

Can One TV Show Make a Difference? ***Will & Grace* and the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis**

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Can a popular television situation comedy make a difference in how people think about gay men? When the National Broadcasting Company first began to air *Will & Grace* in 1998, gay rights advocates and media critics applauded the program for its positive portrayal of two gay men with very different personalities (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002, pp. 87-89). The show features four main characters living in Manhattan. The title characters are Will Truman, a gay attorney, and his best friend Grace Adler, a heterosexual interior decorator. They are often joined by Jack McFarland, a “flamboyantly gay, continually unemployed, self-described actor/dancer/ choreographer,” and Karen Walker, a wealthy, married “socialite and alcoholic” who works for Grace (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002, p. 88). The show has been very successful and has won critical praise and numerous awards. By spring 2001, *Will & Grace* was being watched by an average of 17.3 million viewers each week (Cagle, 2002); in 2002, the series entered syndication and now can be viewed daily in most media markets.

Will & Grace is an unusual communication phenomenon. In the U.S., homosexuals are still targets of prejudice, which is manifested “in a wide range of behaviors ranging from verbal expressions of dislike to violent attacks” (Herek, 1988, p. 451). Negative attitudes toward homosexuals have been documented as pervasive among adolescents (Morrison, Parriag, & Morrison, 1999), college students (D’Augelli & Rose, 1990; Kurdek, 1988), and the general adult population in the U.S. (Herek & Glunt, 1993). Attitudes toward homosexuals are slowly changing, however (Altemeyer, 2001; Yang, 1997), and it seems reasonable to explore what role, if any, television has in influencing sexual prejudice (Gross, 1984, 2001; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999).

In the first decades of television, homosexuals were mostly absent or portrayed negatively as deviants in mainstream shows like *Marcus Welby, M.D.* or *Hawaii Five-0* (Gould, 1973; Gross, 1991, Simms, 1981). Lesbian representations have fared better than gay men (Moritz, 1989), and both have fared better in film than on television (Nelson, 1985). Content analysis by Kielwasser and Wolf (1992) and Fejes and Petrich (1993) suggest that, at least through the early 1990s, positive representations of gay men and lesbians on mainstream television were few and far between. Billy Crystal’s portrayal of a gay character, Jodie Dallas, on “Soap” is noteworthy as television history but did not appear to lead to more gay characters in mainstream television. By 1995, homosexual characters accounted for 0.6 percent of the TV population, significantly less than estimated rates of homosexuality in the U.S. population (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999, p. 94). In the 1990s, number of gay characters on television increased significantly, though the beneficence of increased visibility is a matter of some dispute (Walters, 2001).

While many pundits considered *Ellen* an important cultural break-through in the U.S., we are not aware of any empirical research done investigating attitudes associated with viewing the show; furthermore, one cannot assume that positive attitudes toward lesbian characters results in positive attitudes about gay men (Herek, 1988, p. 470; Kite & Whitley, 1998, p. 56). While there are positive portrayals of homosexual characters scattered across various television shows, no previous broadcast network show that features two gay male characters in leading roles has reached the sort of enduring popularity and critical acclaim that *Will & Grace* has. It is impossible, of course, to predict the future direction of television content. The popularity of cable network shows with more diverse portrayals of gay men, such as *Queer as Folk*, *Six Feet Under*, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*

may lead to a greater range of representations on broadcast network shows. In any case, the distinctive place *Will & Grace* has in broadcast television history warrants the attention of mass communication scholars. In what follows, we offer further rationale for investigating the possible relationship between viewing *Will & Grace* and attitudes about male homosexuals.

A case can be made that the show *Will & Grace* may have a positive influence on attitudes toward gay men. In particular, we propose a linkage of two theories that, to the best of our knowledge, have not previously been brought together to explore the potential influence of television—the Contact Hypothesis from psychology and the theory of Parasocial Interaction from mass communication. The Contact Hypothesis is one of the most significant and enduring contributions of social psychology in the past 50 years (Brewer & Brown, 1998, p. 576). Credited to Gordon W. Allport (1954), the Contact Hypothesis, or Intergroup Contact Theory, states that, under appropriate conditions, interpersonal contact is one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice between majority and minority group members. Two years after Allport's book, *The Nature of Prejudice*, was published, Horton and Wohl (1956) set forward the case for studying what they dubbed *para-social interaction*: "One of the most striking characteristics of the new mass media—radio, television, and the movies—is that they give the illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer" (p. 215). In what follows, we offer a preliminary effort to explore what can be called the "Parasocial Contact Hypothesis."

