

Coming Out in the Classroom . . . An Occupational Hazard?: The Influence of Sexual Orientation on Teacher Credibility and Perceived Student Learning

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This study examined the influence of instructor sexual orientation on perceptions of teacher credibility. The purpose was to determine if college students perceive gay teachers as less credible than straight teachers. In addition, we sought to explore the role of teacher credibility in terms of perceived student learning. In order to examine these variables, a male confederate presented a lecture on cultural influences to 154 undergraduate students enrolled in eight separate introductory communication classes. In each class, the confederate was careful to keep his delivery and immediacy cues (e.g., vocal expressiveness, movement, and eye contact) natural and consistent. The confederate's sexual orientation, however, was systematically manipulated. Findings indicate that students perceive a gay teacher as significantly less credible than a straight teacher. This study also found that students of a gay teacher perceive that they learn considerably less than students of a straight teacher. To help explain the complex reasons behind students' biased evaluations, the authors have included an in-depth qualitative analysis of participants' responses. **Keywords:** Teacher credibility; teacher sexual orientation; student learning.

Teacher credibility plays a fundamental role in classroom dynamics. Students' perceptions of teacher credibility have a profound and pervasive influence on classroom communication and affect the extent to which pedagogical strategies are deemed by students to be effective. Teachers perceived as having high credibility are capable of increasing students' motivation, their drive to succeed, and their overall academic performance (Cooper & Simonds, 1999; Kougll, 1997; Teven & McCrosky, 1997). In short, teacher credibility is a necessary prerequisite for effective instruction. As Beatty and Behnke (1980) advise, "Students simply do not accept information from sources lacking credibility" (p. 56).

Because of its pedagogical pull in the classroom, communication scholars have posited the following seven factors that may cause educators to lose their perceived credibility: insincerity, the use of powerless language, casual appearance, non-immediacy, speaking in a non-Midwestern dialect, poor presentation skills, and verbal pauses (Beatty & Behnke, 1980; Giles & Street, 1985; Haleta, 1996; Leathers, 1992; Morris, Gorham, Cohen, & Huffman, 1996).

Recent scholarship has introduced an eighth variable: marginalized status. In other words, teachers who are members of minorities are more likely to be perceived as less credible than teachers who are not. For instance, research demonstrates that

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female instructors are consistently rated as significantly less credible than male professors (Anderson & Miller, 1997; Centre & Gaubatz, 2000; Hargett, 1999). Similar biases have been projected on non-White instructors. In one such case, Rubin (1998) empirically established that students rate Asian-American instructors as less credible and less intelligible than Caucasian instructors. African-American instructors have also faced prejudice in the classroom. For example, in an in-depth qualitative study, Hendrix (1998b) found that students at a predominantly White university believed that their Black teachers were challenged more often than their White professors in regards to classroom authority and teaching credentials.

Because a significant amount of evidence has indicated a strong sense of anti-gay bias among college students (Cotton-Hurston & Waite, 2000; Waldner, Sikka, & Baig, 1999; Wall & Evans, 2000), it stands to reason that another marginalized group, gay teachers, may also experience biased perceptions of credibility. While previous research has listed the hundreds of reasons why gay teachers do *not* come out of the classroom closet, no work has explored the consequences they face after they *do*. Yet openly gay teachers do exist, and how they fare on student evaluations is of critical importance. Student evaluations affect a teacher's salary review, promotional opportunities, tenure consideration, and contract decisions. "Given the widespread use of student evaluations of teaching for tenure and promotion decisions," Centra and Gaubatz (2000) explain, "it is important to be aware of possible biases in the evaluations" (p. 17). Thus, this study investigates how the act of coming out affects a gay teacher's classroom credibility as reflected by their student evaluations.

Homophobia and Higher Education

Mirroring the homophobic values and violence found within their parent society, college campuses are often hostile environments for gays and lesbians (Sherrill & Hardesty, 1994). This hostility was echoed in a 1997 study that surveyed 226 self-identified heterosexual students. Nearly 95% of them freely admitted to perpetuating some form of discriminatory behavior toward their fellow gay peers. Nearly 33% reported committing a behavior that was rated as moderately harmful or higher (Rey & Gibson, 1997, p. 65).

