

# Perception of Sexual Minorities Among Contemporary University Students

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## Abstract

Although the topic of sexual orientation and homosexuality is no longer considered taboo and the social status of LGBT individuals has improved significantly in the last few decades, prejudice, intolerance and homophobia are still deeply rooted in parts of our society. The aim of the empirical research conducted at a specific college was to analyse students' attitudes towards sexual minorities. The data were gathered using an anonymous online questionnaire in February 2016. In total, 350 respondents participated in the questionnaire survey. The research results indicate that the attitudes of college students towards homosexuals and lesbians is very liberal. However, the issue of sexual minorities remains a topical one. This preliminary research study should be followed up by other empirical studies.

**Keywords:** different sexual orientation, homosexuality, minority, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (LGBT)

## Introduction

In the former Czechoslovakia, the issue of sexual minorities was of little public and scientific interest under the totalitarian regime. Regime change at the turn of the 1980s – 1990s brought a significant change in social attitudes toward this minority, when the availability of information (including professional literature) improved significantly, and many organizations and movements were set up to fight for the rights of sexual minorities to be treated as equals with their heterosexual counterparts. The organizations included for example GI, Lambda, Logos Praha, Ucho Olomouc, STUD Brno, CODE 004, Gales, etc. (Procházka 2002).

In the Czech Republic, the Act on Registered Partnership came into force in 2006. The act establishes and regulates the cohabitation of two persons of the same sex (according to the latest statistical data from SOHO and GI, 2,322 same sex couples – 1,525 gay couples and 797 lesbian couples – have registered their partnership). In June 2016, § 13 paragraph 2, which obstructed the adoption of children by couples in registered partnerships, was repealed. (The Constitutional Court of the Czech Republic described the regulation as discriminatory and contradictory to the right to dignity and respect).<sup>1</sup>

A number of empirical studies conducted after 1989 in the Czech Republic (Weiss and Zvěřina 1997; Weiss, Procházka and Zvěřina 1998; Janošová 2000; Vaculík and Červenková 2007) showed increasing tolerance towards sexual minorities. These findings have since been confirmed through regular surveys conducted by the Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění (hereinafter referred to as PORC - Public Opinion Research Centre). The most recent surveys have focused on the issue of the rights of same-sex couples to get married or to adopt children. As can be seen in Table 1, Czech society is becoming increasingly liberal, in particular with regards to the issue of the adoption of children by same-sex couples.

Table 1: The rights of same-sex couples to register a partnership, get married, adopt children

<b>Lesbians and gay men should have the right to .... (time comparison in %)</b>										
	2005	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
	+/-	+/-	+/-	+/-	+/-	+/-	+/-	+/-	+/-	+/-
... register a partnership	61/30	69/24	75/19	73/23	72/23	72/23	75/21	72/23	73/23	<b>74/22</b>
... get married	38/51	36/57	38/55	47/46	49/45	45/48	51/44	51/44	45/48	<b>49/47</b>
...adopt children	19/70	22/67	23/65	27/63	29/60	33/59	37/55	34/57	-	-
... adopt the	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	58/32	<b>59/33</b>

<sup>1</sup> For the time being, the amended version of the law does not allow the adoption of a child by both partners, but only by one of the registered partners.

biological child of their partner in a same-sex partnership										
... adopt children in institutional care	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	45/48	<b>44/49</b>

Note: sum of “strongly agree” and “agree” responses, and “disagree” and “strongly disagree” responses. Remaining percentage refers to the sum of the “neutral” responses for the individual questions in every year.

Source: CVVM SOÚ AV ČR, v. v. i., *Naše společnost*

Despite this positive trend, the issue of sexual minorities has always aroused – and still does – sharp and contradictory reactions. Hostility and negative attitudes towards gays and lesbians are deeply rooted in the past and still remain within society to this day (Šipošová, Heretik and Ondrisová 1999). According to a number of surveys (Weis, Procházka and Zvěřina 1998; Adamczyk and Pitt 2009; Collier, Bos and Sandfort 2012), education, living standards, political orientation, place of residence, religion, being acquainted with a homosexual, and age play a significant role in the support sexual minorities now enjoy within society.

Unlike previous surveys focused on the attitudes of Czech citizens towards sexual minorities, the authors focused on a group of students at a specific college. The objective of the survey was to analyse their personal attitudes towards sexual minorities and evaluate how tolerant they are in terms of the issue of sexual minorities. This research is the first of its kind in the Czech Republic and should be followed up with other empirical studies (for example, with regards to the analysis of the most significant predictive factor of the attitudes towards homosexuality, comparative analyses, and the attitudes of LGBT individuals themselves).

