

The Psychology of Sexual Prejudice

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Abstract¹

Sexual prejudice refers to negative attitudes toward an individual because of her or his sexual orientation. In this article, it is used to characterize heterosexuals' negative attitudes toward (a) homosexual behavior; (b) people with a homosexual or bisexual orientation; and (c) communities of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. Sexual prejudice is a preferable term to homophobia because it conveys no assumptions about the motivations underlying negative attitudes, locates the study of attitudes concerning sexual orientation within the broader context of social psychological research on prejudice, and avoids value judgments about such attitudes. Sexual prejudice remains widespread in the United States, although moral condemnation has decreased in the 1990s and opposition to antigay discrimination has increased. The article reviews current knowledge about the prevalence of sexual prejudice, its psychological correlates, its underlying motivations, and its relationship to hate crimes and other antigay behaviors.

In a six-month period beginning late in 1998, Americans were shocked by the brutal murders of Matthew Shepard and Billy Jack Gaither. Shepard, a 21-year old Wyoming college student, and Gaither, a 39-year old factory worker in

Alabama, had little in common except that each was targeted for attack because he was gay. Unfortunately, their slayings were not isolated events. Lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people — as well as heterosexuals perceived to be gay — routinely experience violence, discrimination, and personal rejection. A total of 1,102 hate crimes based on sexual orientation were tallied by law enforcement authorities in 1997. Because a substantial proportion of such crimes are never reported to police, that figure represents only the tip of an iceberg (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999).

People with homosexual or bisexual orientations have long been stigmatized. With the rise of the gay political movement in the late 1960s, however, homosexuality's condemnation as immoral, criminal, and sick came under increasing scrutiny. When the American Psychiatric Association dropped homosexuality as a psychiatric diagnosis in 1973, the question of why some heterosexuals harbor strongly negative attitudes toward homosexuals began to receive serious scientific consideration.

Society's rethinking of sexual orientation was crystallized in the term *homophobia*, which heterosexual psychologist George Weinberg coined in the late 1960s. The word first appeared in print in 1969 and was subsequently discussed at length in a popular book (Weinberg, 1972).² Around the same time, *heterosexism* began to be used as a term analogous to sexism and racism, describing an ideological system that casts homosexuality as inferior to

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²Although Weinberg coined the term *homophobia*, it was first used in print in 1969 by Jack Nichols and Lige Clarke in their May 23rd column in *Screw* magazine. Personal communications with George Weinberg (October 30, 1998) and Jack Nichols (November 5, 1998).

heterosexuality.³ Although usage of the two words has not been uniform, homophobia has typically been employed to describe individual antigay attitudes and behaviors whereas heterosexism has referred to societal-level ideologies and patterns of institutionalized oppression of non-heterosexual people.

By drawing popular and scientific attention to antigay hostility, the creation of these terms marked a watershed. Of the two, homophobia is probably more widely used and more often criticized. Its critics note that homophobia implicitly suggests that antigay attitudes are best understood as an irrational fear and that they represent a form of individual psychopathology rather than a socially reinforced prejudice. As antigay attitudes have become increasingly central to conservative political and religious ideologies since the 1980s, these limitations have become more problematic. Yet, heterosexism, with its historic macro-level focus on cultural ideologies rather than individual attitudes, is not a satisfactory replacement for homophobia.

Thus, scientific analysis of the psychology of antigay attitudes will be facilitated by a new term. I offer *sexual prejudice* for this purpose. Broadly conceived, sexual prejudice refers to all negative attitudes based on sexual orientation, whether the target is homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual. Given the current social organization of sexuality, however, such prejudice is almost always directed at people who engage in homosexual behavior or label themselves gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Thus, as used here, sexual prejudice encompasses heterosexuals' negative attitudes toward (a) homosexual behavior; (b) people with a homosexual or bisexual orientation; and (c) communities of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. Like other types of prejudice, sexual prejudice

³*Heterosexism was used as early as July 10, 1972, in two separate letters printed in the Great Speckled Bird, an alternative newspaper published in Atlanta, Georgia. I thank Joanne Despres of the Merriam Webster Company for her kind assistance with researching the origins of this word.*

has three principal features: It is an attitude (i.e., an evaluation or judgment); it is directed at a social group and its members; and it is negative, involving hostility or dislike.

