

# **Homosexuality and Psychology, Psychiatry, and Counseling**

## Sexual Preference Similarity, Attitude Similarity, and Perceived Counselor Credibility and Attractiveness

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This study examined the effect of membership group and attitudinal similarity on perceived counselor credibility and attractiveness. Eighty-four homosexual men identified as holding either an activist ( $n = 42$ ) or a nonactivist ( $n = 42$ ) stance on gay advocacy rated the counselor's credibility and attractiveness after listening to an audiotape-recorded segment of a counseling interview between a male counselor and a male client expressing sexual preference concerns. All subjects heard the same counseling interaction except for counselor responses to two client questions, one related to counselor sexual preference and one related to counselor stance on gay advocacy. The counselor was rated more expert, trustworthy, and attractive when he stated a sexual preference for men than when he stated a sexual preference for women or refrained from stating a sexual preference. Attractiveness ratings were also found to be a function of attitude similarity between the counselor portrayed on the tape recording and the subjects in the study.

In a landmark article reviewing social psychology research, Simons, Berkowitz, and Moyer (1970) identified a number of variables affecting source credibility and attractiveness. This review has been cited in numerous articles for its relevance to counseling psychology (e.g., Claiborn & Schmidt, 1977; Corrigan, Dell, Lewis, & Schmidt, 1980; Spiegel, 1976; Strong, 1978; Strong & Dixon, 1971). In fact, in the past decade a considerable body of research has been reported that bears either directly or indirectly on the application to counseling psychology of source-receiver dynamics postulated by Simons et al. The major portion of this research has attempted to either identify the evidential, reputational, and behavioral cues that influence perceived counselor expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness or determine the effect of perceived counselor characteristics on client attitudes and behaviors (Corrigan et al., 1980).

Several propositions developed by Simons

et al. that have received only minimal attention by counseling psychology researchers have to do with attitudinal and membership-group similarity. Citing numerous studies by Byrne, Rokeach, and others, Simons et al. concluded that receivers judge similar sources as more credible and attractive than dissimilar sources and that membership-group similarities appear to be less significant determinants of attractiveness than attitudinal similarities. Furthermore, they speculate that the chief function of membership-group similarities is to cause receivers to infer attitudinal similarities.

Clients are continually confronted by counselors whose membership-group characteristics (e.g., race, sex, socioeconomic status) and attitude/belief systems are different from their own. Although a number of studies have examined the effect of membership-group similarity on the counseling process, very few have looked at the relationship between attitudinal similarity and either process or outcome variables (Lewis & Walsh, 1980). In the present research review, only two studies were identified in which both membership-group and attitudinal similarities were systematically manipulated as independent variables within the framework of a single experiment. Furlong, Atkinson, and Casas (1979) found that Chicano college students rated coun-

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The authors are listed in alphabetical order to reflect their equal contributions to this research project.

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selors who were perceived to hold attitudes regarding assimilation similar to their own as more credible and attractive than they did counselors whom they perceived as holding opposing viewpoints. The absence of a significant effect for counselor ethnicity in this study can be viewed as support for the Simons et al. proposition that attitudinal similarity is a more significant determinant of perceived credibility and attractiveness than is membership-group similarity. In a study of gender and dating-initiation attitudes, however, Atkinson and Alpert (1981) found that female college students perceived a counselor as most credible and attractive when the counselor verbalized a feminist attitude toward dating initiation, regardless of the counselor's sex or the subject's own attitude toward dating initiation.

The present study examined the effects of membership-group and attitudinal similarity on perceived counselor credibility and attractiveness within the context of gay behavior and attitudes. Although a considerable body of research on homosexuality exists, most of it attempts to identify the etiology of homosexuality and to define homosexual attitudes and behaviors as deviations from heterosexual attitudes and behaviors (Bieber, 1965; Cattell & Moroney, 1962; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1964). Consistent with the view of homosexuality as deviant behavior, the mental health professions have traditionally focused treatment efforts for homosexuals on the goal of changing sexual orientation (Davison, 1977). Only recently has the applied psychology literature reflected a more accepting attitude toward gay behaviors and lifestyle with a concurrent shift in therapeutic focus to client exploration and acceptance of sexual orientation (Binder, 1977; Russell & Winkler, 1977; Silverstein, 1977). Issues pertinent to counseling gays have begun to emerge from this literature, including the suggestion that gay clients perceive homosexual counselors as more credible sources of help than heterosexual counselors (Cass, 1979).