THE CONTACT HYPOTHESIS

Empirical research with ethnic and minority groups has established that intergroup contact can reduce prejudice in the majority group under certain conditions: Participants must feel of equal status, share common goals, have sustained and nonsuperficial contact, and not be opposed by a salient authority (Allport, 1954; Williams, 1964). Pettigrew and Tropp's (2002) meta-analysis of over 700 independent samples has confirmed the contact hypothesis for a variety of minority groups and conservatively estimates the average correlation between contact and prejudice as $-.21$ ($n > 250,000$, $p < .0001$) (see also Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000).

Following Allport (1954) and others, we believe that the reduction of prejudice through intergroup contact is best explained as the reconceptualization of group categories. Allport (1954) considers prejudice a result of a hasty generalization made about another group based on incomplete or mistaken information, thus the basic rationale for the Contact Hypothesis is that prejudice can be reduced as one learns more about a particular category of people. As Rothbart and John (1985) suggest, belief change through contact can be understood as "an example of the general cognitive process by which attributes of category members modify category attributes" (p. 82). That is, a person's beliefs about a category of people (such as gay men) can be modified by that person coming into contact with individual gay men and, by learning about them, elaborate or modify their beliefs about the category as a whole.

If a majority group member learns that the people defined by a particular category are different from them in ways they believe are unpleasant, detrimental, or otherwise negative, then the attitudes they will hold toward such a group constitute prejudice (whether invidious or not). Prejudicial attitudes toward a particular category of people, such as "Arab" or "gay men," may be based on a negative initial experience, a mass mediated stereotype, or socialization from family, friends, or other sources. For example, a young person may learn the category of "gay man" is defined by the functional attribute that gay men seek intimacy with other men, as well as perceptual attributes that may be considered stereotypical, such as the belief that gay men are effeminate.

Positive personal contact that is sustained and nonsuperficial can provide enough information about the minority group that a majority group member may change his or her beliefs, a phenomenon that is typically explained by reference to dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). Because "avoidance

of and social distance from members of specific groups are forms of negative social behavior that are consistent with hostile attitudes and distrust" (Brewer & Brown, 1998, p. 578), positive contact can create a sense of dissonance that can lead to attitude change. The contact must be sustained and nonsuperficial in order to create a dissonant condition in which negative beliefs come into conflict with new beliefs resulting from positive experiences. As mentioned previously, group members must feel of equal status, share common goals, and contact must not be opposed by an authority figure (Allport, 1954; Williams, 1964). If any of these conditions are not met, prejudicial beliefs may increase (if the groups are in competition, for example) or any dissonance can be resolved without challenging existing prejudicial attitudes. For dissonance to be strong motivation for attitude change, the contact must be successful in generating some sort of affective tie toward minority group members. Amir's (1976) claim that intimacy is an important ingredient for contact to reduce prejudice has received substantial support in subsequent research (Batson et al., 1997; Pettigrew, 1997a, 1997b; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995). Pettigrew believes that the opportunity for developing intergroup friendships is such an important part of the contact process that he declares it an essential condition for the Contact Hypothesis (1998, p. 76).

Applying the contact hypothesis to heterosexuals and homosexuals, Herek (1987) found that, among college students, those who had experienced pleasant interactions with a homosexual (either gay man or lesbian) tend to generalize from that experience and accept homosexuals in general. Herek and Glunt's (1993) national study of interpersonal contact and heterosexuals' attitudes toward gay men, in particular, found that contact "predicted attitudes toward gay men better than did any other demographic or social psychological variable" (p. 239); such variables included gender, race, education, age, geographic residence, marital status, number of children, religious denomination and attendance, political party and ideology, and sense of political efficacy.

Herek and Capitanio (1996) found that contact experiences with two or three homosexual individuals are associated with more favorable attitudes than are contact experiences with only one individual. Altemeyer (2001) reports that prejudice against homosexuals is decreasing among his Canadian subjects whose self-reports attribute the change to increased contact with persons known to be homosexual. Pettigrew and Tropp's (2002) meta-analysis of contact-hypothesis studies included 33 studies involving attitudes toward homosexuals and found a significant negative relationship, $r = -.25$, between contact and sexual prejudice ($n = 12,074$, $p < .0001$). Social contact is an especially effective way to reduce sexual prejudice when majority group members are exposed *repeatedly* to *diverse* (typical and atypical) and *likable* representatives of a minority group (Pettigrew, 1998; Simon, 1998). If parasocial interaction functions in a similar manner as interpersonal contact, *Will & Grace* would appear to offer such a contact opportunity.

