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## Attitudes and Beliefs of Heterosexual Sorority Women Toward Lesbian and Bisexual Chapter Members

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# Neumann et al.: Attitudes and Beliefs of Heterosexual Sorority Women Toward Lesbian and Bisexual Chapter Members

DANIEL C. NEUMANN, MARK A. KRETOVICS, & ELISABETH C. ROCCOFORTE

*The authors explored the attitudes and beliefs of heterosexual sorority women toward lesbian and bisexual members at an urban, mid-western, private research university. The authors used a researcher-developed tool consisting of fifty-four Likert scale questions reduced to eight factors to provide evidence of measurement validity. A key finding of this study was that sorority women viewed themselves as very accepting of lesbian and bisexual members and held the belief that same-sex attraction in women is not immoral or inconsistent with their sorority values.*

The experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual members of fraternities and sororities have only recently begun to be studied closely (Rankin et al., 2007). This research area provides insight into what were once perceived as purely heterosexual organizations due to the perceived or actual need for lesbian, gay, and bisexual members to keep sexual orientation private (Case, Hesp, & Eberly, 2005). The present study sought to explore attitudes and beliefs of heterosexual sorority members toward their lesbian and bisexual chapter members. Studying the perceptions of heterosexual sorority members toward lesbian and bisexual members can provide campus administrators with an insight into a campus community where limited research has been completed (Case et al., 2005; Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002; Rankin et al., 2007). This understanding can aid administrators, faculty, and staff in advising, programming, and policy development affecting lesbian and bisexual student experiences on campus and especially within student organizations (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson, 2004; Stevens, 2004). This insight also may inform strategies for improving the overall campus climate regarding tolerance and acceptance of others.

## TERMINOLOGY

The language, labels, and terms used to reference or identify non-heterosexual people and communities are complex and continually changing. Therefore, it is critical to define the terms used within this study. The authors referred to the Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients as adopted by the American Psychological Association (APA) Council of Representatives. The APA refers to sexual orientation as “the sex of those to whom one is sexually and romantically attracted” (APA, 2011, para. 5). Sexual orientation can take multiple forms and one’s identification of their own sexual orientation is referred to as their sexual identity. The authors were interested in the attitudes and beliefs heterosexual women had toward non-heterosexual women, most often identified as lesbian and bisexual. In addition, the authors included the options of gay, queer, and questioning when participants were asked for their sexual identity and when asked about the non-heterosexual community in general. The terms “queer” most often refers to any identity other than normative heterosexuality

and “questioning” refers to someone who is in the process of understanding their sexual orientation as non-heterosexual, but they have yet to come to a better understanding of their identity.

In this study, the authors did not include the attitudes toward and experience of transgender sorority women as the study was focused on sexual identity as opposed to gender identity. Gender identity refers to “one’s sense of oneself as male, female, or transgender” (APA, 2011, para. 3). Research has shown attitudes toward transgender individuals can differ from attitudes toward members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, questioning (LGBQQ) community and often “much of the limited research aggregates transgender college students with their lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) peers, assuming the needs of the populations are similar” (Dugan, Kusel, & Simounet, 2012, p. 719). In order to reflect the focus of the present study, the authors did not use the common acronym, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender), but instead used the acronym LGBQQ to refer to the minority sexual identities most prevalent on campus.

### *LGBQQ Fraternity/Sorority Members*

Hughes (1991) examined the experience of GLB members in fraternities and sororities as well as the challenges chapters faced as members struggled with accepting GLB members. GLB members reported feeling isolated and frustrated by the need to conform to the group norms. Feelings of isolation were reinforced by the social events and programming which are overwhelmingly heterosexual in nature and focus on meeting students of the opposite gender. GLB members stated they felt the need to compensate and express an overtly heterosexual orientation to feel secure within their chapters. Chapters seen as being too accepting of GLB members were often the subject of vandalism, had fewer requests for partnering on programs and events, and their

members were targeted for harassment or isolation (Hughes).

