Critical Analysis of a Research Article

Cassandra Tavaras

Today in society, individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender are often subjected to negative attitudes and homophobia that has a detrimental impact on their lives. As a result, many young homosexuals commit suicide or lead dangerous lives. In an effort to explain homophobic attitudes toward gays and lesbians, researchers have studied many different factors, such as race, age, and gender that may explain why individuals act negatively towards homosexuals on a daily basis. In an article called “The Attitudes of Black and White College Students toward Gays and Lesbians” that was published by the Journal of Black Studies in March 2009, researchers conducted a study in order to research whether or not attitudes towards Black and White students differed among college students; many individuals believe that Black communities are more homophobic than White communities for several reasons, including the influence of religion and the violence in these communities. The research completed in this study would provide major implications on how to combat homophobia in all communities.

Because individuals believe that Blacks are more homophobic than Whites, one of the several hypotheses in this study was that Black students, particularly Black male students, will have less positive views of gay men and lesbian women than White students, will be less willing to advocate for gay rights, and will be less willing to socialize with individuals who identify as gay. Researchers believed that religion would have a greater effect on Black students’ attitudes towards gay and lesbians than it
would have on White students. In addition, researchers hypothesized that age would also affect the attitudes of Black and White students alike; they believed that upperclassmen in college, mainly juniors and seniors, would have a more positive attitude towards gays and lesbians than freshmen and sophomore students. The purpose of this study is essentially exploratory because it intends to further explain the attitudes of Black and White students based on previous research findings that have given insight on factors that may influence attitudes toward homosexuality. For example, the perception exists that Blacks are more negative in their views toward gays and lesbians, but there is a little evidence or empirical research to support this claim. Consequently, researchers are using this study to analyze and research if Blacks really are in fact more homophobic than Whites.

In this study, variables that were used to analyze factors that could have an influence on homophobic attitudes included gender and religion. Gender was defined dichotomously, in terms of whether the participant was male or female; participants could either be defined as male or female for the purposes of this study, and religion was defined by asking participants how much religion affected their lives; participants were asked how often they attended religious services (once a week, once a month, two or three times a month, etc.), which would define the importance of religion in the participants’ lives for the purposes of this study. Gender was coded as 0 for women and 1 for men to identify gender for this study and religion was measured using a point scale from one for four; one represented that religion was not of great importance and four represented that religion was of great importance. The variables in this study are valid
and have a purpose; researchers wished to analyze the role of religion in the students’ lives and its effect on their perception of homosexuals, which means that it makes sense for the researchers to inquire about how often individuals participate in religious services because this method seems to be the most effective and direct approach to discovering how religion affects the college students in the study.

To conduct this study, researchers used a cross-sectional design to survey college students at a public Midwestern university that had about 20,000 students in the Spring of 2002. Researchers used a nonrandom, systematic convenience sampling design that involved about twenty academic courses that represented a variety of different majors and general education courses. On average, there were about twenty to thirty students in the classes that were used on the day of the survey. Students completed the survey voluntarily; more than 95% of students who were present completed the survey. Students of different races completed the survey, but only the surveys of Black and White respondents were used for the study, which amounted to 551 surveys. Of the college students, 54% of the college students were women and 46% were men; the mean age was 22.76. Of the respondents, 26% were freshmen, 25% were sophomores, 26% were juniors, and 23% were seniors. Respondents were asked a series of eighteen questions that were divided into three indexes.

The first six-item index analyzed general attitudes towards gays and lesbians; the second seven-item index analyzed willingness to extend rights to gay and lesbian people; the third and final five-item index analyzed willingness to socialize with gay and lesbian individuals. The responses of the survey were analyzed using a five-point Likert-
type scale that ranged from 1, which meant that the participant strongly disagreed, to 5, which meant that the participant strongly agreed. Respondents were also asked if they had a gay or lesbian family member using a yes or no response; 52% of respondents answered yes and 48% responded no.