PARASOCIAL INTERACTION

The possibility that *Will & Grace* could reduce prejudice against gay men is supported by research investigating parasocial interaction. "Parasocial interaction" simply refers to the phenomenon that viewers form beliefs and attitudes about people they know only through television, regardless of whether such people are fictional characters or real people. Communication researchers have described parasocial interaction as the mass mediated equivalent of interpersonal interaction. Perhaps because the human brain typically processes media experiences similarly to how it processes "direct" experience, people often react to televised characters as they would real people (Kanazawa, 2002; Reeves & Nass, 1996). Parasocial interaction is described as a "normal consequence of television viewing" (Perse & Rubin, 1989, p. 61), with the result being the formation of parasocial *relationships*. As Perse and Rubin (1989) note, people use the same communication-related cognitive processes for both mediated and interpersonal contexts, and "people and media are

coequal communication alternatives that satisfy similar communication needs and provide similar gratifications” (p. 59).

The research supporting the existence of parasocial relationships is extensive. In particular, parasocial interaction has been documented for viewers of local television newscasters (Houlberg, 1984; Levy, 1979; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985), soap opera characters (Perse & Rubin, 1990; Rubin & Perse, 1987; Sood & Rogers, 2000), celebrities appearing in commercials (Alperstein, 1991), talk-radio hosts (Rubin & Step, 2000), situation comedies (Auter, 1992; Autur & Palmgreen, 2000), sports celebrities (Brown & Basil, 1995), and favorite television personalities (Conway & Rubin, 1991; Hoffner, 1996). Kanazawa (2002) reports that watching certain types of television has the same effect on subjective satisfaction with friendships as having more friends and socializing with them more often.

Parasocial interaction functions in a manner analogous to interpersonal attraction. That is, just as people form positive or negative attitudes toward other people in “real life,” television viewers “develop an affinity with the persona they watch on television” (Conway & Rubin, 1991, p. 449). The result of such parasocial relationships is that “the more attracted one is to the persona, the more likely a viewer will seek to watch the persona” (Conway & Rubin, 1991, p. 449). In Conway & Rubin’s (1991) study of television viewing motivation, parasocial interaction was consistently one of the strongest predictors of different viewing motives, including information seeking, entertainment, relaxation, and passing time. Accordingly, we believe it is worth exploring the idea that parasocial interaction can lead to the sort of attitude change that interpersonal contact facilitates.

THE PARASOCIAL CONTACT HYPOTHESIS

Horton and Wohl (1956) note that the media present opportunities for which audience members find “no opportunity” in his or her “social environment” (p. 222). If a majority group member has little opportunity for interpersonal interaction with minority group members, parasocial interaction potentially could provide such contact. Perse and Rubin (1989) claim that viewers formulate impressions of televised characters to reduce uncertainty about social behavior, and that “*people*” constitutes a “construct domain that may be sufficiently permeable to include both interpersonal and television contexts” (p. 73; cf. Berger, 1979). If we can learn from televised characters representing social groups with whom we have minimal “real world” contact, then it is possible that parasocial interaction could influence attitudes about such groups in a manner consistent with the influence of live intergroup contact. Such a possibility is implied in Allport’s recognition of the importance of mass media in forming beliefs about minorities (1954, pp. 200-202), and is acknowledged explicitly by Rothbart and John’s (1985) inclusion of the media as sources of images that can induce belief changes concerning stereotypes (p. 83).

The research on parasocial interaction suggests that the processes involved in positive intergroup contact as described by Pettigrew (1998) can be reproduced through mediated contact. One can learn about a minority group from mediated messages and representations, and if one has a experience one perceives as positive, one’s behavior is altered in that one normally will seek out additional (parasocial) contact rather than avoid it. One can develop affective ties with persons known only through mediated communication, and, whether one reappraises one’s beliefs about one’s in-group or not, the resulting parasocial relationships could encourage a change in prejudicial attitudes about the out-groups of which minority characters belong. Of course, just as interpersonal contact, even under optimal circumstances, does not reduce all prejudice among all those experiencing intergroup contact, parasocial interaction will not always produce the sort of parasocial relationship that will decrease prejudice. Nonetheless, the possibility that parasocial contact, under proper circumstances, could decrease prejudicial attitudes is an important and interesting possibility well worth investigating.

The optimal conditions specified under the Contact Hypothesis can be applied to a mass mediated context. As noted previously, participants must feel of equal status, share common goals, have sustained and nonsuperficial contact, and not be opposed by a salient authority. All of these factors work to decrease the dissonance that positive contact can produce. Their relevance to the contact hypothesis is not from the positive contribution they make to decreasing prejudice, but rather the negative influence that the absence of any of these conditions can produce. The key is the quality of the interaction and the opportunity to develop social bonds. We would posit that the conditions necessary for parasocial interaction to promote a change in attitude would be threefold. First, televisual exposure must be repeated or sustained over time. Second, televisual exposure should be to diverse representatives of a minority group. Since the goal is to change people's understanding of a category, the more representatives of that category that are encountered, the better. Third, viewers must form positive opinions toward televised minority group members. That is to say, viewers must find such representatives to be interpersonally attractive.