Case et al. (2005) surveyed 472 gay and bisexual men and 52 lesbian and bisexual women involved fraternities and sororities in a study assessing self-identified GLB member experiences. Questions included reasons for joining, how membership affected sexual identity development, and level of acceptance from fellow members. A snowball sampling method was used to identify participants for this study; data were collected between 1992 and 1995 and participants average age was 31 for men and 32 for women. Based on their findings, the researchers estimated 5-6% of fraternity chapter members identified as gay or bisexual and 3-4% of sorority chapter members identified as lesbian or bisexual. Seventy percent of the respondents reported they had encountered a climate of homophobic or heterosexual behaviors or attitudes within their respective chapters. However, 39% of respondents who joined after 1980 reported they had revealed their GLB sexual orientation to one or more of their chapter members while in college. Eighty-nine percent of the men and 81% of the women reported they were “very satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied” with their overall fraternity/sorority experience; however, the majority indicated their sexual orientation detracted from their experience. The authors also found that chapters seemed unwilling to recruit or initiate lesbian or gay students, but were more accepting if they came out after initiation.

Hall and La France (2007) studied the attitudes and communication of homophobia in fraternities by administering a questionnaire to 98 fraternity men at a mid-sized, urban, non-parochial private university in the southwest. The researchers found that as attitudes became increasingly homophobic, concerns about appearing gay increased. Similarly, as participant concerns about appearing to be gay increased, their frequency of making homophobic

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comments also increased. The researchers also found that as a fraternity member's attitude became more positive toward gay individuals, his perception of other members' homophobic communication increased. In addition, the more frequent a member's own negative communications about gay men became, the more frequent the member perceived others to make negative comments about gay men.

Several researchers have found sorority members have a more traditional gender role belief system than their non-member peers (Kalof & Cargill, 1991; Kamm & Rentz, 1994). The gender belief system is a "set of beliefs and opinions about males and females and about the purported qualities of masculinity and femininity" (Kite & Whitley, 1998, p. 97). This might suggest members of sororities have more negative attitudes toward lesbian and bisexual individuals, as research has shown individuals who endorse more traditional gender-role beliefs held more negative attitudes toward gay and lesbians (Kite & Whitley; Whitley, 2001). However, Robinson, Gibson-Beverly, and Schwartz (2004) found sorority women endorsed less stereotypical attitudes than non-sorority members. This was supported by Hinrichs and Rosenberg's (2002) research, which showed fraternity and sorority members did not have different attitudes toward lesbian and gay individuals than their non-fraternity and sorority peers.

The literature provided a glimpse into the experience of LGB fraternity and sorority members, but more research is needed to examine the specific experiences of non-heterosexually identified members. The literature is also lacking research on the beliefs and attitudes of heterosexual men and women in fraternities and sororities and how their attitudes and beliefs towards LGB members might influence chapter culture and operations. For this study, the authors focused on the attitudes and beliefs of heterosexual sorority members due to the perceived lack of lesbian

and bisexual sorority women as opposed to the prevalence of gay and bisexual fraternity men on-campus.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Purpose*

This descriptive study was designed to determine the attitudes and beliefs of current sorority members regarding women who identify as non-heterosexual, most commonly referred to in this study as lesbian and bisexual, and what impact those beliefs have on chapter operations. The researchers conducted a quantitative study to examine the following research questions:

1. What are the attitudes and beliefs of heterosexual sorority women toward lesbian and bisexual women in sororities?
2. How do the attitudes and beliefs of heterosexual sorority members toward lesbian and bisexual members influence chapter operations including recruitment, group cohesion, fraternity partnerships, feminine identity, communication, and alumna interactions?

### *Participants*

This study was conducted by surveying initiated undergraduate members of sororities at an urban, mid-western, private research university. The institution's undergraduate student population of just over 4,000 was 47% female with 22% of women holding membership in a sorority at the time of data collection.

In the spring of 2012, during the first week of classes, the researchers emailed an invitation to participate in the research study to all active undergraduate members of sororities (N = 393). Data were collected during January and February of 2012. In total, 66.7% of sorority

women (n = 262) participated in the study, while 62.8% of sorority women (N = 247) provided complete responses. Ten participants identified as LGBQQ and were removed from the sample, resulting in a final sample size of 237 self-identified heterosexual sorority women. Seventy-nine percent (n = 195) of the participants identified as White, 13.4% (n = 33) as Asian, and 3.7% (n = 9) identified as another racial category (American Indian, Native Alaskan, Black, Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, Latino). Due to a deferred recruitment model, no first-year women were included in the sample.

