

Attitudes toward Gays and Lesbians: Gender and Sexism

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southwestern Psychological Association,

Austin, TX, April, 2006

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Problem

Heterosexuals, particularly males, typically hold more negative attitudes towards gays than lesbians (Herek, 2002; Kerns & Fine, 1994). Kern and Fine (1994), examining the attitudes of college undergraduates, reported that males, compared to females, held more negative attitudes towards gay men, but significant gender differences were not found in attitudes towards lesbians. Herek (2002), analyzing data from a national survey, found that adults ranging in age from 20 to 91 had personal reactions to gays that were more negative than reactions to lesbians, with straight men having particularly negative reactions towards gay men. Items included attitudinal assessments of adoption rights, relationship recognition, personal discomfort, likelihood of molesting children, and affective reactions.

Even though attitudes towards gay men have been found to be more negative than attitudes towards lesbians, typically items do not assess perception of competence. The stereotype content model (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004) differentiates forms of prejudice along the two dimensions of competence and warmth. In the current study we explored whether the differential perceptions of gays and lesbians extended to these dimensions. We hypothesized that, although gay males would be perceived as less warm than lesbians and straight men and women, they would be perceived as more competent than both lesbians and straight women.

In addition, we wanted to explore the relation of sexism and attitudes towards gays and lesbians. Specifically we predicted that measures of benevolent “putting women on a pedestal” sexism as well as measures of hostile or resentful, angry sexism (Glick & Fiske, 2001) would be related to negative attitudes towards gays and lesbians.

Method

Ninety-nine men and 226 women from sophomore-level psychology classes participated as an extra credit option. Most participants were 22 years of age or younger (76%) and indicated that their socioeconomic status was upper-middle (33%) or middle class (47%). Although the majority of participants were Caucasian (71%), a sizeable minority (21%) were Hispanic; 5% were African-American.

After completing basic demographic information, students read paragraphs describing three individuals, only one of which was the target of interest, and rated each individual using methodology similar to that used by Cuddy and colleagues (Cuddy et al., 2004). The target paragraph, embedded between the other two individual depictions, described a consultant with an MBA who had worked in the field for six years; the individual’s gender and sexual orientation were varied. The paragraph is given below:

Taylor is a 32-year-old associate consultant who graduated with an MBA. He’s (she’s) been working in his (her) current field for six years. When working with a client, his (her) duties include identifying issues, planning and conducting interviews and analyses, synthesizing conclusions into recommendations and helping to implement change in his (her) client’s organizations. On a personal level, Taylor’s hobbies include swimming and tennis. Taylor and his (her) wife (husband, partner) Jane (John) have been together for five years. They recently adopted their first baby.

Following each of the three paragraph descriptions, the individual was rated on 12 characteristics, 4 assessing competence, 4 assessing warmth, and 4 “filler” characteristics. Participants were also asked to indicate their likelihood of requesting the individual as a

consultant. In addition participants completed the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 2001) and the short version of the Attitude towards Lesbians and Gay Men Scale (Herek, 1999). Since previous research (Herek and Capitanio, 1999) found evidence for contextual effects, that order of presentation of lesbian items before or after the gay men items impacted participants' ratings, we counterbalanced the order of items, presenting the 4 items assessing attitudes towards gay men before attitudes towards lesbians in half of the questionnaires and reversing the order in the other half of the questionnaires.

Results

Attitudes toward gay men were significantly more negative than attitudes towards lesbians, $t(309) = 3.98, p < .001$. Gender differences, significant at the .01 level, were also present in the data with men, compared to women, scoring higher on benevolent sexism, $t(314) = 3.26$; hostile sexism, $t(316) = 5.19$; and negative attitudes towards gay men, $t(311) = 5.90$. For men, attitudes toward gay men scores were positively correlated with benevolent sexism $r(92) = .49, p < .001$; and hostile sexism, $r(92) = .48, p < .001$. Attitudes towards lesbians scores were similarly positively correlated with benevolent sexism, $r(95) = .33, p < .001$; and hostile sexism, $r(95) = .34, p < .001$. For women, attitudes toward gay men scores were also positively correlated with benevolent sexism $r(217) = .42, p < .001$; and hostile sexism, $r(219) = .21, p < .01$. Attitudes towards lesbians scores were similarly positively correlated with benevolent sexism, $r(215) = .45, p < .001$; and hostile sexism, $r(217) = .22, p < .01$.

In addition, we created a difference score, subtracting attitudes towards gays from attitudes towards lesbians. Compared to women, men had significantly more negative attitudes towards gay men than lesbians, $t(113.84, \text{equal variances not assumed}) = -6.62$,

$p < .001$. The difference score was significantly correlated to both measures of sexism for men ($r = -.33, p < .001$ for benevolent sexism; $r = -.30, p < .01$ for hostile sexism), but not for women.

We performed three-way (participant sex X paragraph cue sexual orientation X paragraph cue gender) ANOVA's to examine possible differences in perceived competence, warmth, and likelihood of requesting the person as a consultant. The only significant finding was a main effect for participant sex on the consultant variable; $F(1, 315) = 6.43, p < .05$, with men being less likely to request the individual as a consultant.

Conclusion

As in previous research (Herek, 2002; Kerns & Fine, 1994), we found more negative attitudes towards gay men than lesbian women, with the difference being greater for men than women. Contrary to our hypotheses regarding differential ratings of warmth and competence of gay men, lesbian women, and heterosexual men and women, no significant differences were found regarding sexual orientation and gender of the individual portrayed in the paragraphs. In spite of potentially prejudicial attitudes towards gay men/lesbian women, when rating a specific individual described in a paragraph, no significant differences were found in this sample based on the person's sexual orientation or gender. Perhaps more general sexist and homophobic attitudes do not translate to negative evaluations of an individual on specific characteristics.

For both men and women separately significant correlations were found between negative attitudes towards lesbians/gay men and benevolent/hostive sexism. Similarly, other research has reported links between traditional attitudes and prejudice based on sexual orientation. Herek (2000), summarizing correlates of sexual prejudice towards

individuals with a homosexual orientation, found sexual prejudice to be correlated with religious fundamentalism as well as with authoritarianism. Examining effect sizes from previous research, Whitley (2001) reported significant associations between negative attitudes toward homosexuality and endorsing traditional beliefs about gender roles, hypermasculinity, and measures of sexism.

Comparable to previous findings (Herek, 2002; Kerns & Fine, 1994) of men's more discriminatory attitudes towards gay men compared to lesbians, we found a significant gender difference in the discrepancy between attitudes towards gay males and attitudes toward lesbians. Moreover, for men, but not women, the discrepancy variable was related to both benevolent and hostile sexism.

Kerns and Fine (1994) suggest that attitudes toward traditional gender roles are more strongly related to gay male attitudes than is gender per se. Our data support the complexity of the relations among these variables. While for men the discrepancy between gay men and lesbians was significantly correlated to both measures of sexism, for women the corresponding correlations were not significant in spite of the greater number of female participants. Perhaps conservative political/religious ideology primarily mediates negative attitudes toward homosexual men and women on the part of women. However, for men, gendered attitudes may play a somewhat different role, with devaluation of women and femininity associated with discrepant attitudes for gays and lesbians. We hope that future research will further clarify the delicate interrelationships among attitudes toward gay men/lesbian women and various measures of gendered attitudes as well as further exploring differences among men and women in their attitudes towards gender and homosexuality.

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