Sources of Stability and Changes of Attitudes Towards Cis/Heteronormativity Among College Students

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Introduction

This project examines how community of origin and campus communities may influence students to have higher or lower levels of viewing cisgender and heterosexuality as "normal"; we examine cisheteronormativity. We employ ideas Differential Association Theory and Ideological Learning to examine this process in terms of shifting norms and judgements of deviance. A survey was conducted in the Fall of 2024 asking about life in community of origin and on campus, and the resulting data was analyzed using multiple linear regression.

Results show that 1) those who consider hometown friends closer than UWEC friends are more likely to hold the belief that gender expressions are linked to sexuality, 2) Those who claim a cisheterosexual identity are less likely than others to see gender non-conforming people as able to be good role models and 3) those with cisheterosexual identities from smaller communities of origin are more likely to expect problems if they invite a gender non-conforming friend to a cookout at home compared to on campus, and so a gap in normative expectations and reactions between the two places is greater for some. Given these results we suggest ways that campus climate may be improved.

Theoretical Background and Research Questions

There is a large body of research that shows difficulties experienced due to gender expression or sexuality among college students, and how gender and sexuality norms affect this process (e.g. Effrig et. al., Gonzales et. al., Goldberg). Sutherland's theory of Differential Association explains how people learn to exhibit behaviors and opinions. This theory explains that social interaction has the power to create new thought patterns and actions. Sutherland also emphasizes that "frequency, duration, priority, and intensity" (Matsueda) are essential predictors to determine what new patterns the individual exhibits. The transition from home to UWEC can lead to a clash of normative systems, but the theory shows how new experiences alter older normative standards over time. This research compares students' relationships to their community of origin and campus to measure level of connection to each place, with the assumption that more and deeper interactions at UWEC will have more influence over time.

Ideological learning is a theory which explains how previous beliefs shape the interpretation of new information and experiences. Acceptance of new ideas does not occur in a vacuum. This occurs as a result of other attitudes which line up ideologically and which are similar. (Brooks). Students at UWEC are taking in new information through the lens of their previous experiences in their community of origin. Students may form relationships on campus where the frequency, duration, priority, and intensity increase and possibly outgrow the relationships they have from their community of origin. They then develop a lens which is primarily influenced by their campus connections.

The Heteronormative Attitudes and Beliefs Scale (HABS) measures "essential, binary beliefs about gender and normative attitudes about relational behavior" (Habarth). The HABS scale is comprised of 16 items which measure how sex and gender are correlated and what behaviors are ascribed to gender. The Traditional Masculinity-Femininity (TMF) Scale measures the respondents' personal relationship with their gender and what behaviors they exhibit associated with their gender identity (Duncan). This research uses both HABS and the TMF Scale as framework for developing survey questions on gender and normative aspects of gender.

The main research questions driving this research are 1) what are students' understanding of gender, particularly when expressed in ways that violate the cultural binary? 2) what factors influence attitudes about gender? 3) What role is the University experience playing in changing students' gender constructs?

Methods

This research was conducted through a survey asking about gender beliefs, hometown experiences and university experiences. The researcher and faculty advisor contacted Professors at the University via email to pass the survey along to students. The survey was distributed through Qualtrics to students through their school email. Results were then analyzed using SPSS. First, bivariate analysis was run to show any significant correlations between variables. Following this, multiple linear regression was used to allow both correlations and levels of variance explained to be estimated.

Sample characteristics

Time at UWEC: In total, the survey received 98 responses. The most respondents were were 18 (40%) of respondents, followed by 19 (20%) and 20 (14%). Most were first year students, with 61% reporting being at the UWEC for less than a year.

Community of origin: 35% were from a small town, 23% were from a small city, 18% were from a suburb, 12% were from a rural area, and about 10% were from a big city.

Sex and Gender: 81% of the sample identified as being biologically women, 17% men. For gender, 67% identified as female, 14% male, 11% as non-binary, 4% as transgender, and 2% as gender fluid.

Sexuality: Heterosexual identity was indicated by 45% of the sample, with Bisexual identity being claimed by another 34%. Other sexuality was 8% of the sample, and gay or lesbian 7%.

In terms of race and ethnicity, 89% of the sample were white, and given the small numbers of each other race/ethnicity, we used "non-white" in our analysis as the comparison group.

Results

DEPENDENT VARIABLES (read models vertically)

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES	MODEL 1 SexGenCon	MODEL 2 RoleModel	MODEL 3 CookGap
FriendGap	0.344** (0.276)	-	-
CisHet	0.223 (0.070)	-1.873*** (-0.361)	-0.895* (-0.203)
HtSize	-	-	-0.737*** (-0.402)
HtKnow	-	0.395* (0.213)	-
constant	4.393	8.583	3.440
R^2	0.088	0.200	0.211

Significance levels: *<.05, **<.01, ***<.001. R^2 is a measure of variance explained by the model, so 0.20 would mean that the model explains 20% of the dependent variable variation, with 80% being due to factors not in the model. Standardized regression coefficients are in (parentheses), and are best used to compare effect sizes to one another.

Dependent Variables: **SexGenCon** = considering non-conforming gender expression as being related to homosexual tendencies, **RoleModel** = gender non-conforming people can be good role models, **CookGap** = the difference in expected reactions to bringing a gender non-conforming person to a cookout at UWEC compared to their home town.

