controllability of the cause of homosexuality (etiology), or if it is less connected to the development and learning or more to lifestyle and individual choice. It has been demonstrated, in fact, that members of the majority group only express their positive judgement during assignments, attributing biological or genetical sources that, due to their nature, are uncontrollable (Haslam, & Levy, 2006; Haider- Markel & Joslyn, 2008), and they express the opposing, negative opinions only if the cause is defined as controllable (individual choice). In this sense, the attribution of controllability/uncontrollability and situational and dispositional factors become strong indicators for the possibility, recognised by Gays and Lesbians, to take advantage of social support (Heider, 1944, 1958; Weiner, Perry & Magnusson, 1988).

Attitudes, sexual prejudice and homophobia ultimately seem to be well expressed by the multidimensional concept of Homonegativity. This, in fact, refers to both the aversion and to the anxiety of homophobia, as well as to the range of attitudes towards homosexuality (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980), also including the cultural components and the social roots of intolerance (Lingiardi, 2007). Specifically associated with a type of cognitive strategy, dictated by the need to defend oneself against a threat of disorder and by the will to maintain a socially unchangeable framework, homonegativity seems capable of flourishing within a framework in which homosexuality is unspoken and considered an etiquette which refers to the concept of disease and sin (Ibidem).

The aggressive behaviour is, in this sense, comprehensible and results in intentional characteristics (to cause deliberate harm to others) and in expectation (that such an act provokes negative consequences in those who suffer) (Garro & Ruggieri, 2012; Ruggieri, 2009; Ruggieri & Boca, 2013).

2. Future Trainer and Theaching Paradigm

Prejudices return to the simplification of information, a useful strategy for the immediate formation of opinions and for the choice of a determined behaviour (Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960; Fazio, 1986). For this reason, the study of behaviours on sexual orientation in university students is important – for those enrolled onto training courses for Support Workers – and also for reflection on their own professional futures. Kozloski (2010) states that the level of cultural background is related to levels of sexual prejudice; in this sense, only if teaching programmes are not based on heterosexual paradigms is it possible to promote the knowledge and the development of relationships with LGBT people.

3. The Research

The objective of this study, therefore, focuses on the attitudes of university students regardless of gender, sex and sexual orientation. The hypothesis is that high levels of training may be related to a better attitude towards homosexuals and towards the possible promotion of civil rights for Gays and Lesbians.

3.1 Participants

603 Sicilian university students (Italy) – of which 43 (7,13%) male and 560 (92,87%) female – enrolled onto degree courses at the branch of education for a period of three years ($n = 396$), and for a two-year masters degree ($n = 207$), between the ages of 18 & 27 years old ($M = 21,18$; $DS = 2,41$). Of these students, 598 declare to be *exclusively heterosexual*, 4 *mainly heterosexual* and, lastly, 1 *mainly homosexual*.

3.2 Procedure

The administration of research tools took place during class hours in line with the teaching calendar, and in accordance with a collective administration that ensures full anonymity to all individuals involved.

3.3 Instruments

Self report questionnaires which focus on the collection of attitudes and are capable of determining their direction (favourable vs unfavourable) and their level (the intensity of the assessment).

Questionnaire on the attitudes of university students^a allows, through the use of a Likert 5 point scale (1= “strongly disagree”; 5 = “strongly agree”), us to see students’ attitudes towards:

- Arguments regarding sex and gender (9 items);
- Gays (GS: Attitudes Scale towards Gays – 16 items);
- Lesbians (LS: attitude scale towards Lesbians – 16 items).

Italian Scale for the Measurement of Homonegativity (Scala Italiana di Misura dell’Omonegatività - SIMO – Lingiardi, Falanga & D’Augelli, 2005), to multiple responses (Likert 5 point scale). This is composed of 56 items, of which 28 investigate the attitudes towards Gays and another 28 towards Lesbians.

3.4 Data Management and Analysis

Data has been collected in specific databases and subsequently processed using electronic spreadsheets and the statistical processing package SPSS.20 for Macintosh. Frequency distributions and descriptive statistics were inputted to examine the distribution of the data.

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3.5 Results

The present contribution analyses and examines the attitudes amongst the LGBT community, with a focus on the LG component.

