

# Heterosexist Attitudes amongst Students Entering a Bachelor of Social Work Programme in Switzerland: Exploring Continuing Challenges for Social Work Education

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## Abstract

Social work programmes are expected to enable students to work adequately with sexual minorities. In Switzerland, however, curricular content on sexual minorities is lacking in BSW programmes. Potential sexual prejudice is not explicitly addressed. This study aimed to assess the attitudes towards lesbian women and gay men amongst students entering the BSW programme of a university in Switzerland to establish a basis for discussing curriculum development. Students entering the programme from 2015 through 2018 were surveyed using an online questionnaire. Heterosexist attitudes were captured using the 'Multidimensional Scale of Attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men'. The responding 955 entering students reported positive attitudes towards lesbians and gay men and evidenced low levels of heterosexist views. However, only 4.3 per cent of the respondents consistently disagreed with all items expressing heterosexist views, whilst 43.3 per cent completely agreed with at least one item. The views expressed by male participants expressed significantly higher levels of heterosexism than did those of female participants. The findings evidence uncertainties and a lack of reflection on unquestioned but heteronormative views. This reflects a need to infuse BSW programmes with sexual minority content, to provide opportunities for critical reflection and to address heteronormative and heterosexist views.

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**Keywords:** heterosexism, heterosexist attitudes, homophobia, social work students, Switzerland

*Accepted: June 2020*

## Introduction

Social workers are not merely supposed to provide equitable services to oppressed and vulnerable populations, including sexual minority clients, families, groups and communities. Indeed, professionals are expected to interact unconditionally in an *appropriate* way with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer and intersex people, to empower them and to engage in advocacy. Beyond this, the statement on ethical principle of the International Federation of Social Workers calls on social workers to ‘challenge negative discrimination - including discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation’ (IFSW, 2004, section 4.2.1). This is echoed in national codes of ethics such as, for example, the codex of ‘Avenir Suisse’, the Swiss Association of Social Workers (*Avenir Social Professionnelle Soziale Arbeit Schweiz*, 2010). Notably, direct social work with clients with a non-heterosexual identity requires particular sensitivity, specific knowledge and skills as well as attendant attitudes. The challenge is to deliver relevant, adequate and meaningful service relating to the social complexity at stake whilst recognising that the same size does not fit everyone and business as usual does not necessarily meet sexual minority clients’ or communities’ needs and support their growth. Thus, adequate practice implies a particular ‘queer consciousness’ (Nagy, 2016) and specific competencies (Czollek *et al.*, 2009) sometimes briefly termed ‘rainbow competencies’ (Schmauch, 2015). These include positive attitudes towards sexual minorities and, thus, an attitude free from heteronormativity and sexual prejudice (Dermer *et al.*, 2010) or heterosexism, which refers to ‘an ideological system that denies, denigrates, stigmatizes or segregates any nonheterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community’ (Walls, 2008, p. 26f).

Contrasting with these high expectations, antigay bias continues to be documented amongst social work professionals (Crisp, 2007; Green, 2005), social work faculty (Ben-Ari, 2001; Chonody *et al.*, 2014; Einbinder *et al.*, 2012; Woodford *et al.* 2013) and, to begin with, social work students. Since the 1980s, several studies have explored social work students’ attitudes towards sexual minorities using a variety of hardly commensurable measures. They have tended to report that students were ‘not overly biased’ (Jaffee *et al.*, 2016, p. 257) whilst persistently evidencing a small prevalence of heterosexist views amongst them despite rapid shifts of attitudes towards sexual minorities in the wider

society. A systematic review of twenty-two studies (published between 1980 and 2012) on antigay bias amongst social work students enrolled in programmes in the USA concluded, typically, that social work students' attitudes towards lesbians and gay men were 'mostly positive' (Chonody and Smith, 2013, p. 351). Similarly, a study on social work students enrolled at a university in Canada reported a 'low but significant prevalence of heterosexism' (Brownlee *et al.*, 2005). An inquiry on students of an Australian university established that 8.4 per cent of the respondents' attitudes fell into the 'homophobic range' (Camilleri and Ryan, 2006). Regarding students enrolled in a programme in Greece, a study considered that 10.4 per cent of the participants held negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay men (Papadaki *et al.*, 2013). Exploring social work students from a university in Hong Kong, Kwok *et al.* stated that 'the respondents expressed generally favourable attitudes towards lesbians and gay men' (2013, p. 344). However, an assessment of social work students at two universities in South Korea classified 39 per cent of the respondents as 'high-grade homophobic' (Lim and Johnson, 2001, p. 548).