Subsequent research has focused on gay students as targets of such violence. For instance, Pilkington and D'Augelli (1995) surveyed 194 gay teens between the ages of 15 and 21 from schools across the nation. Roughly 40% of them reported being threatened or attacked by their peers. Seven percent of the students reported being physically attacked by one of their teachers. If college life is this hostile for the gay student, what must life be like for the gay teacher? Based on previously cited research, one can predict that gay instructors face a chilly climate in the classroom. This chilly climate has the power to diminish a gay teachers' credibility, and in turn, cripple their ability to effectively teach.

Teacher Credibility

Scholars agree that teacher credibility can be defined as an attitude or subjective perception (Cooper & Simonds, 1999; Kougl, 1997; Teven & McCroskey, 1997). As noted previously, researchers have examined several variables that may influence students' perceptions of teacher credibility. Clearly, teacher credibility is subjective and seen through the 'eye of the beholder.' As Kougl explains, "Credibility involves belief, not facts, so accuracy or even agreement with reality is irrelevant" (p. 178). In other words, no matter how clearly gay teachers demonstrate their ability to teach, there is a large chance that students' anti-gay biases could dramatically alter how

they are perceived and treated in the classroom. Without question, this scenario presents a very real threat to the gay teacher. Yet contemporary scholarship has largely ignored and thereby discounted its possible ramifications. Therefore, this study seeks to fill an overlooked gap in the literature by exploring whether college students perceive gay teachers as less credible than straight teachers.

Teacher credibility is defined here as a two-factor model composed of two dimensions: *character* and *competence* (McCroskey & Dunham, 1966). *Competence* involves having knowledge or expertise in a given subject area. Instructors who seem knowledgeable on the material are likely to be perceived as credible, convincing, and influential. *Character*, the second dimension of McCroskey and Dunham's credibility model, involves the extent of trust a teacher has with a student. "Teachers who demonstrate to their students that they can be trusted in their teacher-student relationships are perceived as being high in character" (Martin, Chesebro, & Mottet, 1997, p. 433).

Hypothesis and Research Questions

Empirical research has found that teachers of a minority status have been consistently rated less credible than those of a 'socially-desirable' status (Centra & Gaubatz, 2000; Hargett, 1999; Hendrix, 1998a, 1998b; Rubin, 1998). It follows then, that another marginalized group, gays, would be rated less favorably than those who are more 'socially-desirable', heterosexuals. Thus, hypothesis one predicts that:

H1: Students will rate a gay instructor lower in competence and character than a straight instructor.

Because being gay has been regarded by some as an issue of morality and given the subjective nature of credibility, it stands to reason that students' anti-gay predispositions might bias their evaluation of a gay teacher's character (e.g., morality or sinfulness) more so than their evaluations of a gay teacher's competence (e.g., experience, intelligence, or expertise). Thus, the following research question is posed:

RQ1: Will students rate a gay instructor lower in character than in competence?

While previous scholars have alluded to a link between teacher credibility and perceived student learning (Cooper & Simonds, 1999; Koughl, 1997; Teven & McCroskey, 1997), no work has empirically established their relationship. Thus, we pose the following research question:

RQ2: What is the relationship between teacher credibility and perceived student learning?

It follows then, that students of a perceived/self-identified heterosexual instructor will report higher perceived levels of learning than students of a perceived/self-identified gay instructor. Therefore, research question three asks:

RQ3: Will students perceive they learn more from a straight instructor versus a gay instructor?

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 154 first-year undergraduate students (60 males and 94 females) enrolled in eight sections of an introductory communication course at a

large Midwestern university. The average age of the respondents was 18.45 (ranging from 18 to 20). The racial/ethnic distribution of the sample was: 91.6% Caucasian, 5.2% African-American, 1.9% Hispanic/Mexican, 1.3% Asian/Pacific Islander. In terms of sexual orientation, 98.1% identified as heterosexual, 1.3% identified as gay, and 1.3% identified as bisexual.

Because the introductory communication course is required of all of the first-year students at the selected university, respondents represented a cross-section of all academic disciplines. The eight sections utilized within this study were chosen on a convenience basis: classes needed to be comprised of only first-year students and meet on the same day.