### ***Instrument***

The Web-based survey was created through a collaboration between the Office of Greek Life, the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Center, and the Institutional Research Office. Participants were asked demographic questions followed by a series of Likert-scale questions ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) to obtain information on the individual's personal beliefs regarding members of the LGBQQ community. The survey considered the degree to which sorority women were comfortable interacting with lesbians and bisexuals; whether the chapter membership was supportive of lesbian and bisexual members; of the level to which alumna and alumnae groups accepted lesbian and bisexual members; and current programming about the larger LGBQQ community. Participants were also asked whether having lesbian members have/would positively, negatively, or had/have no effect on several areas of chapter operations.

Cronbach's Alpha was computed to determine the overall internal consistency reliability of the survey instrument. The alpha of 0.936 indicated that overall, the instrument was a reliable measure of the construct so an exploratory factor analysis was carried out as another measure of internal validity and also to determine if specific survey items could be

grouped together for the purpose of analysis (Gliner, Morgan, & Leech, 2009). The factors can provide researchers a tool in studying potential differences in the beliefs and attitudes of different subgroups in sororities.

### ***Data Analysis***

When using a researcher-developed instrument to measure a complex construct it is prudent to conduct a factor analysis to determine which underlying aspects or sub-constructs are also being measured (Gliner et al., 2009). These sub-constructs can then be utilized to reduce the number of independent variables to be explored. Comery and Lee (1992) stated that a factor loading was "excellent" if the loading was above 0.71, "pretty good" if it was 0.63, "good" if it was 0.55, "average" if it was 0.45 and "poor" if it was 0.32 or below. The researchers determined that any item loading above 0.32 (poor) was acceptable for an item to be included in the factor.

To determine if the data points were eligible for factor analysis, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure for Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were applied. In this study, the KMO value was determined to be 0.884. Leech, Barrett, and Morgan (2005) stated a KMO value between 0.80 - 0.90 is "good." The Bartlett's Test, measuring homogeneity of variances, was significant [ $\chi^2 = 10,762.858$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ]. As a result of these tests, it was determined that an exploratory factor analysis could be applied (Leech et al.).

A common method to determine the number of factors to retain is for the eigenvalues, representing the measure of explained variance, to be greater than 1.0 for each factor (Leech et al., 2005). An eigenvalue of less than 1.0 indicates the factor explains less information than a single item (Leech et al., 2005). Using these criteria resulted in retaining 11 factors. A scree plot was then used to determine the number of factors to retain for analysis. It was found that the slope of the lines joining the

plotted eigenvalues was “more-or-less a straight line, not necessarily horizontal” after factor number eight, thus eight factors were retained (Jolliffe, 2002, p. 117). Researchers then named the eight factors after examining the content of

the survey items loading on each factor (Table 1). A summary of the eight factors including the number of items, loading, percent of variance accounted for, and Cronbach’s Alpha was determined as described below.

**Table 1**

*Primary Factors Affecting the Attitudes of Heterosexual Sorority Members Toward LGBQQ Members*

Factor	# of Items	Loading Range	Eigenvalue	% of Variance	Cronbach’s Alpha
1 Comfort & Engagement	12	0.825 - 0.418	16.758	31.034	0.936
2 Feminine Identity	9	0.859 - 0.659	5.564	10.304	0.936
3 Acceptance & Support	7	0.782 - 0.421	3.998	7.405	0.891
4 Personal Beliefs and Values	5	0.837 - 0.546	2.188	4.052	0.902
5 Advocacy	6	0.755 - 0.401	1.972	3.651	0.817
6 Sisterhood	2	0.734 - 0.721	1.582	2.930	0.983
7 Language	3	0.720 - 0.651	1.513	2.802	0.676
8 Programming	2	0.743 - 0.725	1.315	2.436	0.681

**Factor one (Comfort & Engagement).** This factor consisted of 12 survey items regarding the individual’s comfort level interacting with lesbian and bisexual women including how comfortable members were having a big sister (i.e., an older member assigned as a mentor) who identified as lesbian or bisexual and how comfortable they were having a member bring a same-sex date to a sorority social.

**Factor two (Feminine Identity).** This factor contained nine survey items that focused on the concept of heteronormative feminine identity, regarding the participants’ perceived expectations from their sorority sisters to dress/act like a girl/woman. In addition, this section contained several questions asking if the participant would give a bid to a prospective member if she did not meet the aforementioned expectations.

**Factor three (Acceptance & Support).** This factor included nine survey items such as “Would you accept a sister who identified as lesbian or bisexual?”, “Would you support a sister through the coming out process?”, and

“Would you encourage lesbians to join your sorority?”