More recently, Chonody and Yu (2014) reported that a proportion of 21 per cent of the responding Australian social work students did not support the statement that there was nothing wrong with a gay man and 16 per cent disagreed with a statement that lesbians should have the same civil rights as straight women. Regarding incoming students in an MSW programme in the USA, Jaffee *et al.* reported that 7.7 per cent of their sample fell 'within the prejudicial range' (Jaffee *et al.*, 2016, p. 262). An assessment of students enrolled in a programme in Mexico led to the interpretation that respondents showed homophobic attitudes towards lesbians and gay men on a middle and lower-middle level, respectively (Rodriguez Otero, 2017). Contrary to this trend, a study exploring social work students enrolled in a social work programme in Namibia concluded that the respondents showed 'low rates' of acceptance of lesbians and gay men (Matthews *et al.*, 2017).

In preparing social work students for competent practice with sexual minority clients or communities, social work education has a role to play. Programmes providing entry-level competencies for future professionals should provide students with knowledge and skills and—importantly—stimulate the critical reflection of attitudes to comply with professional expectations. To address heterosexist attitudes and sexual prejudice in education is relevant for future professional practice. Acknowledging this situation, we wanted to open up a discussion about the need to address sexual minority issues in the BSW programmes offered by the seven schools of social work in Switzerland. We wanted to discuss the importance of anchoring sexual minority content in the curricula and, thus, the direction the further development of the curricula in this country should take.

## Context

In Switzerland, the consecutive Bachelor's and Master's in social work programmes are generalists. The BSW programmes are expected to provide the requisite entry-level qualification for professional practice in any social work field. Thus, the competencies that social work students are expected to develop during their studies are conceptualised in generic terms differentiating between specialist knowledge, professional and methodological skills, social competencies and self-competencies (SASSA, 2007). The assumption is that graduates who have developed these competencies should be able to work adequately with any user group after a familiarisation phase in a new field. In such a set-up, competencies are not specified regarding specific user groups and fields.

In educational practice, this overly generic umbrella calls for concretisation and the definition of a number of focuses in a programme. In a six-semester BSW programme comprising 180 credit points (European Credit Transfer System), not every aspect of social work can be covered. Some of the competencies have to be developed by way of examples. Thus, when defining the curriculum of a BSW programme, there are decisions to make about the content to be covered in courses and aspects of social work that are left out.

The seven schools of social work in Switzerland agreed upon the generic competence profile of their BSW and MSW programmes. However, within this framework, each school creates its own curriculum. As a glance at the programmes run by the seven schools of social work shows, the outcome of this trade-off between subject matter deemed relevant or even inevitable to be included in the programme and that which can be left out seems to follow a certain pattern: sexual minorities do not appear amongst the content considered relevant to be addressed specifically. Content related to affirming practice with sexual minority populations does not systematically form part of the curricula of the BSW programmes. The coverage of these topics seems to depend considerably on the availability and motivation of (individual) faculty members and is often restricted to elective courses.

## Objectives

To start the discussion about curriculum development in Switzerland in general, we decided to concentrate first on one school of social work whose programme widely reflected the situation described above. We sought to ascertain the initial situation regarding its students' attitudes towards sexual minorities. This approach meets with the desideratum that schools should first investigate their student's attitudes, as understanding their attitudes towards sexual minorities is critical for the

development of relevant curriculum and pedagogical interventions (Jaffee *et al.*, 2016). Certainly, findings from other countries such as those mentioned above can strengthen the sensitivity to the importance of the issue and provide sensitising concepts. However, given the specific national legal framework, social policy and rapid shifts of attitudes towards sexual minorities in the wider Swiss society, curricular development could not draw exclusively on findings from previous studies made in other contexts, as those could be inadequate or obsolete. Thus, we aimed to gain insight into challenges that the students' attitudes might present to the social work education and training at this specific school today.

Studies have shown that the time spent in social work programmes has an effect on student's attitudes towards sexual minorities (Swank and Raiz, 2008; Wallenberg *et al.*, 2011). Against this background, students entering the BSW programme were set centre stage as this allowed us to establish students' attitudes before they may have been influenced by curricular content, faculty and field instructors or fellow students.

Literature supports the assumption that students' attitudes towards lesbians and gay men may differ from those towards bisexuals, transgender people or people with queer or fluid gender identities (Logie *et al.*, 2007; Rodriguez Otero and Trevino Martinez, 2016). Thus, a study of student's attitudes towards a multiplicity of non-heterosexual communities would need to have available community-specific contemporary measures that have proved valid in a comparable context. Further, answering a complex and long questionnaire would request more time. Neither of these conditions was fulfilled. As we took a first step on this journey to explore student's attitudes towards sexual minorities, we decided to set a narrow focus and concentrate on students' views about lesbians and gay men.

The aim of this study was to assess attitudes towards lesbian women and gay men amongst students entering a BSW programme at one—major—school of social work in German-speaking Switzerland.

## Methods

### Design and data collection

The study had a cross-sectional design and included data from four entering cohorts of students enrolled in the same BSW programme. For data collection, we used an anonymous, standardised, self-administered questionnaire. We constructed it using the 'EFS Survey' and programmed it to fit for various devices, such as laptops, tablet computers and smartphones. The participants could access the questionnaire online with an open-access link.