Procedure

On a single day, a trained 25-year-old male confederate entered each of eight communication classes as a guest speaker. In every section, the instructors prefaced the male confederate's lecture using the same prepared introductory statement. This introduction established the speaker's credibility by stating that he was a graduate student in the department, that he had a strong background in the communication discipline, and that he was a nationally ranked collegiate public speaker. After his introduction, the male confederate gave a memorized, but extemporaneously delivered, 30-minute lecture on cultural influences on the communication process.

Because the confederate was a seasoned public speaker and practiced educator, he was skilled at naturally performing on-cue and presenting rehearsed material in an un-rehearsed manner. In addition, the confederate's exemplary platform abilities enabled him to keep his delivery and immediacy cues (e.g., vocal expressiveness, movement around the classroom, and eye contact) natural and consistent.

The confederate's sexual orientation, however, was systematically manipulated in each class. During half of the lectures, the confederate subtly referred to his opposite-sex partner three times (e.g., "My partner Jennifer and I . . ."). During the other half, the confederate subtly referred to his same-sex partner three times (e.g., "My partner Jason and I . . ."). Students then evaluated the confederate using the 'Teacher Evaluation Form,' an instrument measuring instructor credibility.

The consistency of the confederate's lectures was placed under scrutiny twice. First, the confederate videotaped his memorized lecture in front of two separate student audiences. Then two volunteers, blind to the purpose of the study, were asked to independently view these videotapes and record perceived inconsistencies between the confederates' performances. No inconsistencies were found. Second, the four participating instructors, who each observed two of the confederate's lectures, were asked to observe for inconsistencies during the actual data-collection process. Again, no discernable inconsistencies were identified.

Measurement

Teacher Evaluation Form. The 'Teacher Evaluation Form' contained three sections. The first section tapped into the two dimensions of teacher credibility: competence and character. These two dimensions served as the two dependent variables in the present study and were operationalized using 12 pairs of bipolar adjectives adapted from McCroskey and Dunham (1966). Participants expressed their reaction toward the confederate by indicating a mark on a 10-point semantic differential scale that best captured the magnitude of their reactions (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957). This scale measured teacher credibility based on the students' perceptions of

the speaker's competence and character. The scales for the two dimensions are as follows:

Competence: intelligent/unintelligent, valuable/worthless, expert/inexpert, reliable/unreliable, informed/uninformed, qualified/unqualified.

Character: pleasant/unpleasant, unselfish/selfish, nice/awful, virtuous/sinful, honest/dishonest, friendly/unfriendly.

To minimize response bias, the polarity of half of the above 12 items were reversed. The measurement's combined dimensions of competence and character reported a coefficient alpha of .82.

The second section of the credibility instrument included one single-item measure related to students' perceived learning. Using a 10-point scale, students were asked to rank the confederate on the following question: *How much have you learned from this speaker's lecture?* (0-Learned Nothing to 10-Learned a Great Deal). This item was included because it allowed for the researchers to draw a link between teacher credibility and perceived student learning. Given that this measure consists of only a single item, a reliability score is impossible to generate. However, previous research using this method had indicated satisfactory validity (Chesebro & McCroskey, 2000; Christophel & Gorham, 1995; Frymier, 1994).

The last section of the credibility instrument included four open-ended questions. These qualitative questions allowed participants to report, in their own words, their reactions toward the confederate. As Schuman and Presser (1979) argue, a more realistic and valid picture of respondents' beliefs, attitudes and experiences is established if participants are instructed to produce an original answer rather than select one from a prefabricated list. The entire 'Teacher Evaluation Form' could be completed within 15 minutes.

Data Analysis

In scoring the credibility scale, six of the negatively worded items were reversed-scored and an item total was computed so that higher scores indicated higher perceptions of teacher credibility. In measuring the quantitative data, *t*-tests were used to measure differences and similarities between the control and experimental groups. In addition, Pearson correlations determined a possible relationship between perceived credibility and learning. The significance for all statistical tests was set at $p < .05$.