**Factor four (Personal Beliefs and Values).** This factor consisted of five survey items regarding the personal beliefs and values of participants regarding same-sex attraction and same-sex relationships including “same-sex attraction is immoral” and “same-sex relationships conflict with the values of my sorority.”

**Factor five (Advocacy).** Factor five, consisted of six items regarding the participants’ interest in being an advocate for the broader lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning community. Items included participants’ current awareness about issues in the LGBQQ community, level of support for organizations that advocate for rights of LGBQQ individuals, and encouraging lesbians and bisexuals to join sororities. Items included “lesbians should be encouraged to join sororities” and “I am aware of current issues in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer community.”

**Factor six (Sisterhood).** Factor six consisted of two survey items regarding the participants' desire to remain a member of a sorority that has one or more out lesbian or bisexual sisters. These were "I would reconsider my membership if one of my sisters was a lesbian" and "I would reconsider my membership if one of my sisters was bisexual."

**Factor seven (Language).** Factor seven consisted of three survey items about the use of language in interpersonal communication, which asked the participant if "it is okay to use the phrase 'that's gay,'" what other chapter members believe, and whether "my sisters make negative comments about lesbians and bisexuals."

**Factor eight (Programming).** The last factor consisted of two survey items asking participants if their sorority sponsored educational programs on LGBQQ issues and if the chapter considers lesbian interests in chapter programming. These items were "my sorority sponsors educational programs on LGBQQ issues" and "my sorority considers lesbian interests in chapter programming."

## RESULTS

Upon completion of the factor analysis the items in each factor were reviewed by examining their mean and standard deviation to provide

greater clarity of the participant attitudes and beliefs surrounding LGBQQ involvement in sorority life on this campus.

### *Effect of Lesbian Membership*

To measure the effect or perceived effect of lesbian members in sororities, participants were asked whether the presence of lesbians in their chapter has affected or would affect several different areas of chapter operations. Participants were able to respond with "not sure," "negative effect," "no effect," or "positive effect" for each selected area. As shown in Table 2, the majority of participants believed there has been no effect or there would not be any effect of having lesbian members on sorority image (62%), recruitment (60%), sisterhood (71%), relationships with other sororities (66%), relationship with fraternities (60%), relationship with chapter alumnae (73%), relationship with alumna adviser (78%) and relationship with the national organization (74%). The areas of chapter operations that showed the largest positive response from participants were sisterhood (21%), relationship with chapter alumna (11%), and recruitment (11%). Relationship with fraternities (14%), sorority image (10%), and recruitment (9%) showed the largest negative response.

**Table 2**

*Reported Effect of Out Lesbian Members in Chapter by Heterosexual Participants*

	Not Sure	Negative	No Effect	Positive
Sorority Image	18.20%	10.20%	61.90%	9.70%
Recruitment	20.70%	8.90%	59.90%	10.50%
Sisterhood	6.80%	1.70%	70.90%	20.70%
Relationships with Sororities	18.10%	6.30%	66.20%	9.30%
Relationships with Fraternities	23.60%	13.50%	59.50%	3.40%
Relationship with Chapter Alumna	14.30%	2.10%	72.60%	11.00%
Relationship with Alumna Adviser	15.60%	0.40%	77.60%	6.30%
Relationship with National Organization	16.90%	2.10%	74.30%	6.30%

*\*percentages are used because several of the questions were negatively worded and reverse scored for analysis*

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### *Comfort Level Engaging With Lesbians /*

#### *Bisexuals*

A series of questions asked about participants' comfort level with living and socializing with lesbian and bisexual women. The mean score for factor one (Comfort and Engagement) was 49.66 (sd = 8.011) with scores ranging from a low of 23 to a high of 60. As shown in Table 3, participants did not take an individual's sexual orientation into consideration before becoming friends with them (m = 4.49 sd = 0.66). Participants were comfortable being

around lesbian and bisexual women (m = 4.46 sd = 0.66), working closely with lesbians (m = 4.45 sd = 0.66), and attending sorority socials where lesbians are present (m = 4.41 sd = 0.73). Participants were still comfortable, but to a lesser degree, having a roommate who is lesbian (m = 3.79 sd = 1.11) and having women they did not know hit on them (m = 3.88 sd = 0.93). Participants' views toward their sisters dating each other were neutral with a mean score of 3.00 (sd = 1.23).