Thus, the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis (hereafter PCH) suggests that exposure to positive portrayals of minority group members that produce parasocial interaction will be associated with a decrease in prejudicial attitudes. Previous research can be interpreted as providing implicit support for the PCH. When direct contact is minimal, television can play an influential role on viewers' attitudes about minority group members, and such influence may increase or decrease prejudice. Entman and Rojecki (2000) argue "Lacking much opportunity for repeated close contact with a wide variety of Blacks, Whites depend heavily on cultural material, especially media images, for cataloging Blacks" (p. 49). Based on survey research, Fujioka (1999) reports that many Japanese international students hold "considerably negative stereotypes of African Americans" but that "perceived positive portrayals" on television are associated with reduced levels of negativity (p. 71). A similar survey project by Tan, Fujioka, & Lucht (1997) found that self-reported impressions of TV portrayals of Native Americans were associated with the perception of at least one stereotypical attribute. Armstrong, Neuendorf, and Brentar (1992) did not examine prejudice per se, but report that the quantity and sort of television viewed by white students with minimal contact with African Americans were associated with different estimations of how black and white Americans compare socioeconomically. For those viewers with little contact with, or information about, homosexuals, it follows that each source of messages about homosexuals takes on greater potential significance.

In particular, there is limited experimental support for the impact of mediated contact with gay men and lower levels of sexual prejudice. Riggle, Ellis, and Crawford (1996) administered an attitudes-towards-homosexuality scale to college students before and after viewing *The Times of Harvey Milk*, a documentary that provides a sympathetic chronicle of one of the first openly gay elected officials in the U.S. Consistent with previous research on social contact, subjects who knew a gay male held less prejudiced attitudes than those who did not, and post-test results showed a significant decrease in levels of reported prejudice ($F[1, 72] = 5.7, p < .02$).

HYPOTHESES

Based on the positive receptions of *Will & Grace* by mainstream and some gay media, we anticipated that:

H1: Viewers perceive portrayals of the gay characters in *Will & Grace* to be positive.

Based on the PCH explained above, we anticipated that:

H2: The greater the viewing frequency of *Will & Grace*, the lower the level of sexual prejudice toward gay men.

H3: The greater the level of reported parasocial interaction with gay characters on *Will & Grace*, the lower the level of sexual prejudice toward gay men.

Previous research suggests that television has its greatest opportunity to influence beliefs and attitudes concerning “groups and phenomena about which there is little first-hand opportunity for learning” (Gross, 1991, p. 22). If parasocial interaction can substitute for the sort of personal relationships described by the contact hypothesis, then the influence of parasocial interaction is likely to be moderated by the amount of previous direct personal contact with gay men. Viewing *Will & Grace* could encourage more tolerant attitudes toward gay men *mostly* for those with little or no prior direct contact with gay men. Thus, we anticipated:

H4: The fewer gay acquaintances the subjects report, the stronger the association between viewing frequency and sexual prejudice toward gay men.

H5: The fewer gay acquaintances the subjects report, the stronger the association between parasocial interaction and lower levels of sexual prejudice toward gay men.

METHOD

Participants

Two hundred forty-five undergraduate students at a large midwestern state university participated. Students were recruited from introductory undergraduate courses in communication studies. Students were offered extra credit for participation with an alternative extra credit exercise available for those who did not wish to participate. Sixty percent were between 18 and 21 years old, 33% were between 22 and 25, and the remaining 7% were between 26 and 60. Consistent with student demographics of communication studies students, 63% of the participants were women. Participants were 86% White, 6% Asian/Subcontinental or Asian/Pacific Islander, 4% Black or African American, 1% Hispanic or Latino/Latina, and 3% identified themselves as Other, including mixed ethnic heritage, with one individual not answering. Ninety-eight percent reported their sexual orientation as heterosexual, a figure higher than anticipated, with the remaining four participants indicating homosexual, bisexual, or uncertain.