In analyzing the qualitative data, the researchers read the students' responses while making reflective comments in the margins noting areas of similarity with other responses. Then the researchers used the similarities within the data to create conceptual categories. Finally, the researchers coded for the frequencies of both positive and critical comments. To accomplish this, the researchers unitized students' comments by separation of thought or new idea under the first two open-ended questions: "*What did you like about this speaker and why?*" and "*What did you NOT like about this speaker and why?*" For the purposes of this study, positive comments are defined as evaluative remarks intended to highlight the speaker's perceived strengths; whereas, critical comments highlight the speaker's perceived faults or weaknesses. In addition, the following open-ended questions were asked and analyzed: "*Would you hire this speaker to be a teacher at this university?*" and "*What three adjectives would you use to describe this speaker?*"

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF RESEARCH SAMPLE

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Competence	54.92	4.00	154
Character	55.09	3.98	154
Overall Credibility	110.01	7.28	154

Results

Hypothesis one predicated that students would rate a gay teacher as less credible than a straight teacher. Results from independent samples *t*-tests indicate that the effect of instructor sexual orientation is statistically significant in both of the credibility dimensions: competence [$t(152) = 2.71, p < .01$], character [$t(152) = 4.52, p < .001$]. Specifically, students perceived the gay instructor to be significantly less credible in terms of competence ($M = 54.08, SD = 4.21, n = 78$) and character ($M = 53.74, SD = 3.99, n = 78$) compared to their evaluations of the competence ($M = 55.79, SD = 3.59, n = 76$) and character ($M = 56.47, SD = 3.49, n = 76$) of the straight instructor. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics of the research sample.

Research Questions

Research question one sought to determine if students would rate a gay teacher lower in character than in competence. While results from a *t*-test indicate no statistically significant difference between groups in terms of the two dimensions of credibility [$t(77) = .83, p > .05$], the means were in the anticipated direction: competence ($M = 54.08, SD = 4.21, n = 78$), character ($M = 53.74, SD = 3.99, n = 78$).

Research question two sought to explore the link between perceived student learning and teacher credibility. Pearson product-moment correlations indicate a significant positive relationship between perceived student learning and teacher credibility ($r = .43, p < .01$). In other words, students report they learn more from teachers whom they consider highly credible. The mean for the learning variable was 7.16 ($SD = 2.04$).

Research question three asked if students perceived that they learned more from straight versus gay instructors. Results from a *t*-test indicate that students perceive they learn significantly *more* from a straight instructor [$t(152) = 10.61, p < .001$]. Descriptive statistics illustrate that students taught by a gay instructor report lower levels of learning ($M = 5.85, SD = 2.06, n = 78$) compared to students taught by a straight instructor ($M = 8.51, SD = .74, n = 76$).

Supplementary Qualitative Analysis

Having quantitatively established that students perceive gay instructors as less credible than straight instructors, it was important to utilize qualitative analysis to understand possible explanations for the statistical data. As Denzin (1978) advocates, a study's quantitative data can be enriched by exploring, through the participants' own voices, the substantive findings behind the statistical significance.

Teacher Evaluation Form

The qualitative analysis was conducted using participants' responses to four open-ended questions embedded in the Teacher Evaluation Form. The researchers

TABLE 2
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF STUDENTS' COMMENTS

	Positive Comments		Critical Comments	
	% of Respondents	<i>N</i>	% of Respondents	<i>N</i>
Heterosexual Instructor	97%	412	30%	52
Gay Instructor	96%	339	79%	205

created conceptual categories based on the differences and similarities that appeared across the gay and straight instructors' evaluation forms.

What did you like about this speaker? In response to this question, a majority of students provided virtually identical positive comments on both the heterosexual and gay instructors' evaluation forms. For example: "His speaking skills were perfect;" "He was very intelligent and informed;" and "He was a great speaker—very charismatic." The straight instructor, however, received considerably more positive comments than the gay instructor: straight instructor ($n = 412$), gay instructor ($n = 339$). See Table 2 for descriptive statistics of students' positive comments.

What did you NOT like about this speaker? In response to this question, students were four times more likely to offer critical comments when evaluating a gay versus straight instructor. Consequently, the straight instructor received only 39 critical comments whereas the gay received an overwhelming total of 205 critical comments. See Table 2 for descriptive statistics of students' critical comments.