**Table 3**

*Factor One: Comfort Level Engaging With Lesbian / Bisexuals*

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
I do not take a person's sexual orientation into consideration before I become friends with them.	4.49	0.66
I would feel comfortable being around lesbian and bisexual women	4.46	0.66
I would feel comfortable working closely with lesbians	4.45	0.66
I would feel comfortable attending sorority socials where lesbians are present	4.41	0.73
I would feel comfortable with my sisters bringing same-sex dates to sorority socials	4.40	0.83
I would feel comfortable having a best friend who is bisexual	4.32	0.80
I would feel comfortable having a best friend who is lesbian	4.23	0.88
I would feel comfortable having a big sister who is lesbian	4.23	0.89
I would feel comfortable having a little sister who is lesbian	4.22	0.89
I would be offended if a woman I didn't know hit on me.	3.88	0.93
I would feel comfortable having a roommate who is lesbian	3.79	1.11
I would feel comfortable with my sisters dating each other	3.00	1.23

*\*Note: A Likert Scale from strongly disagree (1) - neutral (3) - strongly agree (5) was used*

### *Feminine Identity*

The Feminine Identity factor measured participant expectations and perceptions of their sisters' expectations that their sorority sisters follow the heteronormative expectations of what it means to dress and act as a girl/

woman. This factor had a mean score of 27.27 (sd = 7.49) with scores ranging from 11 to a maximum of 45, which represents strong disagreement that members of the participants' chapters have to follow traditional gender norms in the way they dress and act. As shown

in Table 4, participants' expectations that their chapter members do not have to act like a girl/woman ( $m = 2.77$   $sd = 1.05$ ), matched their perception of the expectations of their sorority sisters ( $m = 2.77$   $sd = 1.01$ ). The participants

had the same expectation regardless of sexual orientation. While the participants expected their sisters to dress like a girl/woman, they said would still give a bid to a prospective member that did not dress like a girl/woman ( $m = 3.58$   $sd = 0.98$ ).

**Table 4**

*Factor Two: Feminine Identity*

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
My sisters do not expect me to act like a girl/woman	2.77	1.05
I do not expect my sorority sisters to act like girls/women	2.77	1.01
My sisters do not expect me to dress like a girl/woman	2.79	1.06
I do not expect my sorority sisters to dress like girls/women	2.81	1.04
My sisters do not expect/would expect lesbian sisters to dress like a girl/woman	2.92	1.02
I do not expect my sorority sisters to act like girls/women regardless of their sexual orientation	3.01	1.02
I do not expect my sorority sisters to dress like girls/women regardless of their sexual orientation	3.06	1.03
I would give a bid to a prospective member who didn't act like a girl/woman.	3.57	1.01
I would give a bid to a prospective member who didn't dress like a girl/woman.	3.58	0.98

\*Note: A Likert Scale from strongly disagree (1) - neutral (3) - strongly agree (5) was used

### **Acceptance and Support**

The Acceptance and Support factor measured the willingness of the participant's chapter, as perceived by individual members, to accept lesbian and bisexual members into the chapter, the support and acceptance of "out" members of the chapter and the likeliness they would attend educational programs on lesbian and bisexual issues. The average score for this factor was a 37.70 ( $sd = 4.74$ ) with a range from 22 to a maximum of 45 representing the most accepting and supporting chapter members. As shown in Table 5, participants agreed their sisters would give a bid to a lesbian/bisexual if

they felt she was a good match for their sorority ( $m = 4.55$   $sd = 0.62$ ), however, they perceived their sisters were less likely to encourage lesbians to join their sorority ( $m = 3.47$   $sd = 0.76$ ). Participants felt their sisters either do or would support sisters who are open about being a lesbian ( $m = 4.46$   $sd = 0.59$ ) or bisexual ( $m = 4.31$   $sd = 0.31$ ). Participants agreed that their sisters, to a slightly lesser degree, encourage lesbian sisters to come out ( $m = 4.11$   $sd = 0.71$ ). Participants also believed their sorority sisters would accept them if they were lesbian ( $m = 4.38$   $sd = 0.63$ ) or bisexual ( $m = 4.38$   $sd = 0.64$ ).