The questionnaire captured socio-demographic information such as age and gender and study-related data such as the type of students' entry qualification, the study modality (full-time study, part-time study and study with concurrent field placement) and the campus. Further, it included an instrument to measure attitudes towards lesbians and gay men.

## Measuring attitudes towards lesbians and gay men

During the last five decades, a multiplicity of instruments measuring attitudes towards gay men and lesbian women has been developed (for an overview, see [Walls, 2008](#)) and tested in various populations. From their systematic review of twenty-three measures used to assess attitudes towards gay men and internalised homophobia, Grey *et al.* concluded that all instruments included in the analysis had 'demonstrated that they are viable measures for research' (2013, p. 349). They highlighted that researchers had to choose from amongst them, considering the study purpose, research question, population, sample, etc. Siebert *et al.* pointed out that researchers 'should not assume a measure's validity ... just because the measure appears frequently in the literature' ([Siebert \*et al.\*, 2014](#), p. 206).

Acknowledging these points and considering the exemplary critique ([Siebert \*et al.\*, 2014](#)) of one of the most frequently used scales ([Herek, 1988](#)), we decided that the measure to be used in our study should meet the following criteria: (i) the scale should have sound theoretical underpinning; (ii) it should have proved good internal consistency and low item redundancy; (iii) it should assess the attitudes towards lesbians and gay men in a symmetrical way capturing the same psychological processes and equivalent latent constructs; (iv) if the measure refers to legal issues, it should not be obsolete and invoke those issues that are now also relevant in the respondents' country; and (v) the items should be appropriate to capture more subtle ways of expressing heterosexist views as expressed by progressive university students of a helping profession nowadays.

We decided to use the Multidimensional Scale of Attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men (MSALG) designed by [Gato \*et al.\* \(2012\)](#). The measure is informed by the theoretical discourse and empirical evidence of shifts from rather 'blatant' to 'subtle forms' of expressions of anti-gay bias and draws on the concept of 'modern homonegativity' coined by [Morrison and Morrison \(2003\)](#) and a multidimensional understanding of heterosexism advocated for by [Walls \(2008\)](#). Capturing various dimensions of heterosexist attitudes, the scale taps into the full range of contemporary, more nuanced and hidden bias and measures their expression towards lesbians and gays equally. The scale was developed

to assess university students' attitudes. It was tested with a sample of students enrolled in programmes of psychology, physical therapy and mechanical engineering in Portugal and, therefore, in a contemporary European context. Finally, the internal consistency proved to be good (Gato *et al.*, 2012).

### The Multidimensional Scale of Attitudes toward Lesbian and Gay Men (MSALG)

The MSALG covers four dimensions of attitudes towards lesbians and gay men reflected in four subscales. Two subscales measure 'old-fashioned' (Walls, 2008) or 'blatant' (Gato *et al.*, 2012) hostile heterosexist attitudes:

- a. Pathologising of homosexuality (PH) refers to the view that same-sex relations are inferior to heterosexual relations, an expression of a disease and requiring therapy. It goes along with a moral condemnation of homosexuality. The PH subscale consists of five items (e.g. 'Homosexuality is a psychological disease' or 'The increasing acceptance of homosexuality in our society is aiding in the deterioration of morals').
- b. Rejection of proximity (RP) refers to distancing and the avoidance of interaction with lesbians and gay men and connects with emotional aversion. The RP subscale consists of eleven items (e.g. 'I feel you cannot trust a person who is homosexual', 'I would feel uncomfortable knowing my daughter's or son's teacher was homosexual' or 'I would not mind working with a lesbian or gay men' [reverse coded]).

Further, the MSALG considers modern heterosexist views. According to Walls, modern heterosexism (MH) can be defined as 'subjectively neutral or positive attitudes, myths and beliefs ... while currently denying, denigrating, stigmatizing and /or segregating any nonheterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community' (Walls, 2008, p. 27f). It includes an uneasiness with opening up institutions traditionally associated with heterosexuality (such as marriage and parenthood) to gay men and lesbians and a discomfort with the greater visibility of lesbians and gay men and their expression of identities (Gato *et al.*, 2012; Hegarty, 2006; Morrison and Morrison, 2003). The scale captures two complementary variations of modern heterosexist attitudes:

- c. The MH subscale endorses beliefs, for example, that prejudice and discrimination are a thing of the past, a continued fight for equal rights is not justified and lesbians and gays demand unnecessary

social changes. It also captures views questioning equal rights and the visibility of lesbians and gay men. This MH subscale comprises seven items (e.g. ‘Gay men and lesbian women should stop shoving their lifestyle down other people’s throats’ or ‘I believe same-sex parents are as capable of being good parents as heterosexual parents’ [reverse coded]).