The purpose of this study was to determine whether counselor sexual preference disclosure, counselor attitude toward gay advocacy, and subject stance on gay advocacy affect the way in which gay men view a counselor. It was hypothesized that gay

men would rate a male counselor who discloses that he is homosexual as more credible and attractive than they would a counselor who discloses that he is heterosexual or one who declines to state his sexual preference. It was also hypothesized that gay men would rate a counselor who expresses an attitude toward gay advocacy similar to their own as more attractive than a counselor who holds an opposing viewpoint on this issue.

## Method

### *Procedure*

Two gay research assistants who were graduate students in counseling psychology attended regularly scheduled meetings of various gay organizations in Southern California to recruit subjects for the study. Men attending these meetings were asked to assist in evaluating audiotape recordings that would be used to help train counselors of gay clients. Volunteers were requested to complete a brief questionnaire that verified their sexual preference, provided relevant demographic information, and identified their stance on gay advocacy. Stance on gay advocacy was determined by asking respondents to indicate which of the following two options most closely approximated their own feelings:

1. All gay people should stand up and be counted in order to eventually eliminate harassment.
2. Gay people should be selective with whom they share their sexual preference to avoid harassment.

The first 42 volunteers who identified with each of the two attitudes on gay advocacy were selected as subjects for the study. Within each of the two groups, subjects were randomly assigned to six different listening stations at which they heard one of six tape-recorded segments of a dyadic counseling session involving a gay client. All six tape recordings were identical except for counselor responses to two client questions relating to sexual preference and gay advocacy stance. Subjects completed a shortened version of the Counselor Rating Form (Barak & LaCrosse, 1975) after listening to the tape recordings.

### *Subjects*

Subjects for the study were 84 self-identified gay men recruited from various gay organizations (e.g., student unions, church associations, political groups) who held either an activist ( $n = 42$ ) or nonactivist ( $n = 42$ ) stance on gay advocacy. The total subject population ranged in age from 17 to 66 (mean = 26.4 years) and was predominately white (83%) followed by Hispanic (10%), Asian American (4%) and black (1%). The median educational level for all subjects was 2 years of college. Occupationally, 51% identified themselves as students, 29% as white collar workers, 17% as blue collar workers, and 3% as unemployed. With respect to self-reported

sexual preference on the Kinsey Heterosexual-Homosexual Rating Scale (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948), 18% identified themselves as predominately homosexual but incidentally heterosexual, and 82% said they were exclusively homosexual. Subsequent Chi-square analyses to determine whether either gay advocacy subject population contained a disproportionate share of subjects from these various ethnic, educational, occupational, or sexual preference groups all resulted in nonsignificant outcomes.

### Stimulus Tape Recordings

Six audiotape recordings, each simulating the first 5 minutes of a follow-up counseling session, were developed in which a male client expresses feelings of confusion and anxiety over the possibility of being gay to a male counselor. All six tape recordings are identical (having been made from the same master tape) with the exception of two counselor responses to questions posed by the client.

The first varying counselor response occurs after the client has expressed concern over his homosexual fantasies and experiences. During this segment the counselor responds empathically but the client is obviously somewhat reluctant to self-disclose all of his

feelings and finally confronts the counselor by saying, "I think I'd feel better if I knew how you felt about sex." After clarifying that the client is really asking the counselor to state his sexual preference, the counselor replies with one of three alternative sexual preference disclosures as follows:

I think I can understand—I have strong sexual and emotional feelings also.

Alternative 1. My sexual preference is for men.