**Table 5**

*Factor Three: Acceptance and Support*

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
My sisters would consider giving a bid to a lesbian/bisexual if they felt she was a good match for the sorority	4.55	0.62
My sisters support/would support sisters who are open about being lesbian	4.46	0.59
My sisters would accept me if I was lesbian	4.38	0.63
My sisters would accept me if I was bisexual	4.38	0.64
My sorority supports/would support sisters who are open about being lesbian and/or bisexual	4.31	0.66
My sorority executive board supports/would support sisters who are in the processing of coming out	4.31	0.66
My sisters encourage/would encourage lesbian sisters to come out	4.11	0.71
My sisters would attend educational programs on lesbian and bisexual issues 3	.91	0.72
My sisters encourage lesbians to join our sorority	3.47	0.76

*\*Note: A Likert Scale from strongly disagree (1) - neutral (3) - strongly agree (5) was used*

**Personal Beliefs and Values**

The Personal Beliefs and Values factor consisted of five questions regarding the participants' beliefs regarding same-sex attraction and relationships. The mean score for this factor was a 21.86 (sd = 3.74) with a range from 9 to a maximum of 25 representing the most accepting beliefs. As shown in Table 6, participants agreed that same-sex attraction (m

= 4.56 sd = 0.75) and same-sex relationships (m = 4.50 sd = 0.86) are not immoral (scales were reversed for data analysis). They also agreed that same-sex relationships do not conflict with the values of their sorority (m = 4.57 sd = .67) or their personal beliefs (m = 4.35 sd = 1.03). Finally, participants agreed that same-sex attraction in women is a natural expression of sexuality (m = 3.97 sd = 0.96).

**Table 6**

*Factor Four: Personal Beliefs and Values*

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
Same-sex attraction in women is a natural expression of sexuality	3.97	0.96
Same-sex attraction is not immoral	4.56	0.74
Same-sex relationships are not immoral	4.50	0.86
Same-sex relationships do not conflict with the values of my sorority	4.57	0.67
Same-sex relationships do not conflict with my personal values	4.35	1.03

*\*Note: A Likert Scale from strongly disagree (1) - neutral (3) - strongly agree (5) was used*

### *Advocacy*

The Advocate factor consisted of five questions regarding whether or not a participant encourages lesbian and bisexuals to join sororities and if members are aware of or interested in learning about current issues pertinent to the LGBQQ community. The average score was a 23.58 (sd = 3.65) with a range from 6 to a maximum of 30. As shown in Table 7, participants agreed that they supported organizations that advocate for the rights of LGBQQ people ( $m = 4.25$   $sd = 0.81$ ), however, they were less likely to agree that they were aware of current issues in the LGBQ community ( $m = 3.41$   $sd = 0.77$ ) and that they were interested in learning about current issues ( $m = 3.60$   $sd = 0.95$ ). Participants believed their sisters were likely to encourage lesbians to join sororities ( $m = 3.47$   $sd = 0.76$ ), however, in general participants believed they were more likely to encourage lesbians ( $m = 4.14$   $sd = 0.81$ ) to join sororities than their chapter sisters.

### *Sisterhood*

Two questions make up the sisterhood factor relating to the likelihood that the participant will remain in a sorority if one of her sisters was a lesbian or bisexual. The mean score was a 9.58 (sd = .98) with a minimum possible score of 2 and maximum of 10. As shown in Table 8, participants strongly agreed that they would not consider leaving their respective sorority if a sister revealed she was lesbian ( $m = 4.80$   $sd = 0.49$ ) or bisexual ( $m = 4.78$   $sd = .49$ ).

### *Language*

The Language factor included three questions that asked the participants' perceptions on negative comments about lesbians and bisexuals. As shown in Table 9, participants agreed that their sorority sisters did not make negative comments about lesbians and/or bisexuals ( $m$

$= 4.44$   $sd = 0.65$ ). Participants also agreed that it is not okay to use the phrase "that's gay" ( $m = 4.29$   $sd = 0.91$ ), however, they were slightly less likely to say their sorority sisters held the belief to the same extent ( $m = 3.87$   $sd = 0.97$ ).

### *Programming*

The final factor, Programming, consisted of two questions and considered chapter efforts to include educational programming on LGBQQ issues as well as lesbians' interests in chapter programming. The mean score for factor eight was a 5.30 with a range from two to ten, with ten representing strongly agreeing with the inclusion of LGBQQ programming. As shown in Table 10, participants disagreed that their sorority sponsors educational programs on LGBQQ issues ( $m = 2.68$   $sd = 0.81$ ) and includes lesbian interests in chapter programming ( $m = 2.64$   $sd = 0.82$ ).

