

# Using Thought Listing to Examine Attitudes Toward Homosexuality: A Case Study

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*A case study is presented to illustrate the efficacy of using the thought-listing technique for investigating attitudes toward homosexuality. Four women and two men with varying degrees of sexual prejudice were selected from an existing data set. Respondents' scores on the Index of Attitudes Toward Homosexuals (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980) were compared to self-statements obtained in a thought-listing procedure. Results revealed that different categories of responses (cognitive, affective, behavioral) emerged when examining the participants' thoughts regarding homosexuality. The thought-listing procedure uncovers additional information not traditionally obtained from standardized homosexuality attitude scales. Implications for counselors and educators are discussed.*

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**R**esearch on attitudes toward homosexuality has historically focused on the development of reliable and valid scales for measuring attitudes toward people who are lesbian and gay (Herek, 1994). Various measures have been created to assess attitudes toward homosexuality. These measures include but are not limited to the Homosexuality Attitudes Scale (Millham, San Miguel, & Kellogg, 1976), Index of Attitudes Toward Homosexuals (IAH) (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980), Heterosexual Attitudes Toward Homosexuality Scale (Larsen, Reed, & Hoffman, 1980), Anti-Homosexual Scale (Dunbar, Brown, & Amoroso, 1973), Attitude Toward Homosexuality Scale (MacDonald, Huggins, Young, & Swanson,

1973), and the Homophobia Scale (Smith, 1971). An extensive review of the existing homosexuality attitude scales is beyond the scope of this article and others have already discussed the strengths and limitations of these measures (see for example, O'Donohue & Caselles, 1993; Schwanberg, 1993).

Because the IAH (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980) is one of the most frequently cited standardized measures for assessing attitudes toward individuals who are lesbian and gay (Adams, Wright, & Lohr, 1996; Black, Oles, & Moore, 1998; Rudolph, 1989; Serdahely & Ziemba, 1984), it was used in this article and will be briefly reviewed. This 25-item, self-report instrument is easy to administer, and the 5-point Likert-type format allows respondents to rate their degree of agreement with

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statements regarding homosexuality. In addition, the obtained scores allow researchers to quantify attitudes toward homosexuality, examine how attitudes change over time, and compare scores from different samples.

Research that has used these instruments to examine attitudes toward homosexuality was limited by predominately measuring a single attitude construct (i.e., cognitive). Van de Ven, Bornholt, and Bailey (1996) recognized that using only one measurement strategy to assess attitudes toward homosexuality resulted in an incomplete picture of the way sexual prejudice is manifested differently in the thoughts, feelings, and actions of individuals. Some researchers have suggested that a more thorough examination of the affective and cognitive domains is critical to understanding and measuring sexual prejudice (Schwanberg, 1993; Van de Ven et al.). Researchers have recommended that instruments that assess attitudes toward homosexuality retain separate cognitive, affective, and behavioral components because this model best represents current attitude theory (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993).

As stated previously, scale measures of attitudes toward homosexuality can provide a standard score that indicates the level of acceptance or nonacceptance that individuals have toward people who are lesbian and gay. However, the obtained scores do not uncover the thoughts that respondents had as they processed and rated each scale item (O'Donohue & Caselles, 1993). Thought listing has been identified as one method of tapping the cognitive, behavioral, and affective components of attitudes toward homosexuality.

The thought-listing procedure, as discussed by Cacioppo and Petty (1981), has been used as a method of cognitive assessment for measuring and categorizing individuals' immediate thoughts in response to a presented stimulus. In counseling and psychology, thought-listing methodology has been used in the understanding of client thoughts regarding behavioral change and therapeutic interventions (Fuqua, Johnson, Anderson, & Newman, 1984). Thought-listing techniques have also been used to investigate the frequencies and types of self-talk used by group leaders and individual counselors (Hines, Stockton, & Morran, 1995; Morran, Kurpius, & Brack, 1989; Nutt-Williams & Hill, 1996), the role of self-statements in performance of counseling interventions and tasks (Friedlander, Keller, Peca-Baker, & Olk, 1986; Kurpius, Benjamin, & Morran, 1985), and in client responses and conceptualizations of the therapeutic relationship (Heppner, Rosenberg, & Hedgespeth,

1992; Uhlemann, Lee, & Martin, 1994). Only one study has been conducted that examined people's attitudes toward homosexuality by analyzing their self-talk (Guth, Lopez, Clements, & Rojas, 2001).

To illustrate the subtle differences in self-talk that can be obtained by using the thought-listing procedure, this case study extracted information from an existing data set (Guth, Lopez, Clements, & Rojas, 1998) to compare selected participant scores on a standardized sexual prejudice instrument to self-statements obtained in the thought-listing procedure. In this case study, *sexual prejudice* was used to characterize "negative attitudes toward an individual because of her or his sexual orientation" (Herek, 2000, p. 19). Herek (2000) stated that *sexual prejudice* (rather than *homophobia*) is the preferred term to describe negative attitudes toward homosexual behavior and people or communities who are lesbian, gay, and bisexual.