Survey Instrument

Participants completed a 74-item survey with the understanding that their individual answers would be kept confidential. In addition to basic demographic information, the survey included items to assess how much social contact participants have with non-heterosexual individuals, viewing frequency of *Will & Grace*, attitudes toward gay men and lesbians, as well as items concerning the four main characters. Viewing frequency was measured with the following question: How frequently do you watch *Will and Grace*? 1 = Never; 2 = Every once in a while, about once every two months; 3 = Somewhat regularly, about once a month; 4 = Regularly, about twice a month; 5 = Every week or almost every week, I rarely miss an episode (the survey was administered in May, 2002, before *Will & Grace* went into syndication and became available for viewing daily). A follow-up question was administered to participants who answered “never” to ascertain whether their viewing choice was general to television or specific to *Will & Grace*; non-viewers did not complete survey items about the show.

Content Items

We treated the viewers’ reactions to the show as a whole as the relevant domain of experience. To ascertain whether participants view the overall content of the show as positive or not, the following items were included: “*Will & Grace* has encouraged me to think positively about

homosexuals,” “*Will & Grace* provides a negative view of gay men,” “*Will & Grace* is an important step forward in T.V. situation comedies because it features gay men in major roles,” “*Will & Grace* is *not* an important T.V. show.” We also included two items to ascertain whether participants shared Battles & Hilton-Morrow’s (2002) beliefs about how Jack and Karen are represented; for each character, participants were asked if s/he “represents a refreshing challenge to ‘normal’ conceptions” of their gender, and whether the two act “like a child or buffoon who is not to be taken seriously.” Unless specified otherwise, all non-demographic survey items were measured with a seven-point Likert-type scale anchored with “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree.”

Attitudes concerning Homosexuality

We selected the ten-item version of Herek’s (1984, 1988) well-known Attitudes Towards Lesbians and Gay Men (ATLG) instrument. With college student samples completing a written version of the ATLG or its short forms, Cronbach’s *as* are typically greater than .85 for the subscales and .90 for the full scale (Herek, 1987, 1988). The ATLG is a composite of two subscales, the ATG or Attitudes Towards Gay Men and the ATL or Attitude Towards Lesbians. In our sample ($n = 245$) Cronbach’s *as* were similar to those found by Herek (ATG = .89; ATL = .80). Convergent validity is supported by Herek’s findings that ATLG and its subscales are consistently correlated with other theoretically relevant constructs (Herek, 1987, 1988, 1994; Herek & Glunt, 1993; Herek & Capitanio, 1996). The ATLG’s validity also has been supported with known group comparisons (Herek, 1988; 1994). The ATL consists of five statements concerning lesbians (such as “Female homosexuality is a sin”) and the ATG consists of five statements concerning gay men (such as “Homosexual behavior between two men is just plain wrong”). We also included an item explicitly on heteronormativity: “The only normal sexual relationships are heterosexual relationships.” In our sample, responses to the heteronormativity item were strongly correlated with ATG scores for *Will & Grace* viewers ($r = .97, p < .01$) and non-viewers ($r = .76, p < .01$).

Parasocial Interaction

Parasocial interaction was assessed with two items per major character that stated “I would like to get to know a person like ____” and each “is like a real person to me.” Survey items assessing parasocial interaction are quite varied, depending on the medium, genre, and show being studied. As reported in a meta-analysis of 30 parasocial interaction studies by Schiappa, Allen, and Gregg (in press), two qualities strongly associated with parasocial interaction are the social attractiveness or likeability of the character and their perceived realism. These two aspects are also the most relevant aspects of parasocial interaction for the purposes of the PCH; that is, viewers must perceive the characters to represent realistic members of the character’s minority group, and they must have sufficient affective bond to want to get to know the person better. In our sample, Cronbach’s *a* for all eight parasocial interaction items was .85 and for the four items specific to the gay male characters, Will and Jack, Cronbach’s *a* was .74.

Previous Gay Contact

To ascertain how much direct social contact participants have with homosexuals, an item was constructed that categorizes participants as having no social contact (1 = I do not know *any* gay/lesbian or bisexual people personally); only distant or superficial contact (2 = I am acquainted with a few gay/lesbian or bisexual people, but not as friends); a moderate amount of nonsuperficial contact (3 = I have a few [3 or less] gay/lesbian or bisexual friends or close co-workers); and a relatively high amount of nonsuperficial contact (4 = I have more than 3 gay/lesbian or bisexual friends or close co-workers) (for item wording, cf. Herek & Capitanio, 1996). Though there are problems with grouping gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals into one category, for the preliminary

purposes of this study to explore the PCH we felt the more conservative decision was to measure contact with a broader category of sexual “nonconformists” (Bem, 1993) than to measure only previous contact with gay men. Such a choice, if anything, would underestimate the potential influence of exposure to *Will & Grace*.