## DISCUSSION

This study examined the attitudes of heterosexual sorority women toward lesbian and bisexual members. One of the key findings of this study indicates sorority members at this midwestern institution view themselves as very accepting of lesbian and bisexual members. Participants also perceive their sorority sisters to be accepting, although to a slightly lesser degree. Participants in this study also believe that same-sex attraction and same-sex relationships are not immoral nor do these relationships conflict with the stated values of their organizations. These results are similar to those by Hinrichs and Rosenberg (2002), who found sorority members scored a 4.17 on the Homosexuality Attitude Scale where a 5 is defined as "very accepting." The belief that same-sex attraction is not immoral, combined with the lack of current educational programming on LGBQQ issues in sororities,

**Table 7**

*Factor Five: Advocacy*

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
Lesbians should be encouraged to join sororities	4.14	0.81
Bisexuals should be encouraged to join sororities	4.10	0.81
Lesbians who are out should be admired for their courage	4.09	0.82
I am aware of current issues in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer community	3.41	0.77
I am interested in learning about current issues in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer community	3.47	0.76
I support organizations that advocate for the rights of LGBQQ people	4.25	0.81

**Table 8**

*Factor Six: Sisterhood*

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
I would not reconsider my membership if one of my sisters was a lesbian	4.80	0.49
I would not reconsider my membership if one of my sisters was bisexual	4.78	0.49

**Table 9**

*Factor Seven: Language*

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
It is not ok to say “that’s gay”	4.29	0.91
My sisters do not make negative comments about lesbians and bisexuals	4.44	0.65
My sisters do not think it is okay to say “that’s gay”	3.87	0.97

**Table 10**

*Factor Eight: Programming*

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
My sorority sponsors educational programs on LGBQQ issues	2.68	0.81
My sorority considers lesbian interests in Chapter programming	2.64	0.82

\*Note: A Likert Scale from strongly disagree (1) - neutral (3) - strongly agree (5) was used for tables 1 through 10.

may indicate a greater readiness amongst this population for programming and activities. Perhaps a more active campaign to include sorority members in LGBQQ ally training may be appropriate, and timely? In addition to educating the membership, such as providing LGBQQ ally training or participating in a safe space program, another recommendation is to invite sorority members to demonstrate a public showing of support for the LGBQQ community which could, in turn, increase the comfort level of lesbian and bisexual students within sororities, and further empower positive identity development (Stevens, 2004).

A second finding of this study is the sorority women at this campus believe the addition of lesbian and bisexual sorority sisters into their membership will have no effect on multiple aspects of chapter operations including recruitment, chapter image, and sisterhood, as long as they look and dress like women. While no effect may appear to be better than a negative effect, Fassinger (1991) suggests due to a societal stigma attached to sexual orientation, an environment that lacks either positive or negative indicators (null environment) is similar in many ways to a hostile environment. This provides an opportunity for proactive, rather than reactive education of undergraduate and alumna sorority women about the opportunities and educational benefits of having a diverse membership. Education on lesbian and bisexual topics will also provide undergraduate members tools to help make sorority environments more welcoming for lesbian and bisexual individuals.

These data show sorority women as willing to offer membership to lesbian and bisexual prospective members, encourage sisters to come out, and were supportive of out sisters; however, previous research found that chapters seemed unwilling to invite lesbian and gay students to join, but were more likely to accept them if they came out after initiation (Case, et. al., 2005). While the sorority women were willing to give bids to lesbian and bisexual

prospective members, the researchers found sorority members were less likely to encourage lesbian women to join sororities. Although it is encouraging the members are likely to accept women coming out after they join, the lack of proactive recruitment within the lesbian and bisexual community might send the message that the sororities don't value already "out" women as positive members of their sorority. In order to reach members of the lesbian and bisexual community, undergraduate leaders can utilize the LGB resources on campus such as the professional staff providing support to the LGB community as well as the multiple LGB student groups that are likely to exist. Campus based professionals can establish these connections by inviting representatives from the student groups or professional colleagues to attend a leadership retreat or council meeting.