- d. The denial of support (MH Support) subscale captures MH in the guise of refusing support for equal rights, the fight against discrimination and the expression of identity. This subscale comprises seven items (e.g. ‘Lesbians and gay men still need to protest for equal rights’ [reverse coded] or ‘I find it desirable that homosexual individuals have become more visible in society’ [reverse coded]).

The full MSALG consists of thirty items. The response scale was a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = ‘completely disagree’ to 6 = ‘completely agree’, thirteen items were reversed coded. The MSALG score was calculated by using the mean of the responses to the thirty items. Higher scores indicated a higher level of heterosexist views. As the scale was published in English, we translated it into German, verifying the outcome using a back-translation procedure. In order to avoid position effects, the items of the MSALG were displayed in a randomised sequence.

The psychometric characteristics of the four subscales tested in Portugal were good. Cronbach’s alpha ranged from 0.79 to 0.91 (Gato *et al.*, 2012). In our study, the total MSALG (thirty items) resulted in a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.90, expressing an excellent internal consistency. The PH subscale had an alpha of 0.71, the RP subscale resulted in 0.70, the MH Support subscale 0.80 and the MH subscale 0.77, reflecting a somewhat lower but still acceptable internal consistency.

We conducted a confirmative factor analysis in order to test the structure of the scale. To this end, we performed structural equation modelling (AMOS 24) using the General Least Square method. We specified the model according to the construction presented by Gato *et al.* (2012) and neither correlated error terms nor performed modifications. All items had significant loadings on the construct they were related to on a level  $p=0.000$ . The fit indices considered pointed to the conclusion that the suggested structure had a good fit (adjusted goodness of fit index = 0.924, parsimony goodness of fit index = 0.802,  $\chi^2/\text{df}$  ratio = 2.327,  $p=0.000$ , root mean square error of approximation = 0.037, standardised root mean residual = 0.0524). However, further analysis did not fully support the assumptions of convergent validity and discriminant validity (see supplement 1 in the [Supplementary material](#)). Weighing these results, which were somewhat ambivalent rather than clear-cut, we concluded that interpretations regarding the subscales intended to reflect four dimensions of heterosexist attitudes should be made with caution.



## Data analysis

Data were imported into IBM SPSS 24. First, we performed a descriptive analysis of the socio-demographic and the study-related data. We analysed the single items of the MSALG and computed the MSALG score. Based on Shapiro–Wilk test of normality ( $p=0.000$ ), we concluded that the data on the MSALG were non-normally distributed. Thus, we used the Mann–Whitney U test to make comparisons of MSALG scores between groups and Spearman’s rho to determine associations.

## Sampling

We gathered an availability sample of students entering a BSW programme of a school of social work in the years from 2015 to 2018. In 2015 and 2018, the students were asked to complete the questionnaire during their first week of programme attendance. In 2016 and 2017, the survey was launched during the introduction event two weeks before the programme commenced. In these settings, we reached a population of 1,090 students.

We informed the participants about the aims of the project and that participation was voluntary. We ascertained confidentiality, anonymisation of the data, data security and asked for their consent. In accordance with national law, no formal approval from an ethic commission was needed.

## Results

### Sample description

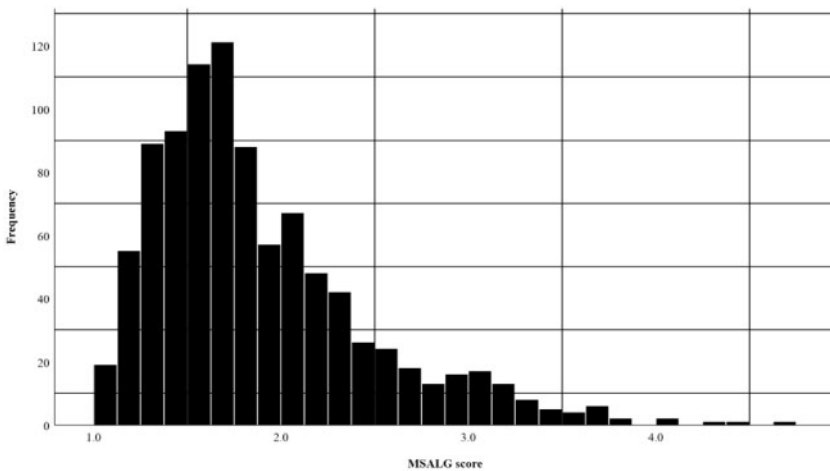
The sample consisted of 955 students entering the BSW programme in one school of social work in Switzerland. This implies a response rate of 87.6 per cent. Respondents’ ages ranged from nineteen to fifty-five years, with a mean age of 25.6 years ( $SD=6.5$ ) and a median age of twenty-three years. Further socio-demographic and study-related characteristics are detailed in [Table 1](#).

### Attitudes towards lesbian women and gay men

Respondents’ attitudes varied widely. The MSALG scores ranged from 1.0 to 4.6. The mean score was 1.9 ( $SD=0.6$ ) and the median was 1.7.