Although all of the lectures were presented by the same person and delivered in the same fashion (sexual orientation was the only manipulated variable), certain comments appeared repeatedly and exclusively on the gay instructor's evaluation forms. For instance, 68% of the students ($n = 53$) made disapproving comments regarding the gay instructor's topic: cultural influences. For example: "I like the speaker, but I don't like the speaker talking about this topic." "He made me feel guilty. I felt like this speaker is telling me I'm not a good person for not agreeing with him," and "I feel this speaker is using this speech to his advantage." Incidentally, the straight teacher received only positive comments concerning the same topic. For example: "[He] spoke on a topic worthy of our attention," "[The speaker] presented a very clear and important message," and "Important topic—great information."

Another discrepancy between the two sets of evaluations concerned comments on delivery. While students praised both of the instructors on their public speaking abilities (e.g., "enthusiastic delivery style," "clear speaking voice," and "seemed very confident and prepared"), a considerable number of critical comments concerning presentation skills appeared only on the gay instructors' evaluation forms. For example: "Distracting hand gestures," "This guy's voice is grating!!" and "Hard to listen to."

Would you hire this speaker to be a teacher at this university? In response to this question, an overwhelming 93% of respondents ($n = 58$) indicated that they would "unquestionably" hire the straight speaker to teach at their university. Conversely, only 30% of students ($n = 23$) said they "might" hire the gay instructor. For example: "I think so, but some students may have a difficult time relating to him;" "I think I would hire him . . . if he taught another subject;" "Maybe, but I think his line of work should be used someplace else and not here at a university." Only 8% of students ($n = 6$) said that they would "definitely" hire the gay instructor. For example, several participants replied: "Of course [this school] should hire him. We

need more teachers who celebrate the concept of diversity,” “Yes! [We] need more teachers who show interest in subject matter and truly believe in what they’re doing,” and “Yes. He would teach others about his differences.”

What three adjectives would you use to describe this speaker? In response to this question, students used similar adjectives to describe both the straight instructor and gay instructor. For instance, the top three ‘shared’ adjectives between the gay and straight instructors were: “articulate,” “educated,” and “energetic.” However, a considerable number of adjectives appeared repeatedly and exclusively on the gay instructor’s evaluations. These adjectives included: “flamboyant,” “creative,” “liberal,” “pushy,” and “biased.”

Discussion

Previous scholars have identified the influential role of credibility in the classroom, calling it a prerequisite for positive teacher-student rapport and a necessity for classroom effectiveness (Cooper & Simonds, 1999; Koughl, 1997; Teven & McCroskey, 1997). More recent scholarship, however, has established that some minority teachers (specifically females, Asian-Americans, and African-Americans) are often the targets of biased perceptions that negatively influence their credibility (Centra & Gaubatz, 2000; Hargett, 1999; Hendrix, 1998; Rubin, 1998). Although significant research has reported strong homophobic attitudes among college students (Cotton-Hurston & Waite, 2000; Waldner, Sikka, & Baig, 1999; Wall & Evans, 2000), few scholars have explored if gay teachers are similarly affected by biased perceptions. The results of the present investigation paint a troubling picture of students’ perceptions of gay instructors.

Synthesis of Finding

Hypothesis. The hypothesis, which predicted that students would rate a gay instructor as less credible than a straight instructor, was supported. This finding is not surprising considering that a significant number of college students have been identified as homophobic (Cotton-Hurston & Waite, 2000; Waldner, Sikka, & Baig, 1999; Wall & Evans, 2000).

Why do anti-gay prejudices affect students’ perceptions of a gay teacher’s credibility? Gibson and Meem (1994) explain that homophobic students often feel psychologically distanced after their teacher discloses that he/she is gay. For instance, they describe an experience with a disgruntled student who felt he could no longer learn from his teacher after he was aware of her lesbian identity:

A few hours after [I came out in] class, a young man came to my office with a drop slip in his hand. He explained that he felt betrayed by me, that I had seemed to him to be tough, but kind like his mother, and that my coming out had let him know that I was not at all what I had “pretended to be.” (p. 14)

Does a single trait determine one’s ability to be an effective teacher? If so, what causes students to determine an instructor’s academic credibility based simply on her or his affection for the same sex? Gibson and Meem (1994) argue that perceived inferiority, coupled with the deviant qualities associated with being gay, create an inevitable false psychological distance within students’ minds. In short, students stop perceiving the gay teacher as credible and start disconnecting themselves in order to feel ‘safe’ and cognitively comfortable. This psychological distancing was evident within students’ responses to the question, “*If one of your teachers told you he/she were gay, how would you respond and why?*” For example, several students made the

stereotypical assumption that a gay teacher would make sexual advances towards them (e.g., "I would feel awkward and wonder if he likes me"). Perhaps it was because of these biased assumptions that several students made the following comments: "I would feel uncomfortable [with their sexual orientation];" "I would tell them to keep it (their sexuality) in the bedroom;" and "[I would] probably drop the class." Clearly, by dropping the class or asking the teacher to refrain from disclosing his or her identity, students were physically or cognitively distancing themselves.

