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Student Prejudice Against Gay Male and Lesbian Lecturers

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ABSTRACT. The authors examined whether gay men and lesbians are evaluated more negatively than individuals of unspecified sexual orientation when attributional ambiguity surrounds evaluations and whether they are evaluated similarly to unspecified others when no attributional ambiguity is present. One male and one female lecturer delivered either a strong or a weak lecture to students who either (a) believed that the lecturer was a gay man or a lesbian or (b) did not receive sexual orientation information. Contrary to predictions, the quality of the lecture did not influence the ratings of known gay male and lesbian lecturers, although lecture quality strongly influenced ratings of lecturers whose sexual orientation was unspecified. After strong lectures, participants rated known gay male and lesbian lecturers more negatively than they did lecturers whose sexual orientation was unspecified. After weak lectures, participants rated known gay male and lesbian lecturers more positively than they did the others. The authors discussed the possibility that students might moderate their ratings to avoid discriminating against gay and lesbian lecturers.

Key words: attributional ambiguity, homophobia, sexual orientation, sexual prejudice, teacher evaluations

RESEACHERS HAVE DOCUMENTED PREJUDICED ATTITUDES toward gay men and lesbians in diverse groups, including students, teachers, and the general public (Eliason, 1997; Herek, 2000; Yang, 1997). Herek (1994) demonstrated that men and individuals with less education were more likely to report *sexual prejudice*. Additionally, those who held negative beliefs toward gay men and

lesbians were more likely to describe themselves as politically or religiously conservative or both, to favor traditional gender roles, and to admit a lack of interpersonal contact with gay men or lesbians. In most of this research, attitudes toward gay men were typically more negative than attitudes toward lesbians (Eliason; Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Kite & Whitley, 1998).

As with other prejudices, negative beliefs toward gay men and lesbians might provide rationalizations for discriminatory actions against them (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995). Researchers have well documented discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, with the most extreme example being the "hate crime," which might involve violence (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999). Hate crimes aside, discriminatory acts toward gay men and lesbians that might not be punishable by law are still very common and pernicious. For example, Rey and Gibson (1997) asked college students whether they had engaged in any of a list of discriminatory behaviors toward gay men and lesbians, ranked from minimally to severely harmful. Of those sampled, 95% admitted some form of discriminatory behavior and 32.7% admitted behavior that was rated as at least moderately harmful against gay men and lesbians.

Such discrimination might deter gay male, lesbian, or bisexual persons from letting people know their sexual orientation (Eliason, 1997; McAnulty, 1993). Of the gay male, lesbian, and bisexual people whom Kitzinger (1991) surveyed, 75% reported hiding their sexual identity at work. Such behavior might form a wise strategy, because researchers have suggested that gay male and lesbian job applicants might be less likely to be selected for positions than heterosexual applicants (Crow, Fok, & Hartman, 1998) and, if hired, might receive less pay than heterosexual employees (Ellis & Riggle, 1995).

However, the results of two recent studies have shown more tolerant responses to gay men and lesbians who "come out," both studies reporting that students might not have negative reactions to their instructors' disclosures of gay male or lesbian sexual orientation (Liddle, 1997; Waldo & Kemp, 1997). Liddle compared her teaching evaluations from sections of a course in which she had revealed herself to be lesbian with evaluations from sections in which she had not. Although she hypothesized that revealing herself as a lesbian would have a negative effect on her teaching evaluations, there was no evidence of sexual orientation bias across the two groups or over time in the informed sections.

Taking a different approach, Waldo and Kemp (1997) hypothesized that students' attitudes toward gay men and lesbians would be more positive after

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taking a course taught by an openly gay male instructor as compared with a course taught by an instructor of unspecified sexual orientation. Their hypothesis was based on research that shows that more interpersonal contact with gay male, lesbian, and bisexual people is related to less prejudiced attitudes (Herek, 1994; Herek & Capitanio, 1996). Waldo and Kemp's results demonstrated a decrease in prejudice in all students across the semester, but students of the gay male instructor showed the sharpest decline in prejudiced attitudes (in accord with the contact hypothesis).

Researchers now face the question of whether such positive (or neutral) reactions to gay men and lesbians represent a significant reduction in prejudiced attitudes or—alternatively—such positive responses are due chiefly to socially desirable responding, with "true" attitudes remaining negative. Such discrepancies between attitudes and behavior in the research literature might be due to changing social norms that lead individuals to abandon public expressions of prejudice while they secretly harbor negative evaluations. Over the past 20 years, research has indicated that it is largely socially unacceptable to be seen as overtly prejudiced against many previously stigmatized groups (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986; McConahay, 1986; Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995). Nevertheless, people might still hold negative attitudes—either implicitly or explicitly—toward these stigmatized groups but try to hide them from others (Crosby, Bromley, & Saxe, 1980; Snyder, Kleck, Strenta, & Mentzer, 1979) and perhaps from themselves (Devine, 1989; Dovidio & Gaertner).

