

# The Effects of a Human Sexuality Course on College Students' Sexual Attitudes and Knowledge

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## Abstract

Undergraduates enrolled in two separate sections of a human sexual behavior course ( $n=85$ ) completed pre- and post-measures of the Trueblood Sexual Attitudes Questionnaire and the Brief Sexual Attitudes Scale. Students reported greater tolerance for sexual practices of others and more liberal and positive sexual attitudes after completing the course. Implications are discussed.

## Introduction

Previous studies have examined the influence of sexual education courses on individual's attitudes and behaviors toward both traditional and nontraditional sexual acts. Prior research has discovered a greater willingness for individuals to alter their attitudes toward other people's sexual preferences on a number of levels, but there appears to be less flexibility when it comes to their own behaviors (Dallager & Rosen, 1993; Gunderson & McCary, 1980; Pratt & Schmall, 1989; Reese & Zimmerman, 1974).

Researchers have found that students who completed a human sexuality course showed a variety of attitudinal changes, typically in the direction of a more liberal position (Rees & Zimmerman, 1974). College students become more sexually liberated and also show greater tolerance and acceptance with regards to the differing sexual practices of others (Gunderson & McCary, 1980). More specific attitudinal changes after completing a human sexuality course include reduction of the sexist double standard, and greater acceptance for masturbation, the use of birth control, and homosexuality (Finken, 2002; Godow & LaFave, 1979).

The current study examined how increased sexual knowledge, by completing an undergraduate human sexual behavior course, may transform sexual attitudes and behaviors of students. Unique measures of sexual attitudes and behaviors were utilized.

## Current Study Hypotheses

Upon completion of a semester long human sexual behavior course, students were hypothesized to 1) show changes in attitudes which reflect greater tolerance for differences in sexual beliefs and practices and 2) report positive outcomes related to completion of the course related to their personal sexual knowledge, sexual self image, and close relationships.

In addition, 3) course performance was predicted to be positively correlated with increases in tolerance for differences in sexual beliefs and practices.

## Method

**Participants.** Eighty five undergraduate college students enrolled in two separate sections of Human Sexual Behavior, a psychology elective taught in the Psychology Department, participated. All students enrolled in the course agreed to have their data included in the current investigation. The majority of students enrolled in the course were women (87%), with an average age of 22.45 years ( $SD = 5.11$ , range = 19-60). Students were primarily of senior class rank (64%), and the majority of students were psychology majors (61%). Ninety-six percent of the sample indicated that they were heterosexual.

**Materials & Procedure.** Students completed the Trueblood Sexual Attitudes Questionnaire (TSAQ; Trueblood, Hannon, & Hall, 1998, 1999) and the Brief Sexual Attitudes Scale (BSAS; Hendrick, Hendrick, & Reich, 2006) at the beginning and end of the course. Both measures have established reliability and validity.

The TSAQ was developed to measure attitudes about personal sexual behaviors (40 questions) and behaviors of others (40 questions). Subscales were developed based on content from typical human sexuality courses including Autoeroticism, Heterosexuality, Homosexuality, Sexual Variations, and Commercial Sex. Statements were rated for agreement on a 9-point Likert scale.

The BSAS is a 23 item measure of sexual attitudes that contains four subscales: Permissiveness, Birth Control, Communion, and Instrumentality. Statements were rated for agreement on a 5-point Likert scale.

Course grade was based on multiple exams and papers. Students also answered demographic and perceived course outcomes questions related to involvement in learning the course material, sexual knowledge, sexual self image, acceptance of sexual variations, and impact on close relationships on a 10-point Likert scale.

## Results

Pre and post scores were compared on the BSAS, the TSAQ self, and the TSAQ other measures.

Students reported significant increases in agreement from the beginning to the end of the term on the Permissiveness subscale of the BSAS, but not on Birth Control, Communion, or Instrumentality (See Figure 1). Students also reported significant or marginally significant increases on all self and other subscales of the TSAQ, except other Heterosexuality (see Figures 2 and 3). No significant gender interactions were found.

Academic performance in the course was not related to increased attitude changes in any of the BSAS or TSAQ subscale areas. Descriptive statistics from questions about perceived changes as a result of the class are presented in the Table.