Research Questions. Previous literature claims that students are able to distinguish between the two dimensions of credibility, competence and character, when making faculty evaluations (Cooper & Simonds, 1999; Koughl, 1997; Teven & McCroskey, 1999). Yet, research question one, which asked if students would evaluate gay teachers higher in competence than in character, was not affirmatively answered. One explanation for this discrepancy is that students' anti-gay predispositions may have overridden their ability to make an accurate and fair assessment of the gay teacher's competence based solely on their displeasure with his character. This is particularly alarming given the significant influence student evaluations are often given over a college educator's professional advancement. Thus, it is imperative that college administrators take students' potential anti-gay biases into consideration when reviewing openly gay faculty's evaluations. An examination of student comments (as is evidenced by the analysis of qualitative comments in this study) could reveal those potential biases. Further, administrators should avoid over-reliance on student evaluations and should, instead, institute multiple methods of faculty review including favorable ratings by peers through observation or review of instructional materials. In addition, administrators should reward teaching that promotes and celebrates intellectual diversity and civility as is evidenced by innovative instructional strategies and teaching materials.

The second research question sought to explore the link between perceived student learning and teacher credibility. Results indicate that students perceive they learn significantly more from teachers whom they consider highly credible. As of yet, no studies have empirically established the link between perceptions of credibility and learning. This finding establishes support for this relationship and attests to the presupposed power of teacher credibility. Further, the significance of this finding warrants future investigation into additional factors that may cause teachers to win or lose their perceived credibility.

The final research question asked if students perceive they learn more from heterosexual instructors versus gay instructors. Results indicate that students perceive they learn almost twice as much from a heterosexual teacher compared to a gay teacher. While this finding is not entirely surprising considering the results of the hypothesis, it does hold serious professional implications for the openly gay educator. Additional research should examine, in depth, whether students actually learn less from gay instructors or whether they simply *perceive* that they learn less.

Supplementary Qualitative Analysis

A supplementary analysis of participants' responses to open-ended questions discovered substantive findings that enriched the study's quantitative data. These findings lend support for the hypothesis and research question three.

A major theme across participant's responses was their consistent degradation of gay and lesbian teachers. For instance, in response to the open-ended question, "*If one of your teachers told you he/she were gay, how would you respond and why?*" more than

70% of participants indicated that they would react unfavorably to a gay educator. Further, many students implied that the disclosure of a teacher's gay orientation would greatly interrupt their ability to learn. In contrast, only 11% of students said they would genuinely welcome a gay or lesbian teacher into the classroom. The supplementary qualitative analysis also showed that student's anti-gay biases colored how they perceived and evaluated a gay teacher's credibility. An analysis of students' responses to the Teacher Evaluation Form indicated that the gay instructor received five times more critical comments and considerably fewer positive comments than the heterosexual teacher.

Although it was the same speaker presenting the same lecture for all eight classes (only the sexual orientation was manipulated), an analysis of students' responses indicated several critical comments that appeared solely on the gay teacher's evaluations. For instance, 67% of students disliked the gay speaker's topic, cultural influences, and suggested that he was pushing an agenda (e.g., "I feel this speaker is using this speech to his advantage"). This same accusation reemerged later when students were asked to describe the gay lecturer: A significant number of them responded with the adjectives "pushy" and "biased."