RESULTS

Of the 245 participants, 69% reported that they watched the show “every once in a while” or more frequently. Accordingly, some results are reported by categorizing participants as “viewers” ($n = 170$) versus “non-viewers” ($n = 75$). Seventy-three percent of non-viewers indicated they choose not to watch or would not watch it even if they had access to a television set, while 19% said they watch no television at all. Only 8% of non-viewers indicated they did not have access but would watch *Will & Grace* if they could.

H1: Viewers perceive portrayals of the gay characters in *Will & Grace* to be positive. Answers to content-related questions include: 73% disagreed that *Will & Grace* “provides a negative view of gay men” ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.52$); 81% of viewers agreed (from slightly agree to strongly agree) to the statement that the show is an important step forward in television situation comedies because it features gay men in major roles ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.55$). Responses to the second statement correlated positively with viewing frequency ($r = .25$, $p = .001$). Sixty percent of viewers agreed (from slightly agree to strongly agree) to the statement that the show “has encouraged me to think positively about homosexuals.” For viewers as a whole the mean score was 4.7 ($SD = 1.53$); responses were correlated with frequency of watching the show ($r = .29$, $p < .01$).

Participants were undecided whether Jack and Karen act like children or buffoons who are “not to be taken seriously” (Jack $M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.84$; Karen $M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.88$), but 65% agreed to the statement that Jack represents a refreshing challenge to “normal” conceptions of masculinity ($M = 4.7$, $SD = 1.54$) and 56% agreed that Karen represents a refreshing challenge to “normal” conceptions of femininity ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 1.64$). Viewing frequency correlated positively to responses to this statement both for Jack ($r = .33$, $p < .001$) and Karen ($r = .26$, $p = .001$).

A positive correlation ($r = .29$, $p < .001$) was found between viewing frequency and the parasocial interaction items concerning all four main characters; a slightly lower correlation ($r = .24$, $p < .001$) was found when considering only those parasocial interaction items concerning the two gay male characters. Viewing frequency correlated positively for wanting to know each character, ranging from $r = .26$ ($p = .001$) for Grace to $r = .36$ ($p < .001$) for Karen. In short, these results support our hypothesis that most viewers see the representations of gay men on *Will & Grace* as positive. The positive correlations between viewing frequency and such positive assessments suggest that the content of the show make our use of the PCH applicable for study of *Will & Grace*.

H2: The greater the viewing frequency of *Will & Grace*, the lower the level of sexual prejudice toward gay men. *H3*: The greater the level of parasocial interaction with gay characters on *Will & Grace*, the lower the level of sexual prejudice toward gay men.

Frequency of watching the show correlated negatively with scores on the ATG scale ($r = -.36$, $p < .001$) and with the heteronormativity item ($r = -.35$, $p < .001$); such results directly support the hypothesis that the greater the viewing frequency, the lower the levels of sexual prejudice toward gay men. Frequency of watching the show also correlated negatively with scores on the ATL scale ($r = -.25$, $p < .001$). With respect to the heteronormativity item, 71% of *Will & Grace* viewers disagreed (from slightly to strongly) to the statement that heterosexual relationships are the only “normal” sexual relationships, compared to 45% of non-viewers; the difference in means

for viewers ($M = 2.7$, $SD = 2.0$) and nonviewers ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 2.2$) was significant ($t[130] = 4.1$, $p < .001$) and in the predicted direction.

Utilizing only the four parasocial interaction items concerning the two gay male characters, parasocial interaction correlated negatively with scores on the ATG scale ($r = -.34$, $p < .001$) and with the heteronormativity item ($r = -.30$, $p < .001$); such results directly support the hypothesis that the greater the level of parasocial interaction, the lower the levels of sexual prejudice toward gay men. Agreement with the statement that the show "has encouraged me to think positively about homosexuals" correlated positively with parasocial interaction ($r = .50$, $p < .001$).

A regression analysis of the data reported only by viewers that included sex, number of gay friends, viewing frequency, and parasocial interaction with the gay male characters as independent variables and the ATG scores as the dependent variable produced significant results ($R = .46$, $R^2 = .21$, $F[4, 164] = 10.96$, $p < .001$). Specifically, as hypothesized, the apparent influence of contact with *Will & Grace* was similar to the influence of direct interpersonal contact with gay friends: The standardized regression coefficient (b) for viewing frequency was $-.19$ ($p < .01$), for the number of gay friends $b = -.24$ ($p < .01$), and for parasocial interaction $b = -.23$ ($p < .01$).