Alternative 2. My sexual preference is for women.

Alternative 3. (No statement of sexual preference.)

But, I'm not sure my sexual preference is really important—it's how you feel that really matters.

The second varying counselor response occurs near the end of the tape recordings. After the client has related the experience of hearing two gay psychologists present differing opinions regarding gay advocacy, the client asks the counselor, "Which psychologist do you agree with?" The counselor responds in one of the following two ways:

Activist gay advocacy stance:

Personally, I agree with the gay psychologist who

Table 1  
Analyses of Variance For Counselor Credibility and Attractiveness Ratings

Dependent variable and source	SS	df	MS	F
<b>Expertness</b>				
Counselor Sexual Preference (A)	79.7381	2	39.8691	3.30*
Counselor Gay Advocacy Stance (B)	2.4773	1	2.4773	.20
Subject Gay Advocacy Stance (C)	6.0124	1	6.0124	.50
A × B	10.2703	2	5.1352	.42
A × C	1.3916	2	.6958	.06
B × C	3.1975	1	3.1975	.26
A × B × C	8.8622	2	4.4311	.37
Error	858.6048	71	12.0930	
Total	970.5524	82		
<b>Trustworthiness</b>				
A	164.2209	2	82.1105	6.60**
B	1.7656	1	1.7656	.14
C	.0488	1	0.0488	.00
A × B	31.9874	2	15.9937	1.29
A × C	7.4391	2	3.7196	.30
B × C	5.8265	1	5.8265	.47
A × B × C	27.4701	2	13.7351	1.10
Error	871.2417	70	12.4463	
Total	1110.0000	81		
<b>Attractiveness</b>				
A	142.0197	2	71.0099	5.56***
B	.6417	1	.6417	.05
C	13.5010	1	13.5010	1.06
A × B	24.6148	2	12.3074	.96
A × C	14.7767	2	7.3884	.58
B × C	64.7066	1	64.7066	5.06*
A × B × C	9.5705	2	4.7853	.37
Error	919.8357	72	12.7755	
Total	1189.6667	83		

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .0025$ .

says it's important for all gay people to stand up and be counted if society is ever going to change its attitudes toward gays.

**Nonactivist gay advocacy stance:**

Personally, I agree with the gay psychologist who says gays should be selective with whom they share their sexual preference if they're going to avoid the harassment and hostility society directs towards gays.

The six audiotape recordings employed in this study were the result of crossing the three sexual preference responses with the two gay advocacy responses. All other aspects of the six recordings were identical.

### Criterion Instrument

A shortened version of the Counselor Rating Form (CRF; Barak & LaCrosse, 1975) was administered to subjects immediately after they were exposed to the stimulus tape recordings. The CRF contains 36 items, 12 each for the measurement of counselor expertness, trustworthiness, and attractiveness, rated on 7-point bipolar scales. For the purpose of the present study, three of the items that Barak and LaCrosse (1975) reported as loading most heavily for each of the three perceived counselor dimensions were included in the shortened version (i.e., intelligent-stupid, experienced-inexperienced, and skillfull-unskillful for expertness; trustworthy-untrustworthy, reliable-unreliable, and sincere-insincere for trustworthiness; friendly-unfriendly, likeable-unlikeable, and warm-cold for attractiveness). For the purposes of analysis, scores for each of the dimensions were the sums of the scores on each of the three items within the dimensions.

### Results

Three  $3 \times 2 \times 2$  analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were used to test the effect of counselor sexual preference disclosure, counselor gay advocacy stance, and subject gay advocacy stance on perceived counselor expertness, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Results of these analyses are presented in Table 1. The main effect of counselor sexual preference disclosure was found to be significant for all three dependent variables. No other main or interaction effects generated a statistically significant  $F$  value for either perceived counselor expertness or perceived counselor trustworthiness. The ANOVA for perceived counselor attractiveness, however, did result in a significant interaction effect between counselor gay advocacy stance and subject gay advocacy stance.