A second category that differed between the straight and gay instructors' evaluations concerned delivery. Although all lectures were presented by one source and delivered in an identical fashion, only the self-identified gay instructor received critical comments concerning his "distracting hand gestures." This discrepancy can be explained by the widely accepted stereotype: gay men are physically effeminate or 'limp-wristed' (Herek, 1984; Jussim, Nelson, Manis & Soffin, 1995; Madon, 1997). In other words, predispositions of gay men caused students to perceive the gay instructor as effeminate, regardless of whether or not he really was. These biases reemerged later when students were asked to describe the gay instructor: Several students chose the adjective "flamboyant." Because it is socially undesirable for Western males to be feminine or to exemplify overtly feminine characteristics, students' predispositions negatively affected how they perceived and evaluated the openly gay instructor. Perhaps the best explanation for these results can be found in Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958). This theory posits that any interaction may give rise to multiple interpretations, each of which seems true to the perceiver (Heider, 1958). In other words, when the teacher identified himself as a member of the gay community, students perceived the teacher as having 'sentiments' (i.e., characteristics) stereotypically associated with the gay community.

Students' biases also affected whether or not they would hire the openly gay speaker. In this study, students were nine times more likely to hire the straight instructor versus the gay instructor. Many students noted that the gay teacher might have a "difficult time relating" to students. Again, as addressed previously, several students were concerned that the gay teacher would push an 'agenda' and offered the stipulation: "I think I would hire him . . . if he taught another subject."

Pedagogical Implications of Findings

This study raises several pedagogical questions for the gay educator. First, is coming out really an occupational hazard? In other words, are openly gay teachers risking perceived credibility as well as student learning by coming out in the classroom? The results of this study do indicate that there are implications for student perceptions of teacher credibility and student learning for openly gay instructors (recall that previous research reveals similar findings for other marginalized groups). However,

should that fact prohibit gay instructors from coming out? Should administrators adopt a policy of not hiring members of marginalized groups that students perceive not to be credible as a function of misconceptions based on gender, race, or sexual orientation? We would argue “no”, insisting that such a policy would be misguided at best and illegal at worst. In addition, there is evidence to suggest that the decision to come out is pedagogically sound and interpersonally healthy.

To justify why, it is important to recall previous communication education research that articulates the importance of classroom self-disclosure. Such literature emphasizes that an instructor’s self-disclosure might potentially enhance classroom rapport. For instance, Rogers (1969) accentuates the importance of trust and honesty in the teacher-student relationship, stressing that realness in the educator is vital. Moreover, he suggests that effective teachers are authentic and willing to self-disclose as a means of reducing hierarchy and generating dialogue. In a similar light, Beck (1983) posits that self-disclosure humanizes the classroom and is important to student learning. She maintains that self-disclosure encourages openness in students, creates a positive atmosphere, unifies the group, and validates diversity. However, Beck asserts, “The point is not self-disclosure for its own sake, or for the sake of political correctness, but because telling seems important at a given moment when it is most congruent with, and most organic to the teaching act” (p. 291).

Given this study’s findings, it may seem logical that the professional disclosure of sexual orientation in the classroom is disadvantageous for the gay teacher. It follows then that the next pedagogical question is: Is being gay the exception to the pedagogical rule of self-disclosure? These authors, again, would argue “no” for several reasons. First, being authentic and real in the classroom reaps several benefits for the gay teacher. For instance, the decision to ‘come out’ has proven to be associated with significantly less anxiety and depression, a higher self-concept, improved relationship satisfaction, greater sense of community, and successful integration into family and society (Berger, 1990; Bybee, 1990; Gartrell, 1981; Larson & Chastain, 1990). Further, Ellis and Riggle (1995) found that gays who are open in the workplace are more likely to have positive perceptions of office climate and high job satisfaction compared to gays who remain closeted. In a similar vein, Wright (1995) explains, “Being oneself, being real makes the art of teaching more comfortable and relaxed” (p. 28).

Second, it is pedagogically sound for gay instructors to come out because they are beneficial to fellow instructors. For instance, Waldo and Kemp (1997) note that instructors who come out “can promote community building among faculty and can potentially initiate scholarship and research on lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues” (p. 81).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is pedagogically sound for gay teachers to come out because they are beneficial to students. Empirical evidence finds that instructors who ‘come out’ in the classroom significantly reduce their students’ biases against gays and lesbians (Waldo & Kemp, 1997). In addition, instructors who come out in the classroom have the potential to validate the self-worth and self-esteem of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students (D’Augelli, 1991, 1992; Waldo, 1995). Further, openly gay instructors send a powerful message to their gay and straight students that college is a place where differences are respected, valued, and celebrated rather than simply tolerated. In the final analysis, students must be encouraged to expand their understanding about those that differ from them.