The data analysis of the items considered most significant for the purposes of this contribution, estimated by both tools, demonstrates that 58,08% do not know anyone who could be defined as gay, lesbian or bisexual (don't know = 16,72%); a statement that refers to the invisibility of homosexuals that can produce harmful effects, especially for the development of relationships between peers (Dessel, Woodford & Warren, 2011). And still the tendency is noticeable to consider the pathological dimension of homosexuality as items F, G & H highlight the absence of knowledge of civil rights (couple, same sex parents, work...) (Item B, C, D, E, I) (Table 1).

Table 1. Frequencies (%) of responses related to judgements expressed in regards to male homosexuality

(scale: attitudes vs gay – GS)

Item	Disagree	Do not know	Agree
A. Effeminate men make me uncomfortable	24,63%	16,34%	59,03%
B. If I find that a teacher is gay would remove my child from his class	29,46%	26,54%	44%
C. i would not vote for a candidate openly declared gay	34,76%	23,45%	41,79%
D. The marriage between men should be legal	67,32%	12,34%	20,34%
E. Gays cannot be good parents	11,48%	15,18%	73,34%
F. Male homosexuality is a psychological disorder	39,78%	18,76%	41,46%
G. Gays should undertake treatment to change their sexual orientation	38,23%	16,78%	44,99%
H. Psysician and psychologist should find a cure for male homosexuality	36,23%	23,78%	39,99%
I. Male homosexuality is a threat to the family as a social institution and value	21,05%	16,72%	62,23%

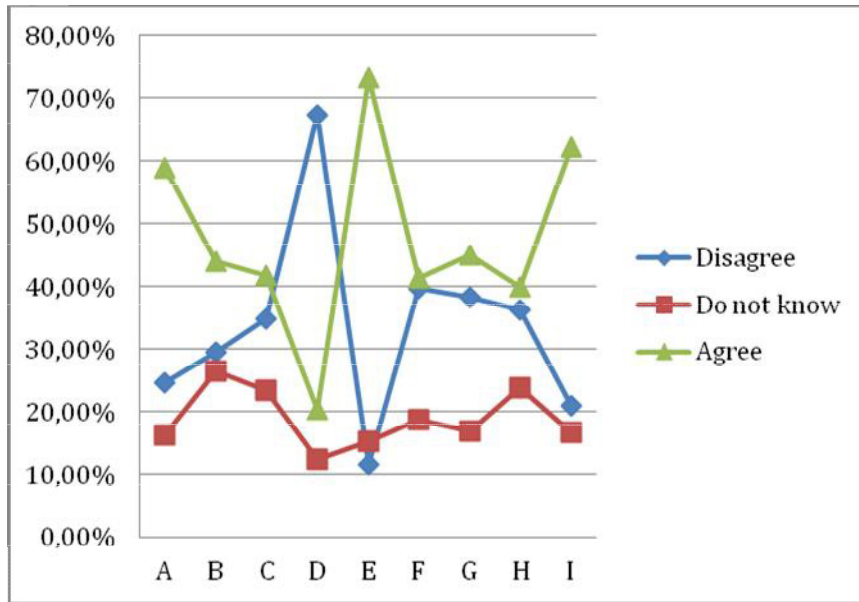


Figure 1. Complex responses – Scale GS

In relation to GS, participants, therefore, amount to an average score of 45,57 in a range that has 16 as an inferior limit (this number represents the total not accepting of gays) and a maximum limit of 80 (that instead represents the maximum score of acceptance).

The currently reported data does not differ from that relating to female homosexuality, summarised below (Table 2 & Figure 2)

Table 2. Frequencies (%) of responses related to judgements expressed in regards to female homosexuality

(scale: attitudes vs lesbians – LS)

Item	Disagree	Do not know	Agree
A. Masculine women make me uncomfortable	32,34%	17,89%	49,77%
B. If I find that a teacher is a lesbian I would remove my child from her class	32,92%	23,45%	43,63%