## Method

### *Participants*

A portion of data that was collected as part of a broader study on the effects of training in lesbian and gay issues was used (Guth, Lopez, Clements, & Rojas, 1998). Six participants were selected for this case study. These individuals were Caucasian undergraduate psychology students (4 women, 2 men) from a southeastern university. The mean age of the sample was 27 years (range: 20 years–37 years). Regarding sexual orientation, 100% indicated that they were heterosexual.

### *Instruments*

*IAH.* The IAH (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980) was used to assess attitudes toward homosexuality. Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with 25 items related to homosexuality. An overall index for the IAH was created by summing the responses to the items. Scores on the IAH could range from 25 to 125. Lower scores on this standardized instrument indicate more accepting and positive attitudes. The IAH has been shown to have high test-retest reliability and good factorial and content validity (Hudson & Ricketts; Pagtolun-An & Clair, 1986; Serdahley & Ziemba, 1984).

*Thought-Listing Instrument.* In addition, respondents were presented with written situations related to lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues. After each scenario was read aloud to the participants, they were asked to

recall their thoughts and write them in the spaces provided (Cacioppo and Petty, 1981).

### **Procedure**

The data used in this case study came from the participants' pretest session. Participants were asked to complete a pretest questionnaire assessing their general beliefs, feelings, and thoughts regarding homosexuality. The questionnaire included the IAH (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980) and a thought-listing instrument.

A purposeful sampling technique (Patton, 1990) was used to select 3 matched pairs of respondents ( $n = 6$ ) with varying levels of sexual prejudice. Each pair had the same obtained score on the IAH and was chosen to illustrate how thought listing can uncover unique information about attitudes and perceptions that cannot be obtained when using a standardized attitude scale. Their thoughts on the following situation were examined: "You overhear coworkers making degrading comments about homosexuals." For an in-depth description of the systematic thought-listing procedure that was used to identify and define broad thought content categories, see Guth et al., 2001.

### **Results**

The first pair of respondents scored 37 on the IAH indicating accepting attitudes toward homosexuality. However, closer examination of the thoughts revealed some differences in perceptions. The first participant responded to the situation on affective and behavioral levels. For example, this individual expressed feelings such as "annoyed" and indicated a behavior: "Try to make a point with each individually." The second individual responded to the situation on a cognitive level expressing thoughts such as "Pin Heads!" "This is just racism," and, "It is not worth it—you can't change minds about this."

The second pair of participants scored 77 on the IAH indicating an increasing degree of sexual prejudice. This pair produced a mixture of accepting and nonaccepting thoughts. The first participant responded on a behavioral level stating, "Don't get involved," and "Then again I'll probably join/laugh knowing it's not right." The second individual also responded behaviorally stating, "Listen and voice my opinion," and "Tell them everyone has a right to choose."

The third pair of respondents scored 114 on the IAH indicating high levels of sexual prejudice. The first participant responded on a behavioral level stating,

"Ignore it," "Mind your own business," and "Join in." The second individual responded on a more cognitive level stating, "Homosexuality is wrong," "Immoral," "Bad, bad, bad" "It's disgusting," and "Unacceptable."

### **Discussion**

As can be seen by these illustrations, the respondents' thoughts about homosexuality fell on a continuum from extremely positive to extremely negative. Overall, the degree of sexual prejudice as measured by the IAH was additionally supported by the thought content. For example, respondents who had scores on the IAH indicating a high degree of sexual prejudice also expressed nonaccepting thoughts.

However, the thought-listing procedure helped to discover subtle differences among respondents who had the same score on the standardized IAH measure. Different categories of responses (cognitive, affective, and behavioral) emerged among the participants; these categories provide illustrations of how people thought about the topic of homosexuality. Although each pair of individuals had identical standard scores, they differed in their personal reactions to the same stimulus situation. Respondents expressed their emotions, cognitions, or behaviors as responses to the situation. Thought listing tapped all three components of the tripartite model for understanding attitudes (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993) and can be a useful tool for exploring the attitudes that individuals hold toward homosexuality.

The information gained from this investigation has implications for counselors and educators. With proper training, counselors and educators can use this methodology as an assessment tool. Furthermore, when dealing with issues of sexual orientation, counselors could use thought listing to explore clients' feelings, thoughts, and behaviors toward homosexuality; assess developmental needs; and uncover counseling issues. In addition, counselors and educators may not be able to use the same type of therapy or training for people who are processing and responding in the different domains. Thus, educators may need to tailor training in lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues to the different typologies that emerge. A rational approach may be more effective for those who process on a cognitive level whereas an experiential approach may be more effective for those who process on an affective level. Clearly, this inference needs further empirical investigation.

In conclusion, this article highlighted a need for additional methods of assessing the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of attitudes toward homosexuality. The thought-listing methodology appears to be a complementary method for obtaining data not traditionally uncovered by standardized scale scores. The thoughts obtained by this technique provide support for O'Donohue and Caselles' (1993) conceptual model wherein they proposed that reactions toward homosexuality fall into three broad types: emotional, intellectual or cognitive, and behavioral. However, these findings need to be considered in light of the limited sample size that was used. Future research could extend this investigation by using a larger, randomly selected sample of students. This would increase the generalizability of the findings.

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