Professional educators should not pander to students' stereotypes or be allowed or encouraged to create an environment where misunderstandings, misconceptions, and prejudices are allowed to fester. Thus, based on this evidence, it can be reasoned that openly gay teachers do not limit students' learning experience; rather, they enhance and diversify them.

Nevertheless, while it may be 'pedagogically healthy' to come out in the classroom, it cannot be ignored that a considerable number of students in this study perceived the gay educator as "biased" and "pushy" simply because he was addressing the issue of cultural influences. Because of these findings, the final pedagogical question that must be addressed is: Should openly gay teachers shy away from discussing particular issues in order to avoid being labeled as biased? Again, these authors argue "no" for several reasons. Initially, it stands to reason that gay teachers should not modify their classroom behavior any more than heterosexual teachers modify theirs. In other words, asking gay teachers to become invisible by silencing themselves goes against what college institutions were designed to do: educate students about experiencing life's differences, not escaping them. Further, it should be stressed that the results from this study should not be used as motivation for closeted gay teachers to remain closeted, nor for openly gay instructors to return to the closet. Instead, findings from this study should be used to persuade colleges and universities to become proactive in the fight against bigotry and intolerance of *all* minorities, including sexual minorities. Similarly, this research should be used to build arguments for the necessity of university nondiscrimination policies, tolerance workshops/classes, and other educational interventions that will help establish a more positive climate for gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender persons.

Certain factors limit the interpretation of this study's results. Initially, while the authors attempted to tap into student predispositions toward gay people in general, the instrument used was not found to be a reliable measure of predisposed attitudes and could not be used for purposes of this analysis. Future research should investigate ways to measure the attitudes of students which may serve as a potential bias toward gay instructors. Administrators could then use this information to temper negative evaluations of instructors. In addition, the researchers only examined student's initial perceptions of instructor credibility. It is possible that students disassociate the source from the message over the long term. If that were to happen, students may find the message (cultural diversity) more persuasive as time passes. Second, the researchers were unable to collect a random sample of participants because we were interested in collecting responses from sections that met on the same day and contained only first-year students. Future studies should attempt to replicate our findings relying on more rigorous sampling procedures. Finally, although the researchers went to great lengths to guard against this, it is possible that the confederate subtly varied his presentations and that these variations affected the results. However, we have confidence that any differences that may have been present had little impact on students' perceptions. Initially, the presentations underwent great scrutiny from several trained communication scholars who were unable to detect any significant variations. In addition, our analysis of the qualitative data clearly indicates that the manipulation of sexual orientation was effective.

There are several areas that warrant future research. First, in order to gain a better awareness of the intolerances faced by all gay educators, it is necessary to investigate

if other members of the gay community (lesbian, bisexual, and transgender teachers) are also adversely affected by biased perceptions of credibility. Similarly, it would be advantageous to explore if the variable of sex would have a significant effect on perceived credibility. For instance, are lesbians evaluated differently than gay men in regards to perceived credibility? Second, because this study investigated only student's *initial* perceptions of credibility, future research in this arena must explore *derived credibility* (credibility acquired over an extended period of time). Results from such research could determine if gay educators can repair their damaged/lost credibility. Third, future work may advance the relationship between teacher credibility and student learning. In order to do so, it would be beneficial to utilize previously established multiple-item learning indicators to help tap into students' levels of learning. In addition, potential scholarship should empirically test if students actually learn less from gay instructors or if they simply perceive they learn less. Finally, inspired by the findings of this study, it would be beneficial for future work to analyze how heterosexual teachers perceive and evaluate their gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students. In other words, do teachers' biases affect their grading/evaluations of gay students? Additional research in these diverse contexts could expand knowledge on the detrimental effects of anti-gay discrimination and the associated 'occupational hazard.'

Conclusion

This exploratory study has offered insight on the influences of sexual orientation on teacher credibility and perceived student learning. Such an investigation may offer an incentive to colleges and other institutions to instill policies that would curtail harassment based on sexual orientation. Such a policy may also generate an inclusive learning environment and boost school morale. This study, however, remains a benchmark in a desolate area of investigation. Hopefully, it will not be the last.

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