## Methodology

The empirical research was conducted in February 2016 at the Institute of Technology and Business in České Budějovice (ITB) by means of an anonymous online questionnaire created by the authors of the article. 1,260 full-time students (due to the age proximity of the respondents) were approached to take part in the survey. In total, 350 students (149 male and 201 female) participated in the survey. The questionnaire consisted of 15

questions focused on determining the level of the respondents' awareness of the issue of homosexuality and mapping their personal attitudes towards sexual minorities. The data obtained through the survey were statistically evaluated and processed using a spreadsheet programme, and are presented in graphical form in Appendix 1.

Table 2: List of questions included in the questionnaire.

QUESTIONNAIRE
1. What is "homosexuality"?
2. In your opinion, what are the causes of different sexual orientation?
3. Are homosexuals more likely to commit deviant sexual acts?
4. Does a homosexual teacher threaten the moral education of children and young people?
5. Was the topic of homosexuality discussed in the context of your primary/ secondary school education?
6. Should this topic be involved in school curricula?
7. A person whom you respect turns out to be gay/ lesbian. Will it influence your relationship with them?
8. You see two men / women holding hands in the street. Do you mind?
9. Do your parents resent homosexuality?
10. Is there a significant difference between love between a man and a woman and love between two men/ women?
11. Are homosexuals discriminated against in our society?
12. Are the movements fighting for the rights of homosexuals necessary? Do they have a positive effect?
13. Should homosexuals have the right to get married?
14. Should same sex couples have the right to adopt children?
15. Are you male / female?

## **Results and discussion**

The majority of the respondents believe that:

- Homosexuality is an alternative form of sexuality;
- Sexual orientation is caused by a genetic predisposition;
- Homosexuals are not more likely to commit deviant sexual acts;
- Gay/ lesbian teacher does not represent a threat to the moral education of children and young people;

- They did not encounter the topic of homosexuality within their primary / secondary education;
- This topic should be included in school curricula;
- Finding out that a person whom they respect is gay/ lesbian would not affect their relationship with them;
- They do not mind seeing two men/ women holding hands;
- Their parents do not have a negative attitude towards homosexuals;
- Love between a man and a woman does not differ significantly from love between two men or two women;
- Homosexuals are discriminated against in society;
- Movements fighting for the rights of homosexuals are necessary and have a positive effect;
- Homosexuals in the Czech Republic should have the right to get married;
- Homosexuals in the Czech Republic should have the right to adopt children.

### **More detailed analysis of the data collected**

The overwhelming majority of respondents (83.6%) consider homosexuality to be an alternative form of sexuality caused by a genetic predisposition (64.8%). This corresponds with the assumption that homosexuality, as well as other sexual orientations, is not a matter of personal choice, and that it is not a disease, disorder or deviation. It is a natural variation of human sexuality. David (2014) states that, "asking a person to act contrary to their sexual orientation is perverse. It would be like forcing heterosexuals to live in a homosexual partnership."

There is no consensus among scientists about the causes of homosexuality. Janošová (2000) says, "... homosexuality and other sexual orientations have not been to the extent so as to be able to give a satisfactory and unambiguous answer explaining the causes of their origin. Theories concerning the origin of homosexuality are very diverse, and depend also on the scientific discipline the scientist bases their investigation on. Some of the hypotheses are complementary, some are contradictory." The most likely theory is linked to biological factors i.e. genetic predisposition and prenatal development. The influence of the environment only seems to play a more significant role in the case of predisposed individuals, and then only until the age of three (Brzek and Pondělíčková-Mašlová 1992). The majority of responses in the questionnaire seem to be in accordance with this theory. Almost 65 % of the respondents believe that having a different sexual orientation is caused by a genetic predisposition, whereas only 17% and 11.8% respectively, believe that it is caused by the influence of the environment or a mental disorder.

Approximately three quarters of all respondents (70.5%) believe that homosexuality does not increase the risk of deviant sexual acts nor that a gay or lesbian teacher threatens the moral education of children and young people (76.1%). Most students (61.6%) did not encounter this topic during their primary and secondary education, and more than half (51.6%) think the topic of homosexuality should be included in the

school curricula. Schools therefore seem to be failing on this issue. However, according to similar surveys, families are failing to address the issue too. The main source of information in this case are still peers (Weiss and Zvěřina 1999; Jarkovská and Lišková 2013).

Some of the respondents (9.7%) admitted that the sexual orientation of a person they respect would influence their relationship with them. However, almost 84% of the respondents are of a different opinion. Furthermore, research conducted in the past has confirmed the assumption that having personal contact with a person who does not hide their different sexual orientation positively influences the attitudes of heterosexuals towards sexual minorities (Ondrisová et al. 2002; Vaculík and Červenková 2007).