Conceptualizing heterosexuals' negative attitudes toward homosexuality and bisexuality as sexual prejudice — rather than homophobia — has several advantages. First, sexual prejudice is a descriptive term. Unlike homophobia, it conveys no *a priori* assumptions about the origins, dynamics, and underlying motivations of antigay attitudes. Second, the term explicitly links the study of antigay hostility with the rich tradition of social psychological research on prejudice. Third, using the construct of sexual prejudice does not require value judgments that antigay attitudes are inherently irrational or evil.

PREVALENCE

Most adults in the United States hold negative attitudes toward homosexual behavior, regarding it as wrong and unnatural (Herek & Capitano, 1996; Yang, 1997). Nevertheless, poll data show that attitudes have become more favorable over the past three decades. For example, whereas at least two-thirds of respondents to the General Social Survey (GSS) considered homosexual behavior “always wrong” in the 1970s and 1980s, that figure declined noticeably in the 1990s. By 1996, only 56% of GSS respondents regarded it as always wrong (Yang, 1997).

Much of the public also holds negative attitudes toward individuals who are homosexual. In a 1992 national survey, more than half of the heterosexual respondents expressed disgust for lesbians and gay men (Herek, 1994). Respondents to the ongoing American National Election Studies have typically rated lesbians and gay men among the lowest of all groups on a 101-point feeling thermometer, although mean scores increased by approximately 10 points between 1984 and 1996 (Yang, 1997).

Despite these examples of negative attitudes, most Americans believe that a gay person should not be denied employment or basic civil liberties. The public is reluctant to treat homosexuality on a par with heterosexuality, however. Although most Americans favor giving same-sex domestic

partners limited recognition (e.g., employee health benefits, hospital visitation rights), they generally oppose legalizing same-sex marriages. Whereas the public generally supports the employment rights of gay teachers, they do not believe that lesbians and gay men should be able to adopt children (Yang, 1997).

Unfortunately, most studies have not separately assessed attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. To the extent that data are available, attitudes toward gay men appear to be more negative than attitudes toward lesbians, especially among heterosexual men (Herek & Capitano, 1996; Kite & Whitley, 1998). This pattern may reflect differences in the underlying cognitive organization of attitudes toward gay men and lesbians (Herek & Capitano, 1999).

CORRELATES

Laboratory and questionnaire studies have utilized a variety of scales and outcome measures to assess heterosexuals' attitudes toward gay men and lesbians (e.g., Davis, Yarber, Bauserman, Schreer, & Davis, 1998). Consistent with findings from public opinion surveys, they have revealed higher levels of sexual prejudice among individuals who are older, less educated, living in the U.S. South or Midwest, and rural residents (Herek, 1994). The previously noted sex difference in sexual prejudice occurs not only in the area of personal acceptance (Herek & Capitano, 1999; Kite & Whitley, 1998) but also in attitudes concerning civil rights and social policy (Yang, 1998).

Sexual prejudice is also reliably correlated with several psychological and social variables. Heterosexuals with high levels of sexual prejudice tend to score higher than others on authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1996; Haddock & Zanna, 1998). In addition, heterosexuals who identify with a fundamentalist religious denomination and frequently attend religious services typically manifest higher levels of sexual prejudice than do the nonreligious and members of liberal denominations (Herek & Capitano, 1996). Since the 1980s, political ideology and party affiliation have also come to be strongly associated with sexual prejudice, with

conservatives and Republicans expressing the highest levels (Yang, 1998).

Sexual prejudice is strongly related to whether or not a heterosexual knows gay people personally. The lowest levels of prejudice are manifested by heterosexuals with gay friends or family members who describe their relationships with those individuals as close and report having directly discussed the gay or lesbian person's sexual orientation with him or her. Interpersonal contact and prejudice are reciprocally related. Not only are heterosexuals with gay friends or relatives less prejudiced, but heterosexuals from demographic groups with low levels of sexual prejudice (e.g., women, highly educated people) are more likely to experience personal contact with an openly gay person (Herek & Capitano, 1996).