In order to determine which counselor

Table 2  
Tukey's HSD Test for Differences Among Means for Sexual Preference Disclosure Conditions by Dependent Variables

Disclosure condition	Condition means	Differences among means for disclosure conditions	
		Homosexual	Heterosexual
Expertness <sup>a</sup>			
Homosexual	17.0357		
Heterosexual	15.0000	2.0357*	
Not stated	14.9259	2.1098*	.0741
Trustworthiness <sup>b</sup>			
Homosexual	17.9643		
Heterosexual	14.9259	3.0384*	
Not stated	15.6370	2.9273*	.1111
Attractiveness <sup>c</sup>			
Homosexual	16.6429		
Heterosexual	13.6552	2.9877*	
Not stated	14.2222	2.4207*	.5670

<sup>a</sup> Tukey's HSD(71) = 1.4117,  $p = .01$ . <sup>b</sup> HSD(70) = 1.4394,  $p = .01$ . <sup>c</sup> HSD(72) = 1.4428,  $p = .01$ .  
\*  $p < .01$ .

sexual preference disclosure means differed significantly from each other, Tukey's HSD test (Kirk, 1968) was used to make all possible pairwise comparisons of means for the three dependent variables. Counselor sexual preference disclosure means and the HSD values for their differences are reported in Table 2. For all three dependent variables, the counselor was perceived more favorably when he stated a homosexual preference than when he stated a heterosexual preference or when he declined to state his sexual preference.

The source of the significant interaction of counselor gay advocacy stance with subject gay advocacy stance for perceived counselor attractiveness can be observed in Table 3. Subjects gave more favorable attractiveness ratings to the counselor when he expressed a gay advocacy stance similar to their own than when he expressed a dissimilar attitude. Tukey's HSD test for differences among these means revealed that means for the two attitude similarity conditions (activist counselor-activist subject; nonactivist counselor-nonactivist subject) each differed significantly from the means for the two attitude dissimilarity conditions (activist counselor-nonactivist subject;

Table 3  
*Means and Standard Deviations for Perceived Counselor Attractiveness by Counselor and Subject Gay Advocacy Stance*

Counselor gay advocacy stance	Subject gay advocacy stance					
	Activist			Nonactivist		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Activist	16.3158	3.3342	19	13.6667	3.9665	21
Nonactivist	14.3182	4.3686	22	15.1818	3.0494	22

nonactivist counselor-activist subject) but not from each other.

### Discussion

The results of the present study provide evidence that gay men perceive homosexual counselors as more expert, trustworthy, and attractive than heterosexual counselors who refrain from stating a sexual preference. Also, the results suggest that regardless of the counselor's sexual preference, similarity of attitudes on the issue of gay advocacy is an important determinant of perceived counselor attractiveness. These two outcomes lend support to earlier findings in social psychology in which receivers judged similar sources as more credible and attractive than dissimilar sources. Further, the finding that subjects rated counselors who held an attitude similar to their own on gay advocacy as more attractive than counselors who held a dissimilar attitude provides support for the proposition advanced by Simons et al. (1970) that perceived attractiveness varies directly with attitude similarity. No support was found, however, for the proposition that attitudinal similarity is a more significant determinant of attraction than membership-group similarity. In the present design, such a relationship would have resulted in a three-way interaction effect for the attraction variable, an effect that did not even approach traditional levels of statistical significance.

In an earlier study on value-communication style and similarity of values, Lewis and Walsh (1980) reported that perceived counselor trustworthiness and attractiveness were directly related to attitudinal similarity, a finding replicated in the present study for the attractiveness dimension. Lewis and

Walsh also found that the manner in which counselor values were communicated (explicitly or implicitly) did not affect perceptions of the counselor, nor did it affect subjects' confidence in the counselors' helpfulness. Taken together, the results of the Lewis and Walsh study and the present study suggest that counselors need to be sensitive to their own values and to their clients' values as well as to how these values may interact to affect the counseling relationship. A counselor who holds the same attitude as his or her client may want to express that attitude in order to optimize influence with the client. On the other hand, a counselor who holds an attitude in opposition to the client's values should be aware that he or she may be risking credibility by expressing the attitude, either explicitly or implicitly, to the client. Withholding an explicit value statement, however, particularly when requested by the client, may also be problematic for the counselor. The present study indirectly assessed the effect of withholding a requested value statement, since any expression of sexual preference can be viewed as a statement of values as well as a declaration of membership in a group. The counselor in the present study received no better ratings when he declined to state his sexual preference than when he stated a preference in opposition to that of the raters. Additional research is needed to directly assess the effect of a counselor's decision to withhold requested value statements.