Figure 1. Mean Pre and Post BSAS Scores by Subscale

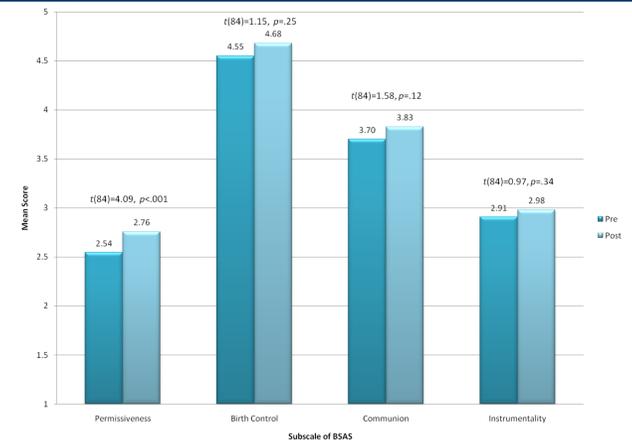


Figure 2. Mean Pre and Post TSAQ Self Scores by Subscale

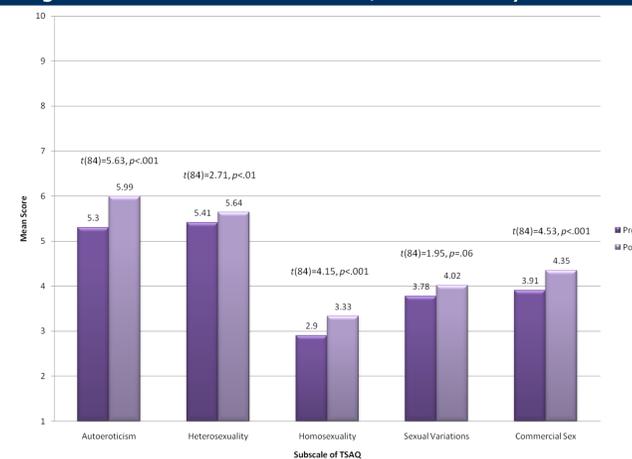


Figure 3. Mean Pre and Post TSAQ Other Scores by Subscale

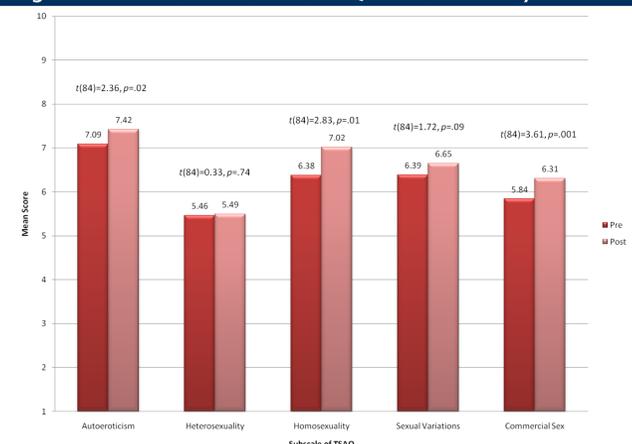


Table. Descriptive Statistics for Perceived Course Outcomes

Questions (all answered on a 10-point Likert scale)	M	(SD)
How involved were you in learning the material in this course?	8.05	(1.36)
This course has increased my sexual knowledge.	8.67	(1.36)
This course has improved my sexual self image.	7.60	(2.04)
This course has increased my acceptance of sexual variations.	8.04	(2.07)
This course has improved my current (and/or will improve my future) close relationships.	8.20	(1.71)

## Discussion

As predicted, students reported greater tolerance for sexual variations on subscales of the BSAS and TSAQ at the end of the course. Students also reported high agreement with the statement about increasing their acceptance of sexual variation after completing the course. Students reported greater comfort with their sexuality as reported by changes in the BSAS, TSAQ, and agreement with statements about improved sexual self image and close relationships at the end of the course. While students reported their sexual knowledge increased as a result of completing this course, course grade was not related to changes in BSAS or TSAQ scores. Greater comprehension of sexual knowledge was not necessary to lead to improved sexual tolerance.

Accurate information about human sexuality is important for making healthy lifestyle choices and developing a personal sense of self. Increasing tolerance is essential to combating sexism, homophobia, and other prejudices that exist in society and make individuals better prepared for dealing with diversity in their future personal and professional lives. Colleges should consider the impact of courses such as this in their curriculum.

Follow-up research may investigate specific course activities which can enhance knowledge and tolerance in different areas.

## Selected References

Hendrick, C., Hendrick, S., & Reich, D. (2006). The Brief Sexual Attitudes Scale. *Journal of Sex Research*, 43(1), 76-86.

Trueblood, K., Hannon, R., & Hall, D.S. (1999). Revision and reliability of a measure of sexual attitude. *Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality*, 2. Retrieved from <http://www.ejhs.org/volume2/hannon/attitudes.htm>

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