**Table 1** Characteristics of participants ( $N = 955$ ).

Variable	Descriptor	$n$	%	$N$
Year of entry	2015	105	11.0	955
	2016	296	31.0	
	2017	245	25.7	
	2018	309	32.4	
Gender	Female	687	72.2	952
	Male	260	27.3	
	Gender identity not listed	5	0.5	
Entry qualification	Professional baccalaureate	319	33.6	950
	General baccalaureate	179	18.8	
	Specialised baccalaureate	297	31.3	
	Professional college diploma	68	7.1	
	Intermediate diploma school certificate	8	0.8	
	Other	79	8.3	
Study modality	Full-time study	396	41.5	955
	Part-time study	247	25.9	
	Study with concurrent field placement	309	32.5	
Campus	South Campus	630	66.1	953
	North Campus	323	33.9	



**Figure 1:** Histogram of respondents' score on the MSALG (minimum value = 1; maximum value = 6;  $N = 950$ ).

A small proportion of 1.8 per cent of the participating students scored a mean of 3.5 or higher. [Figure 1](#) displays the full range of scores.

The items with the highest mean score of agreement with  $M = 4.0$  was: ‘When I hear about a romantic relationship, I tend to assume that

**Table 2** Description of the four dimensions of MSALG

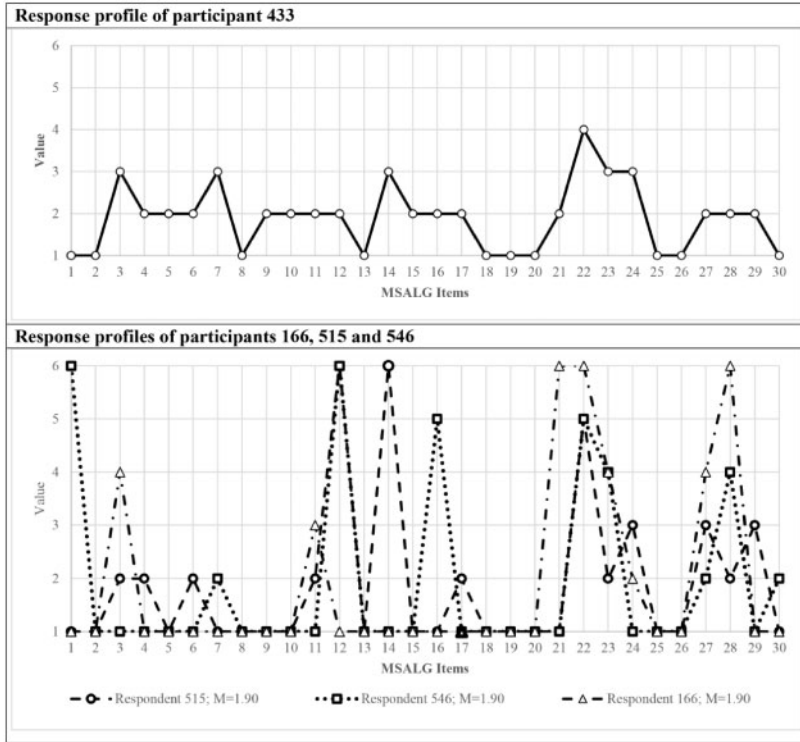
Dimension	Number of items	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	Median	<i>n</i>
PH	5	1.00	4.80	1.41	0.63	1.00	948
RP	11	1.00	3.91	1.53	0.53	1.45	949
Refusal of support (MH Support)	7	1.00	5.57	2.12	0.80	2.00	950
MH	7	1.00	6	2.50	0.83	2.43	949

the partners are of the opposite sex.’ The item with the second highest mean score ( $M=3.3$ ) was: ‘Being raised in a homosexual home is quite different from being raised in a heterosexual home.’ In third place ( $M=2.5$ ) was the item: ‘Lesbians and gay men who are “out of the closet” should be admired for their courage’ (reverse scored). On the opposite pole of the continuum, the three items with the lowest mean score of agreement were: ‘I feel that you cannot trust a person who is homosexual’ ( $M=1.1$ ), ‘homosexuality is a psychological disease’ ( $M=1.2$ ) and ‘lesbians and gay men should undergo therapy to change their sexual orientation’ ( $M=1.2$ ). The scores of the items are displayed in the supplement 2 of the [Supplementary material](#).

Analysis shows substantial differences between the means of the four subscales. The PH subscale had the lowest mean score. The mean of the RP subscale was also low and close to it. However, the MH Support subscale and MH subscale received markedly higher mean scores and higher maxima. MH showed the highest mean score and respondents’ means stretched from 1 (minimum) to 6 (maximum). [Table 2](#) displays the description of the subscales.

