
AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Volume 3, Number 1
Submitted: August 3, 2007
First Revision: August 30, 2007
Accepted: September 1, 2007
Publication Date: September 10, 2007

Sexual Attitudes of Criminal Justice College Students: Attitudes toward Homosexuality, Pornography, and other Sexual Matters

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ABSTRACT

*Criminal Justice students are considered to be among the more conservative thinkers among college majors. This study compared students declared as criminal justice majors versus all other declared majors regarding attitudes toward sexual issues. Of particular interest are those issues that have a “law” or “legal” aspect. Participants were from 10 undergraduate classes at a Hispanic-serving university in deep South Texas, near the Mexican border. There were 60 criminal justice majors and 258 indicating a major other than criminal justice. Measurement was accomplished through a 38 item sexual attitudes questionnaire designed specifically to assess human sexuality attitudes. Seven items showed statistically significant differences, mostly items related to legal issues. The criminal justice majors tended to be more conservative/rejecting than the non-criminal justice majors on three items with regard to bisexuality and homosexuality. But, on four items relating to males having sex before marriage, *Playboy* magazine, and pornography, the criminal justice majors showed a liberal, accepting attitude. The possibility of prejudiced attitudes toward homosexuals is examined and suggestion is made for education on this topic.*

INRODUCTION

Today’s society is filled with a variety of attitudes toward sexual issues. Therefore, there should be differences based on whether one’s views are conservative or liberal. Criminal Justice students are considered to be among the more conservative

thinkers among college majors (Dantzker & Jackson, 1998; Dantzker & Waters, 1999). We are also aware that a majority of college students are sexually experienced (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Wiley & Gay, 1996). According to a study conducted by Wiley and Gay (1996), they found that “nearly 82% of the students surveyed had sexual intercourse” (pg. 4). What was not discussed was what factors contributed to their sexual behavior other than gender. Among college students, one would think that attitudes and perceptions might differ by major.

Similarly, Crawford and Popp (2003), in their review of 30 studies published since 1980, found evidence for the continued existence of sexual double standards: differences of acceptance of sexual behavior depending on the gender of the actor. For example, a college age male could have several sexual partners and be considered “a stud” while a female college student with several sexual partners is “loose” or “slutty.” College students appeared to be the main sample population for a majority of the studies, yet no one considered major as playing a factor in one’s attitudes or decisions regarding sexual activity. For example, a study by Lance (2004) examined the attitudes of college students toward contraceptives but only focused on gender differences.

With respect to college students, it has been suggested that a variety of factors influence choice of major including family background, socioeconomic and sociopolitical views, and tradition (Dantzker, 2003, 2004; Lackland & De Lisi, 2001; Trusty, Ng, & Ray, 2000). Examining choice of major will often indicate the views that might be expected from students about various topics, yet, very little has been written regarding the relationship of a student’s major to attitudes, perceptions, choices, or behaviors (Dantzker, 2003, 2004; Dantzker & Jackson, 1998; Dantzker & Waters, 1999; Hansen, et al., 2001).

Since Criminal Justice majors appear to be more conservative (Dantzker, 2003, 2004; Dantzker & Jackson, 1998; Dantzker & Waters, 1999), one of the areas about sexual perceptions we decided to examine was what specific differences there might be regarding human sexuality attitudes among students when compared by major (For other areas examined with our sexuality attitudes questionnaire, see Dantzker & Eisenman, 2003, 2005; Eisenman & Dantzker, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2006).

METHOD

A questionnaire should have established validity and reliability (Dantzker & Hunter, 2000). The present study is one of several studies reporting differences from our sexual perceptions questionnaire (Dantzker & Eisenman, 2003, 2005; Eisenman & Dantzker, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2006). The questionnaire was composed of 38 statements covering a number of sexual activities and behaviors. The statements were reviewed by both researchers as well as by a psychology colleague who specializes in attitudinal research and who had recently completed a study on college students’ use of the Internet as it pertains to sex. It was agreed that on its face, the statements seemed to measure what was being sought, i. e., the students’ perceptions regarding a variety of sexual activities and behaviors. The statements were set up for response on a Likert scale of one to five

(one representing strongly disagree and five strongly agree). A variety of demographic questions were also included.

Ultimately, Chronbach's Alpha, and various other methodological tests, and multiple uses, offered findings that substantiated the reliability and validity (Dantzker & Eisenman, 2003; Eisenman & Dantzker, 2003, 2004a, 2004b). For this sample Chronbach's Alpha was .58. Although lower than desired, is likely that the variety of sexual items contributed to the lower Alpha.

Procedure

The survey was distributed in 10 undergraduate courses by the present researchers and cooperating colleagues, who read out loud the consent paragraph at the top of the survey to all the students before letting them read it to themselves. The 10 undergraduate classes include two psychology, three criminal justice, and five philosophy courses. Students were advised participation was strictly voluntary and that there would be no consequences for not participating. Upon completing the survey the students were asked to either leave it on their desk or, if comfortable, return it directly to the instructor.