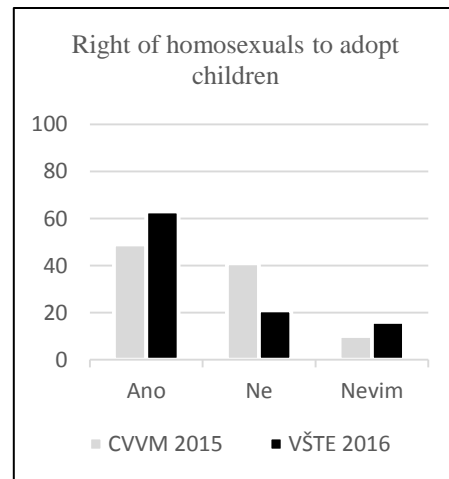
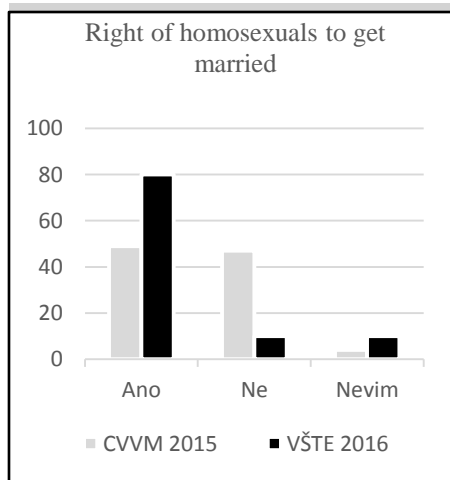
The responses to the eighth question confirmed an already well known fact: public displays of affection between two gay men are less acceptable than those between two lesbian women (18.9% compared to 0.9%). According to Janošová (2000), female homosexuality (lesbianism) is socially more acceptable than male homosexuality. However, about three quarters (75.6%) of respondents do not see either of these public displays of affection as offensive. The perception of homosexuality also seems to be an intergenerational problem as more than a quarter of the respondents' parents (26.5%) find homosexuality upsetting, whereby mothers (1.2%) seem to be more tolerant than fathers (14%).

Despite the specifics of the relationships of gays and lesbians (Sváková and Ondrisová 2003), most respondents (61.5%) believe that the love between two men (two women) does not differ significantly from the love between a woman and a man.

Almost two thirds of the respondents (64.7%) believe that homosexuals are discriminated against in society, and 38.5% of them consider movements that fight for the rights of homosexuals as being essential and that they have a positive impact.

Compared to a nationwide survey, there was a significant difference in tolerance concerning the right of homosexuals to get married. Whilst the results of a nationwide survey indicate that just under half of the respondents (49%) agree with the right of homosexuals to enter into marriage, amongst students there is a much higher level of tolerance (80%). A similar difference of opinion was observed concerning the issue of the adoption of a child by same-sex couples, the most divisive topic with regards to the issue of the equality of sexual minorities. According to the results of a PORC survey, 41% of the respondents oppose the adoption of children by homosexual couples, whilst only one-fifth (21%) of the ITB students were of the same opinion.

Figures 1 and 2: Comparison of PORC and ITB survey results on the right of homosexuals to get married and adopt children.



Legend: Ano – Yes, Ne – No, Nevím - I don't know, CVVM – Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění (Public Opinion Research Centre), VŠTE - ITB

Source: PORC, own research

The relatively high level of tolerance shown by the ITB students on this issue is consistent with the global trend of a permanent rise in gay and lesbian parenting, as evidenced by a number of research studies on this topic (Weiss, Procházka and Zvěřina 1998; Cahill, Battle and Meyer 2003; Sokolová 2009; Ross et al. 2009; Moore and Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013; Gates 2015).

## Conclusion

The issue of different sexual orientations is a topical issue and a subject of social science research. The presentation of the results of such research and surveys can become, inter alia, an important part of predicting the attitudes and behaviour of younger generations.

The results of the survey conducted at the Institute of Technology and Business in České Budějovice confirmed that college students have a high level of tolerance towards sexual minorities. A comparison with similar surveys conducted in the last few years in the Czech Republic confirmed that young and educated people in the Czech Republic are one of the most tolerant groups in terms of their relationship to sexual minorities. It is therefore likely that this trend will continue to grow in the future.

This preliminary research study should be followed up by further empirical research into the causes of the intolerant attitudes of some students towards sexual minorities, as well as into the differences in perception of different sexual orientations in various types of educational institutions. Additional research should also focus on comparing teachers' and students' attitudes towards sexual minorities, both in the Czech Republic and abroad, as well as into the attitudes of those people with a minority sexual orientation.