C. I would not vote for a candidate openly declared lesbian	37,75%	12,76%	49,49%
D. Lesbian marriage have to be legal	71,23%	8,23%	20,54%
E. Lesbians cannot be good parents	23,45%	16,67%	59,88%
F. female homosexuality is a psychological disorder	35,67%	23,12%	41,21%
G. lesbians should undertake treatment to change their sexual orientation	43,67%	14,78%	41,55%
H. Psysician and psychologist should find a cure for female homosexuality	41,60%	15,82%	42,58%
I. Female homosexuality is a threat to the family as a social institution and value	28,83%	19,85%	51,32%

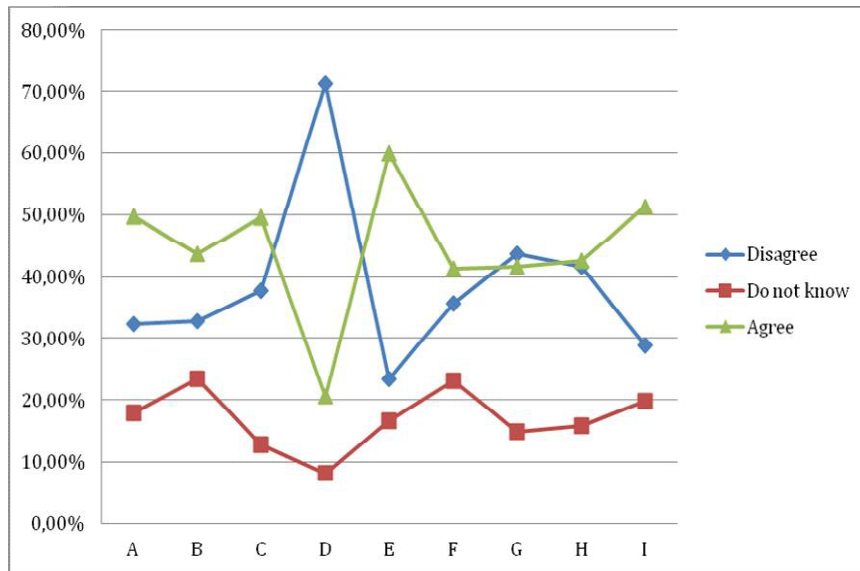


Figure 2 Total responses – LS Scale

Compared to LS, in fact, participants settle for a mean score of 44,29 in a range that, as stated above, has a lower limit of 16 (total non-acceptance of Gays), and a higher limit of 80 (maximum score of acceptance).

In both sections (GS and LS), the transition from Bachelor Degrees to teacher's courses does not seem to have influenced the quality of the opinion towards homosexuality. The average scores, in fact, do not undergo significant changes, despite a higher level of education (figure 3).

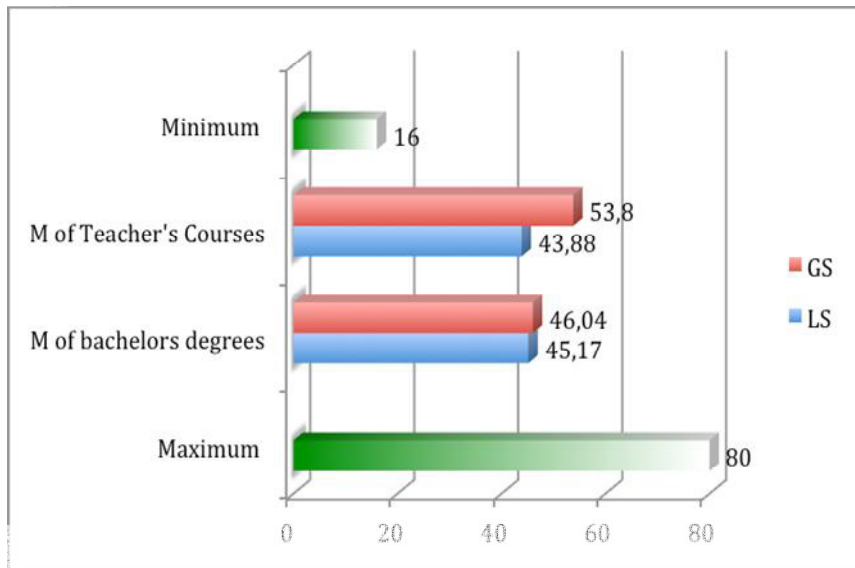


Figure 3: Total responses - Scale LS and GS - Bachelor Degrees and Teacher's Courses