Throughout the study, multiple survey items grouped lesbian and bisexual women together, as similar studies have done previously (Case et. al, 2005; Engberg, Hurtado, Smith, 2007; Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2004; Stotzer, 2009). Herek (2002), however, found that attitudes toward bisexual men and women were more negative than toward lesbian women and gay men. To examine any potential difference in attitudes between the two communities this study asked four survey items twice, the first regarding lesbians and the second regarding bisexuals. Significance testing for each survey item showed no significant difference between the means for lesbians or bisexuals. This suggests the sorority women in this community do not view bisexual women with any more or less negative attitudes than lesbian women.

While the sorority community as a whole at this midwestern campus was accepting of lesbian and bisexual members, there were a few additional areas for improvement. The participants expressed they expected their sorority sisters to dress/act like a girl/woman; however, they also agreed their sorority would give a bid to a potential new member who did

not meet these expectations. Expectations to dress/act like a girl/woman is one aspect of the traditional gender role belief system, based in heteronormative expectations, which previous research found to be present in sorority chapters (Kalof & Cargill, 1991; Kamm & Rentz, 1994; Robinson et al., 2004). The difference between expectations of a prospective member and those of a sister can result in a member feeling obligated to meet feminine expectations in regard to dress and actions. Officer training and retreats could be used to serve as an introduction to this topic. Leadership could be made aware of the potential negative ramifications of gender role stereotyping, the concept of gender expression as a spectrum, as opposed to a binary construct, as well as the potential for negative impact on women who express their gender in non-normative ways. In addition, participants indicated neutrality about their comfort level with members of the same chapter dating. Sorority headquarters professionals, alumnae volunteers, and campus-based professionals can be proactive in this regard by developing inclusive policies and discussing with chapter leadership the possibility of members dating so the leadership can respond appropriately, and sensitively, when it occurs.

In general, the majority of these findings provide a different view of sorority sisters' attitudes and beliefs toward the lesbian and bisexual community than has been depicted in the past. The researchers hope that the findings here can be seen as an opportunity for sorority organizations to more openly and actively recruit members of lesbian and bisexual community on their respective campuses as well as continue to strive to create inclusive and safe spaces for all members to participate in sorority life.

#### LIMITATIONS

There are a few limitations that must be considered when applying the results. First, Lambert, Ventura, Hall, and Cluse-Tolar

(2006) found upperclassman have significantly more accepting and tolerant views than underclassmen. A limitation to this study is the exclusion of first-year students due to the campus policy on deferred recruitment. Lambert et al. suggest if first-year students were included in the study, results would have been less accepting and tolerant.

Second, it is important to note this study focused solely on the attitudes of heterosexual sorority women toward non-heterosexually identified sorority members. This study did not consider attitudes toward, and experiences of, transgender sorority women. Gender expression was considered in the study, but only as it was connected to perceptions and assumptions of masculinity that are often associated with non-heterosexual women. Therefore, the results of this study should be limited to the attitude toward lesbian and bisexual students and not the attitudes toward transgender students within sorority life.

Additionally, this study was conducted on a single campus of a mid-sized private research university in the midwest at which the undergraduate population comprises slightly less than 42% of the total student population. The research focus and highly selective nature of the institution and the limited diversity among the participants also limits the generalizability of the study.

#### FUTURE RESEARCH

The study examined and reported the attitudes of heterosexual sorority women toward lesbian and bisexual members and created an opportunity for further research on this topic. The next step in this research is to explore attitudes and beliefs based on different subgroups of sorority women using the derived factors. Possible subgroups include: race, chapter affiliation, length of time in sorority, leadership position, friends or family who

identify as LGBTQ, and chapters with an out sister. It is also suggested future researchers expand the size of the sample and include multiple research sites.

Researchers recommend studying the perceptions of non-affiliated lesbian and bisexual students of the sororities' level of acceptance. This will assist fraternity/sorority campus professionals in assessing the comfort level of lesbian and bisexual students in joining sororities and will also provide feedback on creating a more tolerant university environment.

A study could also be conducted to examine the rate that lesbian and bisexual students receive invitations to join sororities to compare actions versus their stated values and beliefs.

Finally, this study did not survey the attitudes of non-affiliated students so the researchers were unable to determine whether the beliefs and attitudes reported by sorority members are less or more accepting than the non-affiliated students at the institution. The researchers recommend future studies that compare the attitudes and beliefs of affiliated students with non-affiliated students.

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