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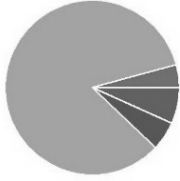
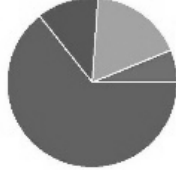
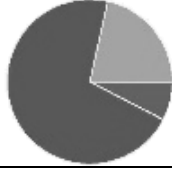

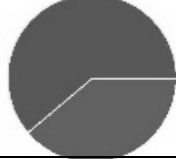
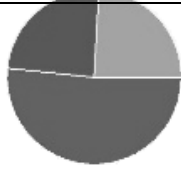

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**Appendix 1 (detailed summary of the results):**

<b>1. Homosexuality is</b>			
a/ a disease	23	6.6 %	
b/ a deviation	19	5.5 %	
c/ an alternative form of sexuality	291	83.6 %	
d/ other	15	4.3 %	
<b>2. In your opinion, what are the causes of homosexuality?</b>			
a/ genetic predisposition	225	64.8 %	
b/ mental disorder	41	11.8 %	
c/ influence of environment	59	17 %	
d/ other	22	6.3 %	
<b>3. Homosexuals are more likely to commit deviant sexual acts</b>			
a/ yes	27	7.7 %	
b/ no	246	70.5 %	
c/ don't know	76	21.8 %	
<b>4. Can a homosexual teacher threaten the moral education of children and young people?</b>			
a/ yes	31	8.9 %	
b/ no	265	76.1 %	
c/ don't know	52	14.9 %	
<b>5. Was the topic of homosexuality discussed within the context of your primary/secondary education?</b>			
a/ yes	134	38.4 %	
b/ no	215	61.6 %	
<b>6. Should this topic be involved in school curricula?</b>			
a/ yes	179	51.6 %	
b/ no	84	24.4 %	
c/ don't know	84	24.4 %	
<b>7. A person I respect turns out to be homosexual. Does this affect your relationship?</b>			
a/ yes	34	9.7 %	
b/ no	291	83.4 %	
c/ don't know	24	6.9 %	
<b>8. There are two men / women holding hands in the street....</b>			

a/ I do mind	16	4.6 %	
b/ I don't mind	264	75.6 %	
c/ I do mind two men holding hands	66	18.9 %	
d/ I do mind two women holding hands	3	0.9 %	
<b>9. My parents resent homosexuality</b>			
a/ yes	91	26.5 %	
b/ no	201	58.4 %	
c/ only my mother	4	1.2 %	
d/ only my father	48	14 %	
<b>10. Love between two men/ women is not different from love between a man and a woman</b>			
a/ yes	56	16.1 %	
b/ no	214	61.5 %	
c/ don't know	78	22.4 %	
<b>11. Are homosexuals discriminated against in our society?</b>			
a/ yes	224	64.7 %	
b/ no	70	20.2 %	
c/ don't know	52	15 %	
<b>12. Movements fighting for the rights of homosexuals are important and have a positive impact.</b>			
a/ yes	134	38.5 %	
b/ no	85	24.4 %	
c/ don't know	129	37.1 %	
<b>13. Should homosexuals in CR be allowed to get married?</b>			
a/ yes	277	79.6 %	
b/ no	35	10.1 %	
c/ don't know	36	10.3 %	
<b>14. Should homosexuals in CR be allowed to adopt children?</b>			
a/ yes	218	62.5 %	
b/ no	75	21.5 %	
c/ don't know	56	16 %	
<b>15. I am</b>			
a/ a man	148	42.4 %	
b/ a woman	201	57.6 %	

## **Appendix 2 (glossary):**

**Bisexuality** – approximately balanced sexual and romantic attraction to people of both sexes, homosexual and heterosexual orientation at the same time. Bisexuals find both sexes equally attractive (Capponi, Hajnová and Novák 1994).

**Coming Out** – process of realization, acknowledgement and acceptance of one's own sexual orientation (Zvěřina 2003).

**Heterosexuality** – sexual and erotic attraction to people of the opposite sex (Capponi, Hajnová and Novák 1994). "Sexual orientation towards people of the opposite sex; there are three areas: a) sexual orientation, b) sexual behaviour including romantic relationships and partnerships, c) identity i.e. self-perception as a person with a certain sexuality; those areas are not always consistent..." (Smetáčková and Braun 2009).

**Homophobia** – negative or even hateful attitude towards people that belong to a sexual minority. "Fear of homosexuality and homosexuals, which can lead to aversion, hostility or even hatred and can become the basis for rejecting, ridiculing or harming behaviour towards homosexuals or people who are assumed to be homosexuals; currently, the term homophobia is used to refer to the abovementioned feelings and behaviour towards all people who are not heterosexuals..." (Smetáčková and Braun 2009).

**Homosexuality** – erotic and sexual attraction to people of the same sex. Like all other types of sexual orientation, it is considered constant, lifelong, not caused by the person and not a matter of choice (Brzek and Pondělíčková-Mašlová 1992).

**Lgbt (Lbt)** – people with a minority sexual orientation. It is a general term used for homosexuals, bisexuals and transsexuals.

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