The use of surveys in this study effectively addresses a broad range of people, such as different majors, religious beliefs, etc. Using a survey allows individuals to rate their opinions about the subject using a scale that will effectively communicate their opinions; using a five-point scale eliminates a binary of yes and no answers that leaves out those answers that may be in between yes and no and immensely contributed to the results of the study, which is one of the advantages of using a survey. Using a survey is highly effective when researching a social topic such as homosexuality. This survey can easily be reproduced for another, equally diverse sample of a population, such as teachers, lawyers, doctors, and other professionals in the community; the questions used in the survey are general questions that anyone can answer regardless of gender, race, or class, which means that it can be offered in other general ways to different groups of people. It would be very interesting to give this survey to additional groups of people to compare their results with the results of the college students used in this study.

The survey seemed to be the most reliable form of data collection for the purposes of this study, but was only be limited to college students at one university, which seemed to be a limitation of this study. In addition, it seems as though some of the items being analyzed on the survey could have been a little more detailed; for
example, the questions asked about religion could have been more detailed and asked about the types of religious activities students may participate in, etc. Overall, this method of collecting data seemed to work for this study over other methods of data collection.

In this study, researchers carried out the survey in an ethical manner. The college students who participated in this study were well aware of the logistics of the survey and the researchers made the effort to tell the students that the survey was completely voluntary; the researchers could have conducted the survey under false pretenses and not given the details out to the students, but instead they made sure that the participants had enough information to consent to doing the survey. Researchers only used the data collected towards proving the hypotheses of the study, which means that the study was conducted in a fairly ethical manner and the results analyzed effectively.

The results of the study showed that there was no statistical difference between the attitudes of Black men and White men in any of the indexes of the study. Male students of both races were more homophobic than female students. Also, there were no significant differences between Black female and White female women in their views towards socializing with gays and lesbians. However, researchers discovered that White women were slightly more willing to extend rights to gays than Black women. Religion was a more important influence for Black students than White students. Black students reported that they attended religious services more often than White students. Religion was unrelated to the differences in attitudes among Black students and White students. In addition, Black upperclassmen had more positive attitudes towards gays and lesbians
than freshmen and sophomores; the same was true for White students. Statistically, there was no significant difference between Black and White students at any educational level on any of the three indexes. For Whites, age had a significant effect on the three indexes; as age increased, attitudes towards homosexuality became more positive. Religion was important in accounting for differences in views for White students, but not for the Black students; the importance of religion and the frequency in which students attend religious services was insignificant for Black students. The study determined that it is unclear whether or not Blacks and Whites have different attitudes towards homosexuals, which implies that further research is necessary to eradicate homophobia in society.

All in all, the research presented in this study was very informative. It is interesting to note that the researchers did not find any significant differences towards homosexuals among Blacks and Whites since most individuals believe that Blacks are more homophobic than any other racial communities and this study found different results; these findings makes one wonder if it is true that Blacks tend to be homophobic or if this is another stigma among Blacks created by society. Researchers identify the fact that the study was done using only college students as one of the study's limitations, but there are also advantages to using young individuals, especially because young individuals represented the majority in these communities, which means that analyzing their opinions gives researchers a good idea of how individuals think about this topic.

Also, using young individuals allows researchers to get an idea of the way attitudes are formed at this point in time; using older adults would give researchers a
different perspective because older participants would have different attitudes based on past experiences and attitudes from several years ago. This study allows individuals to see that issues should not always be perceived as solely Black individuals against White individuals; there were no differences between the attitudes of Black students and White students, which show that Blacks and Whites are capable of thinking similarly on different issues. This survey is a good starting point for research about homophobia and whether race plays an important role in shaping the attitudes of individuals. It would be interesting to see the results of a survey conducted using older Black, White, and other ethnic participants in a variety of settings to truly see if Black communities or other ethnic are more homophobic than White communities and to then take this research further in an effort to determine why these homophobic attitudes exist so that we can fight for the equality of all people in society, aside from race, gender, and class.