### What is the meaning of ‘1.9’

The respondents’ mean score on the MSALG was 1.9. This finding looks neat and clear. However, as is the case with other scales of attitudes towards sexual minorities, the MSALG does not define a clinical cut-off presenting the boundary between acceptable scores and problematic scores. A glance at the literature shows that a common procedure of interpretation is to retranslate the scores into the original response scale. On the MSALG response scale, the mean score of 1.9 lays below 2 = ‘disagree’ and would be interpreted as an expression of respondents’ clear disagreement with the heterosexist attitudes in question. One option would be to briefly summarise the findings of this assessment, as some authors with comparable results do ([Jaffee et al., 2016](#); [Newman et al., 2002](#)): The students entering the BSW programme in our focus reveal a very low level of heterosexist attitudes. This seems true even when the findings on MH are considered. Apart from a few cases,

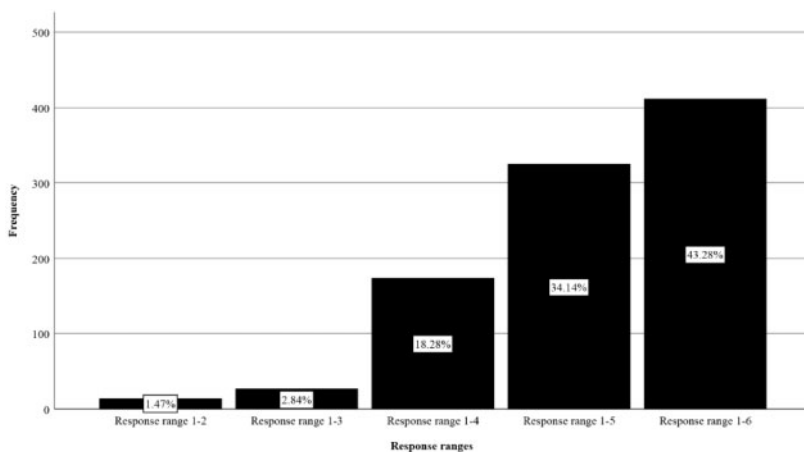


**Figure 2:** Examples of response profiles of participants with a mean score on the MSALG of 1.9.

heterosexist attitudes seem to be a rare phenomenon. At least as far as their attitudes are concerned, these findings do not attest to a students' need nor call for action—and, therefore, do not justify the introduction of specific curricular content.

However, we were aware that a mean score evidences a central tendency. Given the length of the MSALG, we were aware that calculating the mean score could have a levelling effect and has the potential to flatten the effect of a certain number of higher scores to the value of 1.9.

Against this background, we set out to disentangle the meaning of the mean score of 1.9 in more depth. In a first approach, we examined the configurations of the nineteen respondents who individually had exactly a mean score of 1.9 on the MSALG. An appreciation of their profiles confirmed that the mean score reflected diverging response patterns. There were respondents whose response value varied between 1 = 'completely disagree' and 3 = 'rather disagree' with exception of one response value 4 = 'rather agree' (see, for example, respondent 433; Figure 2, upper graph).



**Figure 3:** Response profiles of participants on the MSALG ( $N=952$ ).

However, there were also response profiles which included three responses with the value 6 = ‘completely agree’ and one with the value 4 = ‘rather agree’. There were sets including two responses with the value 6 and one with the value 5 = ‘agree’ as well as profiles including three responses with the value 6, two responses with the value 5 and one with the value 4 (see, for example, respondents 166, 515 and 546; [Figure 2](#), lower graph).

Further, the visualisation demonstrated that respondents’ reported agreement and complete agreement varied. Higher response values did not concentrate on specific items; rather they were spread over the scale. To sum up, this exercise provided face validity for the assumption that analysis of the mean score on the MSALG does not yield the information the response patterns hold for our discussion about curricular content.

In a more systematic approach, we focused on the range of responses of the participants. We analysed their responses to the thirty single items of the MSALG and defined five groups of respondents according to their range of values on the response scale.

Students with responses varying between 1 and 2 expressed invariably firm disagreement (1.47 per cent), those with responses ranging from 1 to 3 (2.8 per cent) without exception disagreed with the items expressing heterosexist views. Together, these made up 4.3 per cent of the participants. In turn, 95.7 per cent of the participating students agreed to varying degrees with at least one of the items expressing heterosexist views. [Figure 3](#) visualises this finding.

The 174 (18.3 per cent) students with response ranges including the value 4 reported slight agreement with at least one of the items

expressing heterosexist views. In fact, 84 (48.3 per cent) ‘rather agreed’ with just one item of the MSALG. This corresponds with the exemplar profile of respondent 433 (Figure 2, upper graph). However, 46 (26.4 per cent) ‘rather agreed’ with two and 15.5 per cent with three items.

The 325 (34.1 per cent) students with responses ranging up to the value 5 reported agreement with a least one of the items expressing heterosexist view. Amongst them, 187 (58.1 per cent) agreed with just one item, whilst 87 (27 per cent) agreed with two and 28 (8.7 per cent) agreed with three items. Additionally, 95 respondents also ‘rather agreed’ (value 4) with one, 64 with two and 31 with three other items on the scale.