Hypotheses 4 & 5: Consistent with earlier research (Herek & Capitano, 1996; Herek & Glunt, 1993), the fewer gay acquaintances and friends our participants said they have, the more likely they were to hold prejudicial beliefs about gay men as measured by the ATG. A one-way ANOVA indicates means' differences ($F [3, 240] = 8.415$, $p < .001$). The Tukey Honestly Significant Differences test showed that means for subgroups 1 (no gay acquaintances) and 2 (gay acquaintances but no friends or close co-workers) were significantly different from subgroups 3 (three or less gay friends or close co-workers) and 4 (more than three), but subgroups 1 and 2 were not significantly different from each other and neither were 3 and 4. Table 1 reports the mean scores on the ATG for each answer to the number of gay acquaintances item, along with SD , subgroup size, and the subgroup's correlation between viewing frequency and ATG score, and between parasocial interaction and ATG score. The lowest possible ATG score is 5, the highest possible is 35.

As shown in the table, for all subgroups the ATG scores are lower with higher levels of viewing; the strongest correlation was for those with no gay acquaintances ($r = -.48$, $p < .01$). The correlation between viewing rates and ATG scores for those reporting more than three gay friends was not statistically significant. Similarly, for all subgroups the ATG scores were lower with higher levels of parasocial interaction; again, the strongest correlation was for those with no gay acquaintances ($r = -.65$, $p < .05$). The correlation between parasocial interaction and ATG scores for those reporting more than three gay friends was not statistically significant. In short, for those viewers with the fewest direct gay contacts, exposure to *Will & Grace* appears to have the strongest potential influence on reducing sexual prejudice, while for those with many gay friends, there is no significant relationship between levels of prejudice and their exposure to the show.

TABLE 1 goes about here.

To assess whether the different correlation results for each subgroup were significant, we first tested whether the absolute magnitude of correlations between viewing frequency and ATG scores would increase as the number of gay acquaintances decreases (H4). A chi-square test for the equivalence of correlations was performed rejecting the null hypotheses that the correlations were equivalent ($\chi^2[3, n = 244] = 21.39$, $p < .01$) (Cohen & Cohen, 1983, p. 55). Inspection of the correlations in Table 1 confirmed that the pattern was as anticipated. To confirm that the pattern was monotonic and in the anticipated direction, the Fisher- z transformation of the correlations between viewing frequency and ATG scores was regressed on number of gay friends. The slope of the

regression was negative as anticipated. The adjusted R^2 , correcting for the low number of observations, was .73, indicating a strongly monotonic trend as predicted.

We next tested whether the absolute magnitude of correlations between parasocial interaction and ATG scores would increase as the number of gay friends decreases (H5). A chi-square test for the equivalence of correlations was performed rejecting the null hypotheses that the correlations were equivalent ($\chi^2[3, n = 166] = 54.91, p < .01$) (Cohen & Cohen, 1983, p. 55). Inspection of the correlations in Table 1 confirms that the pattern is as anticipated. To quantify the strength of that pattern, the Fisher- z transformation of the correlations between ATG and parasocial interaction was regressed on number of gay friends. The slope of the regression was negative as anticipated. The adjusted R^2 , correcting for the low number of observations, was .615, indicating a strongly monotonic trend as predicted. The data from Table 1 suggests that the effects of parasocial interaction on ATG scores drops off rapidly after subjects had at least some acquaintance with gay men yielding more of a threshold effect than one that is linear. Thus there is a very specific interaction between parasocial interaction and the number of gay acquaintances/friends in predicting ATG scores.

DISCUSSION

Significant support was found for all hypotheses. Viewers perceive the portrayal of the gay characters on *Will & Grace* as positive. Both viewing frequency and parasocial interaction predict lower levels of sexual prejudice toward gay men. The correlational evidence is consistent with the claim that parasocial interaction and viewing frequency are causally intertwined with each other in their relationship to levels of sexual prejudice toward gay men. Consistent with the contact hypothesis, ATG scores were progressively lower for those with more gay acquaintances. As predicted, the strongest correlation between parasocial interaction and ATG scores was for the group with least reported direct contact with homosexuals ($r = -.65, p < .05$); the same was true for the relationship between viewing frequency and ATG scores ($r = -.48, p < .01$). These results suggest that further work on what we have called the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis would be productive.

Given our reliance of correlation data and a nonrandom sample, the results of this study cannot prove the causal claim that “watching *Will & Grace* encourages more tolerant attitudes toward gay men.” Further investigation into the PCH appears warranted, however, given that the results are consistent with the theoretical literature on the contact hypothesis and parasocial interaction, along with the lone experimental study done on media exposure and attitudes toward homosexuals (Riggle, Ellis, & Crawford, 1996). Though self-reports must be used with caution (McCroskey, 1984), it is noteworthy that sixty percent of viewers agreed with the statement that *Will & Grace* “has encouraged me to think positively about homosexuals” and that answers correlated with parasocial interaction ($r = .50, p < .001$) and with frequency of watching the show ($r = .29, p < .01$).