Participants

A total of 327 usable surveys were collected. Among the 327 completed surveys, 9 did not indicate a major. This resulted in 60 criminal justice majors and 258 indicating a major other than criminal justice. The surveys were coded, entered into an SPSS database, and analyzed using analysis of variance.

RESULTS

The questionnaire consisted of 38 statements regarding various sexual items. However, of the 38 when compared by major, only seven were found to have significant relationships. Interestingly, the seven significant items were those that have both legal implications and were relevant to a liberal vs. conservative interpretation.

Table 1 – Mean Comparisons, by Major (Significant findings only)

Variable/Item	Means/SD							
	Criminal Justice (N=60)		Other (N=258)		ALL (N=318)		F	
Males should be experienced.	3.20	1.18	2.70	1.18	2.80	1.19	4.312*	
Any type of homosexual behavior is wrong.	3.47	1.48	2.61	1.48	2.77	1.52	8.702**	
Bi-sexuality is acceptable.	2.50	1.30	3.00	1.42	2.91	1.41	3.715*	
Magazines like Playboy demean women.	2.62	1.25	2.79	1.36	2.75	1.35	5.089**	
Pornographic materials cause males to be sexually aggressive.	2.65	1.10	3.05	1.81	2.97	1.17	3.019*	
Pornographic materials have no effect on females.	2.65	.90	2.32	.95	2.39	.94	2.996*	
Sex between same gender should be illegal.	3.07	1.36	2.51	1.29	2.62	1.32	5.491**	

* $p \leq .05$

** $p \leq .01$

Criminal Justice majors were more agreeable to the following statements:

Males should be experienced before marriage,
Any type of homosexual behavior is wrong,
Pornographic materials have no effect on females
Sex between same genders should be illegal.

They were less agreeable to:

Bi-sexuality is acceptable,
Magazines like Playboy demean women
Pornographic materials cause males to be sexually aggressive.
(See Table 1)

DISCUSSION

Despite the limited research on college students by major, it is a viable factor. In this research, we found that major does make a difference regarding attitudes toward certain sexual attitudes. In particular, Criminal Justice majors tended to be more conservative minded toward bisexuality and homosexual behavior. These findings tend to support, to an extent, the belief that criminal justice majors, as a group, are more conservative, a view long associated with individuals in law enforcement and corrections. However, it was only in some limited areas that the criminal justice majors were more conservative than the non-criminal justice majors. In fact, the criminal justice majors could be seen as liberal with regard to accepting sex before marriage for males (liberal regarding male behavior), and not condemning either Playboy magazine or pornography.

With respect to general sexual activities and behaviors, no significant difference existed by major. This was particularly interesting with respect to the items of rape and sex with someone under the legal age. It would appear from those results that whether liberal or conservative, neither side supports rape or sex with minors. Perhaps this is more an issue of general morals rather than attitude or perceptions. The same might be true for the other non-significant statements in that moral values are similar regardless of major with the exception of homosexual behavior, pornographic materials, and the role of the male. Therefore, one could suggest that with respect to homosexuality or bisexuality items where the law may be involved, criminal justice majors appear to have a stronger conservative, restrictive perception than non-criminal justice majors.

Negative Views of Homosexuals

This negative view of homosexuality could result in criminal justice majors being harsher with homosexuals when they encounter them in their current or later work roles as police officers, customs agents, deputy sheriffs, correctional officers, etc. and could result in possible mistreatment of homosexuals. Thus, criminal justice classes may want to emphasize a nonprejudiced attitude toward and treatment of homosexuals, since the students seem to start out with negative attitudes toward homosexuality. Affective and attitudinal negativity toward homosexuals can be a deep part of a personal or cultural belief system and which requires extensive work to overcome (Negy & Eisenman, 2005;

Rostosky & Riggle, 2000).

It is illegal to treat people differently due to their race, ethnic group, sexual orientation, etc. But, if one is prejudiced against one of these attributes, then one might be inclined to discriminate. If one has negative attitudes toward homosexuality and also much power, such as those in police-type jobs, then one could be especially negative toward homosexuals. Thus, it would most important for criminal justice programs to teach nonprejudiced attitudes toward different groups, including homosexuals, who have been called the one group it is still all right to discriminate against (Cooke, 2005).

Limitations

The caveat to this study is the fact that we only used two divisions of majors. Other majors that we did not specifically examine, perhaps, for example, those in business, engineering, or agriculture (or other fields) might also be conservative in some sexual attitudes. This is something future research can examine.

Further, the study was done at a university that is 88% Hispanic, mostly Mexican American. In fact, the university has more Mexican-American students than any other university in the United States. It would be valuable to explore if criminal justice majors in general have the attitudes found here or if such attitudes are mainly or especially prevalent among Hispanics. The conservative nature of Hispanic culture and teachings could lead to a negative view of a socially stigmatized outgroup, such as homosexuals, although preliminary data by the second author shows no difference in attitudes toward homosexuals for Hispanics vs. Anglos.

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