Finally, 412 (43.3 per cent) respondent students exhausted the response range with response values stretching up to 6 and, thus, reported complete agreement with at least one item. As analysis revealed, amongst these, 262 (64.1 per cent) completely agreed with just one item, whilst 85 (20.8 per cent) completely agreed with two and 30 (7.3 per cent) with three items. Extreme cases completely agreed with 12 ( $n=1$ ), 14 ( $n=1$ ) or 15 ( $n=1$ ) items. Additionally, 113 respondents from this group also agreed (value 5) with another item on the MSALG, 68 with two and 13 with three other items. A group of 118 respondents also ‘rather agreed’ (value 4) with other items in the MSALG, 57 with two and 40 with three additional items.

In the light of the two different analytical approaches, the participant’s average response score of 1.9 reflected low overall agreement with heterosexist views. However, only a small proportion of 4.3 per cent of the responding students avoided agreeing with all items expressing heterosexist views. In contrast, a proportion of 27.5 per cent of the respondents ‘completely agreed’ with one, 8.9 per cent ‘completely agreed’ with two, 3.1 per cent ‘completely agreed’ with three, whilst 3 per cent ‘completely agreed’ with four to eight items expressing heterosexist views. Extreme cases ‘completely agreed’ with 12 ( $n=1$ ), 14 ( $n=1$ ) or 15 ( $n=1$ ) items.

### Group comparisons

Analysis showed no significant association of respondents’ MSALG score and their age (Spearman’s  $\rho = -0.05$ ,  $p=0.174$ ) nor did the Kruskal–Wallis test reveal significant group differences by entry qualifications ( $U=8.37$ ,  $p=0.137$ ), study modality ( $U=2.89$ ,  $p=0.236$ ), the field of concurrent practice education ( $U=9.92$ ,  $p=0.623$ ) or the campus ( $U=108950$ ,  $p=0.50$ ). However, there was a significant difference between women and men ( $U=98162$ ;  $p=0.10$ ) and between cohorts. The cohort entering in 2017 showed significantly lower scores than those entering in 2016 ( $U=72.48$ ,  $p=0.013$ ) and 2015 ( $U=85.68$ ,  $p=0.048$ ).

However, it did not significantly differ from those entering in 2018 ( $U = -24.29$ ,  $p = 0.30$ ) just as the other cohorts did not differ significantly from each other.

## Discussion

To our knowledge, this was the first systematic assessment of social works students' attitudes towards lesbians and gay men in Switzerland. The responses of 955 students entering a BSW programme from 2015 to 2018 generally reflected a low level of heterosexist views. On the MSALG, their scores averaged 1.9, expressing a general disagreement with heterosexist views. Amongst these, 1.8 per cent scored a mean of 3.5 or higher suggesting agreement with heterosexist views. However, only a small group of 4.3 per cent of the respondents showed firm (i.e. without exception) disagreement with the items expressing heterosexist views. This proportion is much smaller than the 29 per cent reported by Brownlee *et al.* exploring a sample of social work students from Canada (Brownlee *et al.*, 2005). In our sample, 95.7 per cent of the students agreed to varying degrees with at least one of the items expressing heterosexist views, which is worthy of comment. This includes twenty-nine respondents who 'completely agreed' with four to eight items expressing heterosexist views and some extreme cases who 'completely agreed' with twelve to fifteen items of the MSALG. Although no clinical cut-off is defined, at least these cases have to be considered as incoming students holding rather strong heterosexist views. Notwithstanding this group, a large group of students entering the BSW programme under consideration agreed to a varying extent with heterosexist views.

Due to measurement issues and differences in a societal context, a comparison of these findings has to be made with caution. Students assessed by Gato *et al.* (2012) observed mean scores on the four subscales that were substantially higher than those in this study. However, their respondents were not enrolled in social work and this could make a difference, as shown by Tolar *et al.* (2004). As mentioned above, extant research often provided vague descriptions of the level of antigay bias amongst the respondent students. The systematic review of studies regarding social work students in the USA conveys that respondents' attitudes towards lesbians and gay men were 'mostly positive' (Chonody and Smith, 2013, p. 351). The study on students in Hong Kong summarised that the respondents held 'generally favourable attitudes' towards lesbians and gay men (Kwok *et al.*, 2013), whilst the study on students in Mexico describes the assessed level of heterosexist views as 'medium level'. These are generous conclusions, which we too could draw from the findings of our study. When compared with more recent studies that quantify the proportion of respondents with heterosexist views, we have

the impression that the proportion of students evidencing bias in our sample might have been smaller than the 7 per cent found holding negative attitudes in a sample of students from Greece, the 7.7 per cent considered prejudiced in a sample from the USA (Jaffee *et al.*, 2016, p. 262) or the 21 per cent of a students' sample from Australia who hesitated to agree that there was nothing wrong with gay men or the 16 per cent who questioned equal rights for lesbians (Chonody and Yu, 2014). The significant difference between men and women observed in our data shows parallels with the findings of many other studies (Chonody and Smith, 2013). Regarding the four cohorts of first year students, there is no evidence for a continuous trend to lower scores.