Since this was an analog study, generalization of the current findings to actual counseling situations can be questioned. Subjects in the present study were observers of, rather than participants in, a counseling relationship and reactions to the counselor may not reflect those experienced in actual

counseling. The brevity of subject exposure to counseling interaction must certainly be considered a limitation in the design of this experiment. The implications drawn from the current findings may be limited to the rapport-building process only, and value differences in treatment phases of counseling may actually promote client change. It is conceivable, for example, that the most significant changes occur for clients who have little in common with their counselors and for whom, at least initially, they experience little attraction. The implications may also be limited to a presenting problem involving sexual preference. A gay client concerned about agoraphobia may not care about whether or not the counselor is homosexual. Furthermore, the direct relationship between perceived counselor credibility and attractiveness and influence in counseling has yet to be firmly established.

It can still be argued that perceived credibility and attractiveness are very important products of any counseling contact, if for no other reason than to enhance the probability that the client will remain in counseling until his or her problem is resolved. To the extent to which the results of this study can be generalized to actual counseling outcomes, the present findings do have implications for counselors and counseling agencies serving gay clients. For example, agencies serving a gay clientele may enhance their credibility with gay clients by employing self-avowed gay counselors. Further, whether homosexual or heterosexual, counselors who see gay clients should be aware that they may be viewed more favorably if they express attitudes on gay issues similar to those held by the clientele they serve than if they express dissimilar attitudes.

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*Until recently, most articles about gay men have focused on etiology or cure. This article focuses on the initial phase of counseling male clients who have a negative gay identity and want help accepting their homosexuality. The article includes some basic concepts in gestalt therapy and how they can be applied when working with men who are acknowledging their homosexuality. It also includes tools and guidelines for therapists who want to work effectively with gay men desiring a positive gay identity.*

JEFFREY BEANE

## ***"I'd Rather Be Dead Than Gay": Counseling Gay Men Who Are Coming Out***

Many men who recognize they are homosexual have a difficult time feeling positive about their homosexuality and accepting it as part of themselves. In this article I focus on the initial phase of counseling men who want help in feeling positive about and accepting their homosexuality. My assumption about homosexuality is that it is neither a disease nor something simply to be tolerated. It is as valuable as heterosexuality.

This article is based on my experience counseling men who are gay or homosexual, my experience as a gestalt therapist, and my experience as a gay man. Within the gay subculture

there is a distinction between gay and homosexual. The word *homosexual* has a negative connotation because it has been used as a diagnostic label by many clinicians, pertains only to sexual orientation, and is usually accompanied by a negative self-image. The word *gay* has come to connote an attitude of positive self-acceptance, which includes emotions, affection, life-style, and political perspective as well as sexual orientation. (For an in-depth perspective of homosexual identity formation see Cass, 1979; Troiden & Goode, 1980.)

Although the focus here is on the initial phase of coming out<sup>1</sup> and feeling good about being gay, most of the concepts are applicable for counselors working to develop a positive gay identity at any point in a gay man's life. The process of coming out as a gay person and "developing a positive gay identity" (Berzon, 1979) are lifelong endeavors. Whether one is 16 or 60, living in Los Angeles or rural Pennsylvania, the process of accepting one's homosexuality and developing a positive gay identity are somewhat universal. A negative gay identity or nonacceptance of one's homosexual feelings is not restricted to people who have not come out but can be firmly established in a gay person who has been out for many years.

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