Independent Variables: **FriendGap** = the difference between importance of friends at home compared to friends at UWEC, **CisHet** = identifying as both cisgender and heterosexual, **HtSize** = size of home town, **HtKnow** = knows someone from their home town who does not conform to gender norms.

Model 1-Conflating sex and gender: the influence of campus connection.

Model 1 shows a significant effect for those who see friendships on campus as more important relative to friendships in their hometown on seeing less connection between gender expression and sexuality. Those who place more importance on hometown friendships are more likely to see gender non-conforming people as being homosexual. Importantly, CisHet status is insignificant in this model, showing comparative levels of friendship importance between home and UWEC does not vary by gender expression or sexuality.

This result is not changed by the inclusion of the following control variable in the model, one at a time: CisHet status, hometown size, the importance of religion to the subject, HtKnow, knowing a gender non-conforming person at UWEC, or by time at UWEC. The insignificant effect of time at UWEC shows what matters is connection to others not just being on campus for more time.

Model 2-Role Models: Seeing positives in gender non-conforming people.

Model 2 shows that those who identify as both cisgender and heterosexual are far less likely to see gender non-conforming people as able to be good role models. This effect is moderated for those who knew a gender non-conforming person in their hometown.

This result is not changed by the inclusion of the following control variable in the model, one at a time: hometown size, the importance of religion to the subject, knowing a gender non-conforming person at UWEC, or by time at UWEC.

Model 3-Climate in Community of Origin and Campus: expectations about treatment of non-gender conforming people.

Model 3 uses a Dependent Variable that is the difference in expected reactions to bringing a gender non-conforming person to a cookout at home compared to at UWEC. Those who are both cisgender and heterosexual, and those from smaller hometowns, expect more negative reactions at home compared to other students from larger communities or who do not claim CisHet identity.

This result is not changed by the inclusion of the following control variable in the model, one at a time: the importance of religion to the subject, HtKnow, knowing a gender non-conforming person at UWEC, time at UWEC, or FriendGap.

Analysis

Model 1-Conflating sex and gender: the influence of campus connection.

Having closer friendships either on campus or in community of origin was a clear indicator of how much a person links sexuality and gender. Those who considered their friends in their hometown as more important to them than friends at UWEC were more likely to link gender expression to sexuality. This was true across the board regardless of a person's gender, sexuality, community of origin size, importance of religion, or time spent at UWEC. Having stronger friendships with people on campus is has an effect in that it impacts a person's construct of gender and sexuality, making them more likely to see sex and gender as different, and this likely occurs through more frequent and more impactful interactions on campus, as Differential Association theory and Ideological Learning theory would predict. However, this model only explains 8.8% of the variance in linking sexuality and gender, so while significant, the effect is relatively mild.

Model 2-Role Models: Seeing positives in gender non-conforming people.

People who identify as both cisgender and heterosexual were less likely to believe a person who does not conform to gender expectations is capable of being a good role model. This was true whether the gender non-conforming person was a man or a woman. This was changed if the cisgender heterosexual individual knew someone from their hometown who was gender-nonconforming. In this situation, they were more likely to believe a gender non-conforming person could be a good role model. Given that this model explains 20% of the variance in the dependent variable of "can be a good role model", the effect of CisHet identity combined with early experiences in the hometown explain more of the view of non-gender conforming people in terms of role modeling. Both of these effects are consistent with Differential Association theory and Ideological Learning theory.

Model 3-Climate in Community of Origin and Campus: expectations about treatment of non-gender conforming people.

There are different expectations about how others will treat gender non-conforming people in students' hometowns and on campus, and those differences are affected by two factors: CisHet status and hometown size. The smaller the community of origin, the more likely students are to see a gap between reactions to gender non-conforming people they bring to a cookhout at home versus at UWEC. CisHet individuals also expect more negative reactions to such a situation at home than on campus. This finding is impactful, but, in general home size was not found to be a strong indicator for individual opinions of those who are gender-nonconforming. Given that this model explains 21% of the variance in the dependent variable, community of origin and CisHet status do influence the perception of both communities under question in terms of negative reactions from others.

Discussion and Implications for Campus Policy

Given a data from one point in time, we cannot assess causal relationships with this research. Also, given a limited sample size, there is question as to how representative our sample is of the entire population of UWEC students. However, given data collection early in the semester and includes a large number of first semester students, the data does give us a snapshot of the early socialization process on Campus.

This research shows that experience with others who are not CisHet has an impact, as does community of origin. It also shows that those who are CisHet have a tendency to apply stereotypes to those who are not cisgendered. It also shows that developing strong connections to those on campus leads to fewer gender based stereotypes.

We suggest that small changes in new student orientation (NSO) can speed this socialization process along. NSO should continue to emphasize forming connections early on campus, as this has been shown to have many positive effects socially and academically. Including information in NSO on "good role models", such as "Think of how much (this type of person, not limited to gender examples) goes through every day. To me, I think that takes a lot of courage, and confidence in themselves, which is pretty admirable." Lastly, a NSO component that emphasizes not making assumptions about people ("An African American man might really be into classical music, someone who is transgender might be attracted to someone of the opposite or same sex, we don't know, we should not assume.") has the potential to reduce the conflation of gender expression and sexuality for those on campus.

Acknowledgements & Sources:

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Research was supported in part by the University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire Office of Research and Sponsored Programs Summer Research Experiences for Undergraduates grant.