We used the MSALG to establish students' attitudes. This measure designed to assess college students' attitudes in a European context proved to be a viable instrument. The full scale proved excellent, the subscales reflecting four dimensions of heterosexist attitudes proved to have acceptable internal consistency. However, in our sample, the four dimensions were not fully distinct.

Some of the items with the highest average score of agreement were from the MH dimension and, thus, are subtle and worded in a reticent style. Some items could be considered ambiguous and reflect heteronormativity rather than heterosexism. This critique could apply to the item with the highest mean score of agreement in our sample: 'When I hear about a romantic relationship, I tend to assume that the partners are of the opposite sex' (Item MHN22). However, whilst this view comes close to empirical reality (in Switzerland, recent studies estimate that men having sex with men are 3.0–3.8 per cent of the male population [Schmidt and Altpeter, 2019]), it is a form of othering and potentially excluding sexual minorities. Using Wall's words: this taken-for-granted heterosexual approach is potentially 'segregating any nonheterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community' (Walls, 2008, p. 27). Subtleties are also in play when it comes to family issues and the item with the second highest mean score ( $M = 3.3$ ) on the MSALG: 'Being raised in a homosexual home is quite different from being raised in a heterosexual home' (Item MHN27). This echoes Wall's reflection that people with modern (paternalistic) heterosexist views would express their concern regarding lesbians and gay men 'most likely couched in terms of protecting their child (or other paternalistic targets) from the unfair social realities that lesbians and gay men (potentially) face' (Walls, 2008, p. 28). Similar reasoning could underpin the agreement with item MHN27. Significantly, participants' mean score of the item expressing a more upfront questioning of the 'capabilities' of same-sex parents to be 'good parents' (MHN3) was 1.9 and, thus, markedly lower. The item (MHN11) expressing that 'same-sex couples should be allowed to adopt children just as heterosexual couples do' had a mean score of (reverse coded) 2.0; 14.2 per cent of the respondents did not agree with



this statement. Thus, the level of support of same-sex adoption amongst the respondent students turned out to be massively higher than the level of acceptance in the general population. Data from the European Social Survey show that only 46.8 per cent of the respondents living in Switzerland agreed with the statement that ‘Gay male and lesbian couples should have the same rights to adopt children as straight couples’ (European Social Survey Cumulative File ESS 1–8, 2018). On this occasion, students’ responses evidence a certain independence from mainstream views and do not just reproduce attitudes that are common around them. Still, we cannot assume that students entering a BSW in social work are spontaneously immune or fully emancipated from socialisation experiences and discourse in society, especially from heterosexist views in subtle guises.

## Limitations

First, it is of note that our respondents were not likely to be exclusively heterosexual. The questionnaire did not include an instrument to capture students’ sexual orientation. We have to assume that non-heterosexual students expressed less heterosexist views and contributed to the lowering of the mean score on the MSALG. Further, the test of the construct validity of the MSALG yielded ambiguous results. We concluded from this that interpretations related to the subscales designed to reflect four dimensions of heterosexist attitudes should be made with caution. Given that we collected data from students enrolled in one school, generalisations have to be made with caution. The attitudes were self-reported. Even though the questionnaire was anonymous, it cannot be excluded that participants were influenced by social desirability.

## Conclusion

Our findings bring us to the conclusion that an important proportion of students expressed uncertainties and to a certain extent supported subtle expressions of heterosexist views. We tend to see their responses pointing to not fully reflected—maybe just incidentally adopted—stances regarding lesbians and gay men and an expandable sensitivity to the pitfalls underlying apparently neutral statements. Maybe this situation is not specific and a need for reflexion may potentially play out regarding other stakeholders than sexual minority clients, communities and fellow students as well. However, this is no valid reason for a possible relativisation. In the light of this assessment of heterosexist views, we consider it important to include sexual minorities content in the BSW curriculum. We conclude that the large majority of the respondent students do not

evidence harsh forms of heterosexism. However, having been raised and living in a largely heterosexist society, they evidence uncertainties in their attitudes towards sexual minorities and a certain lack of reflection in this respect. We identify a need for reflection on unquestioned but heteronormative views.

In the light of this assessment, we question the curricular idea that generic competencies acquired by the students in the BSW programme just need to be transferred or applied to sexual minority clients/communities and, thus, will suffice. Without going into the details of suggestions regarding teaching here, we advocate for the explicit inclusion of sexual minority-specific content in the BSW programme.

## Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *British Journal of Social Work* online.

## Acknowledgements

We thank the participants of this study. We appreciate their readiness to share their views and feelings and provide an insight into their attitudes towards sexual minorities. We also thank the School of Social Work at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland for the possibility to conduct this study and the support of the inquiry into sexual minorities.

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