An alternative interpretation of the results could hypothesize that television viewers with more favorable attitudes toward gay men are more likely to watch the show and experience parasocial interaction with its gay characters. As Segrin and Nabi (2002) recently noted, the problem of selective viewing exposure complicates media studies that attempt to correlate viewing behavior with specific attitudes. However, as Segrin and Nabi conclude, even if viewers seek out programming that is consistent with their prior socialization, the power of television to strengthen attitudes should not be underestimated (p. 260).

Is it reasonable to suppose that most or all of the variation found in our results is explained by self-selection and little-to-none by viewing frequency or parasocial interaction? Though a definitive answer cannot be provided based on this study, we believe there are reasons to doubt that most or all variation is due to self-selection. To be sure, viewers with strongly held negative attitudes about

homosexuals are unlikely to watch *Will & Grace*, just as they are unlikely to seek out interpersonal contact with homosexuals (Herek & Capitanio, 1996). Thus, we suspect that a model that assumes a *reciprocal* relationship between parasocial contact and reduced sexual prejudice is more plausible than a “one-way” model that attempts to explain all of the variance implied with either viewing or pre-existing attitudes by themselves.

If *all* viewing variation was explained by attitudes toward homosexuals, we should not have found the marked difference between the strength of the correlations between those with no gay contact and those with many gay friends (see Table 1). If attitudes toward gay men predicted *all* viewing frequency, then the subgroup with the most gay contact and lowest ATG scores should have had the *highest* correlation between viewing frequency and ATG scores among the subgroups rather than the *lowest*. Thus, while it may be unreasonable to attribute all of the relevant variation in ATG scores to viewing frequency and parasocial interaction, it is equally unreasonable to attribute all of the relevant variation to prior attitudes toward gay men. Consistent with the reciprocal process of influence documented in the contact literature (Herek & Glunt, 1993), it would seem prudent to infer that viewing frequency of and parasocial interaction with *Will & Grace*, and attitudes toward gay men, are *mutually reinforcing*.

CONCLUSION

Research on attitudes toward homosexuals could be enhanced by taking mass media more seriously. While social psychologists' work in this area has been extensive, almost no scholarship outside of communication studies has entertained the possibility that mass media could be an important variable influencing sexual prejudice. To learn if this is the case, additional research would need to be done to sort out with more precision whether and how attitudes are influenced through television viewing of relatively unfamiliar social groups. If parasocial interaction can substitute for direct contact, what are the qualities necessary for such interaction to encourage attitude change? For example, some critics have argued that representations of homosexuals, including on *Will & Grace*, have been crafted and "straightened out" to be acceptable to mainstream audiences (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Gross, 1991; Linneman, 2002). Further research is necessary to identify the limiting conditions for televised portrayals to influence various attitudes concerning minority groups.

Future research should explore the relationships among different types and intensity of contact between heterosexuals and homosexuals (cf. Herek & Capitanio, 1996) when assessing the relative influence of direct and parasocial interaction. Though an initial attitude change concerning homosexuality apparently can be made with “relative ease” (Morin & Garfinkle, 1981, p. 127; cf. Herek, 1991), research has not yet established the parameters of the relationship among personal contacts, parasocial interaction, media content, and attitude change. This study suggests that further research in such directions could yield important findings.

As noted recently by Giles (2002), the concept of parasocial interaction has considerable potential but is currently seriously undertheorized and causal models to describe the emergence of parasocial relationships has yet to emerge. A good deal of work needs to be done to unpack the factors that facilitate the development of parasocial relationships that can change attitudes. And, of course, the extent to which our findings would be replicated in studies of parasocial contact with other minorities is an open question. Nonetheless, the question of whether one television show *can* make a difference by providing parasocial contact with minority groups is well worth further pursuit.

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TABLE 1
ATG Scores and r with Viewing Frequency (VF) and Parasocial Interaction (PSI) for Subgroups based on Number of Gay Acquaintances

Subgroups	ATG M	SD	VF r	VF n	PSI r	PSI n
1) No gay acquaintances	18.84	8.7	-.48**	25	-.65*	14
2) Gay acquaintances, but no gay friends	17.12	8.4	-.33***	83	-.37**	58
3) 3 or less gay friends	13.02	8.4	-.36***	103	-.35**	66
4) More than 3 gay friends	10.82	6.5	-.21	33	.30	28
Totals	14.7	8.6	-.32***	244	-.34***	166

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.