Some of the data, for example Items D, E and I on both scales, also encourage reflection on the levels of prejudice which appear to be related to traditional, sexual roles and to sexual conservatism. These results can appear unpredictable if attention is aimed at the sex of a group of participants, which is female dominated. Previous research, in fact, has demonstrated that women, both adolescents and adults, generally demonstrate low levels of prejudice towards homosexuality, unlike men who, on the contrary, tend to not only have a strong interest towards the distinction of gender differences, but also a tendency to maintain a clear and coherent gender identity (Baker & Fishbein, 1998). It has not been possible, unfortunately, to compare the responses in relation to the participants' sex due to the low number of males enrolled onto the training courses covered by the survey. In fact, in the Italian, academic world there is a female dominance in Humanities courses and psycho-pedagogical courses (Mebane, 2008).

Finally particular attention is given to the percentage of 'do not know' responses (about 25%), provided by both means: a figure which seems to suggest a difficulty expressed by students in assuming a position relative to the thematic focus of attention, avoidance or indifference.

In conclusion, the tables shown represent a stimulus for reflection, since the results are unquestionable entities; in fact, contrary to the design hypothesis, the opinion on homosexuality has not been subjected to changes with the progression of training. The participants of the survey probably think they do not really know any homosexual people, by not assuming an invisibility of

these. It is likely that, instead, they are protagonists who are unaware of friendly and informal interactions with members of the out-group, and so they do not find it necessary to review their own beliefs and observe errors of categorisation (Cook, 1984; Herek & Capitano, 1996). The outcome of the survey, again, could be attributed to the quality of the content of the training offered to the students, presumably unarticulated and poor models for training of future social workers (educators, trainers and teachers). The individuals involved in the survey, in fact, will have a profession mainly based on listening to and interacting with others, and whose foundations should find a place for acceptance, not prejudice, of the challenges expressed by the user. The study of attitudes, in this sense, can facilitate the comprehension of the relationship strategies adopted in connection with interpersonal interaction and the corresponding behavioural response. To create a beneficial relationship means, in fact, to change social representations, to revisit their own prejudices and, yet, to sacrifice opinion by going beyond dichotomies before the everlasting movement of research and of change (Morin, 2001).

Through extensive gender training, it is not only necessary for Social Workers to reflect on the ways in which the human being represents reality, but also for those who deal with education in particular to reflect on the processes of categorisation, prejudices and on the possibility of changing these.

It is a journey of lifelong learning, thus being capable of guaranteeing a suitable acquisition of knowledge and valuable lessons, without avoiding confrontation with certain social issues that can appear more challenging than others.

4. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

The current survey, which is by no means exhaustive, will further explore the preoccupation of the students, equally distributed by sex and by another Italian region (Puglia). It is also a good opportunity to analyse the content of educational programmes offered in advanced training at other universities of the peninsula.

The quality and the level of instruction represent, in fact, indicators for the increase of social tolerance. In this sense, the requirement emerges for future professionals of beneficial relationships, to acquire new competencies and high healthcare training to guarantee social support of ample respite to social minority groups, subjects of discrimination and stigmatisation. Job training is also necessary with youngsters belonging to different nationalities, present in high proportion in educational institutions of a society more and more multi ethnic like the present, because it should make the understanding of different cultures possible towards homosexuality. One objective, the latter, that in other countries has been achieved through group meetings that have focused on the heteronormative culture and on the invisibility of sexual orientation. Students sought to create a more welcoming world for LGB people by learning about the views of others and then promoting understanding and acceptance through teaching others about sexual minorities (Dessel, Woodford & Warren, 2011). The training of social workers should, therefore, focus its attention on the acquisition of valid competencies for the integration of different sexual identities, on the creation of a real respect for equal opportunities and on counteracting the discomfort caused by the prejudices against

homosexuality. The way in which they coordinate issues with social norms, with understanding sexuality and human well-being is in fact connected to the attitudes and opinions on homosexuality (Heinze & Horn, 2009). Training processes should further extend into education and reflect our professional futures. Internal wrestling with how gender and orientation have been shaped and re-shaped in our own lives, remains to be discussed further (Marshall 2006).

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