Relatively little empirical research has examined racial and ethnic differences. Sexual prejudice may be somewhat greater among heterosexual African Americans than among Whites, mainly because of White women's relatively favorable attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. The correlates of sexual prejudice may vary by race and ethnicity. Interpersonal contact experiences may be more important in shaping the attitudes of Whites than of Blacks, for example, whereas the belief that homosexuality is a choice may be a more influential predictor of heterosexual Blacks' sexual prejudice (Herek & Capitano, 1995).

UNDERLYING MOTIVATIONS

As with other forms of prejudice, sexual prejudice has multiple motivations. For some heterosexuals, it results from unpleasant interactions with gay individuals, which are then generalized to attitudes toward the entire group. This explanation probably applies mainly to cases in which interpersonal contact has been superficial and minimal. For others, sexual prejudice is rooted in fears associated with homosexuality, perhaps reflecting discomfort with one's own sexual impulses or gender conformity. For still others, sexual prejudice reflects influences of in-group norms that are hostile to homosexual and bisexual people. Yet

another source of prejudice is the perception that gay people and the gay community represent values that are directly in conflict with one's personal value system.

These different motivations can be understood as deriving from the psychological functions that sexual prejudice serves, which vary from one individual to another. One heterosexual's sexual prejudice, for example, may reduce anxiety associated with his fears about sexuality and gender, whereas another's prejudice might reinforce a positive sense of herself as a member of the social group "good Christians." Such attitudes are functional only when they are consistent with cultural and situational cues, for example, when homosexuality is defined as inconsistent with a masculine identity or when a religious congregation defines hostility to homosexuality as a criterion for being a good Christian (Herek, 1987).

PREJUDICE AND BEHAVIOR

Hate crimes and discrimination are inevitably influenced by complex situational factors (Franklin, 1998). Nevertheless, sexual prejudice contributes to antigay behaviors. In experimental studies, sexual prejudice is correlated with antigay behaviors, although other factors often moderate this relationship (Haddock & Zanna, 1998; Kite & Whitley, 1998). Voting patterns on gay-related ballot measures have been generally consistent with the demographic correlates of sexual prejudice described above (Strand, 1998). Recognizing the complex relationship between sexual prejudice and antigay behavior further underscores the value of anchoring this phenomenon in the scientific literature on prejudice, which offers multiple models for understanding the links between attitudes and behavior.

CONCLUSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Although more than a quarter century has passed since George Weinberg first presented a scholarly discussion of the psychology of homophobia, empirical research on sexual

prejudice is still in its early stages. To date, the prevalence and correlates of sexual prejudice have received the most attention. Relatively little research has been devoted as yet to understanding the dynamic cognitive processes associated with antigay attitudes and stereotypes, that is, how heterosexuals think about lesbians and gay men. Nor has extensive systematic inquiry been devoted to the underlying motivations for sexual prejudice or the effectiveness of different interventions for reducing sexual prejudice. These represent promising areas for future research.

In addition, descriptive studies of sexual prejudice are needed within different subsets of the population, including ethnic and age groups. Given the tendency for antigay behaviors to be perpetrated by adolescents and young adults, studies are especially needed of the development of sexual prejudice early in the life span. Finally, study is needed of commonalities and convergences in the psychology of sexual prejudice according to whether the target is men or women, homosexuals or bisexuals. Much of the empirical research in this area to date has been limited because it focused (implicitly or explicitly) on heterosexuals' attitudes toward gay men.

Stigma based on sexual orientation has been commonplace throughout the twentieth century. Conceptualizing such hostility as sexual prejudice represents a step toward achieving a scientific understanding of its origins, dynamics, and functions. Perhaps most important, such an understanding may help to prevent the behavioral expression of sexual prejudice through violence, discrimination, and harassment.

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