Only recently, however, have researchers begun to demonstrate that subtle prejudice against gay men and lesbians might be increasing, even while blatant prejudice is decreasing (e.g., Aberson, Swan, & Emerson, 1999). The desire to appear egalitarian to others might lead a prejudiced person to act in an unprejudiced manner toward a gay male or lesbian individual, unless that prejudiced person can find a way to justify negative treatment toward the individual (Aberson et al.).

Individuals who hold prejudiced attitudes that they wish to hide from others might use their naïve understanding of attribution to enable them to continue to discriminate without public reprobation (Snyder et al., 1979). Discriminatory actions whose causes are ambiguous might be less likely to elicit negative reaction from others than discriminatory actions that are clearly attributable to prejudiced attitudes. Following Jones and Davis' (1965) correspondence inference theory, Snyder et al. noted that a person's reasons for choosing one behavior over another are more easily determined by others when there is only one noncommon effect between the two choices. That is, if a person makes a choice between two actions or objects that are identical except in one specific aspect, one can assume that this particular difference is the driving force behind their decision. If there is more than one noncommon effect or variation between two choices, however, the actor's intentions are less clear: the choice cannot be easily attributed to favorability toward one noncommon effect over another. Thus, multiple

noncommon effects create attributional ambiguity about the reasons behind the choice (Snyder et al.). Thus, if a person does not want to appear openly prejudiced to others, he or she can still discriminate against a negatively evaluated group—but only when there is another reason to which his or her behavior can be attributed.

Using an attributional ambiguity paradigm, Snyder et al. (1979) examined prejudice against people with disabilities. The researchers asked participants to choose one of two rooms in which to watch a movie. In the condition with no ambiguity, the researchers offered the same movie in two rooms. A person with a disability sat in one of the rooms while the other room was empty. Most participants chose to sit next to the person in a wheelchair. In the attributional ambiguity condition, the researchers offered two different movies: one that the person with a disability watched and another that played in an empty room. In this case, most participants chose to sit in the empty room regardless of the movie that played there. As the researchers predicted, participants avoided sitting next to the person with a disability more often when the choice between sitting next to a person with a disability and a person without a disability was also a choice between different movies. During the debriefing, some of the participants who had chosen not to sit next to the person with a disability expressed concern about not wanting to avoid the person with a disability. The researchers noted that this concern raised the question of whether participants were trying to deceive themselves, the researchers, or the person with a disability.

Aberson et al. (1999) also used an attributional ambiguity paradigm to examine evaluations of gay men. They hypothesized that people would evaluate gay men more negatively than heterosexual men when additional information had been presented that justified a negative evaluation but that people would evaluate gay men more positively than heterosexual men when no additional information had been offered that could justify a negative evaluation. The researchers told students that they would watch a videotape of a male candidate for the position of HIV/AIDS education spokesperson. The researchers told half of the students that the candidate was gay and male, whereas the researchers gave the other half of the students no sexual-orientation information. They then instructed the students to rate the candidate in terms of how well he could relate to students and whether he would be a good spokesperson for the program. In the condition of additional justification, students heard the candidate make negative comments about college students. No negative comments were made in the condition of no justification. Contrary to the researchers' original hypothesis, the participants actually rated gay men more favorably than heterosexual men when there was justification for prejudice. However, students were less likely to ascribe positive traits to gay men acting positively and less likely to ascribe negative traits to gay men acting negatively. Participants gave heterosexual men who made no negative comments the highest ratings. These findings are in accord with recent theories about subtle prejudice (e.g., Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995).

In the present study, we sought to understand how subtle prejudice against gay men and lesbians might manifest itself. An experimental design following the attributional ambiguity paradigm (Snyder et al., 1979) gave some participants an excuse for demonstrating prejudice against gay male and lesbian lecturers and other participants no excuse. Specifically, students watched a guest lecture that was either strong or weak and that was performed by a lecturer who was either (a) acknowledged as a gay man or a lesbian or (b) of unspecified sexual orientation. We predicted that students would rate the gay male and lesbian lecturers more negatively than they would the unspecified lecturers overall but that the evaluations of gay male and lesbian lecturers who gave a weak lecture would reveal that underlying prejudicial attitudes influenced the evaluations. Thus, we predicted that when giving a strong lecture, unspecified lecturers would receive somewhat more positive ratings than gay male and lesbian lecturers. However, we also predicted that when giving a weak lecture, gay male and lesbian lecturers would be rated much more negatively than heterosexual lecturers. In other words, we predicted a spreading interaction with two main effects, for sexual orientation and lecture quality.

Method

Participants

The main participants were 261 students from four introductory psychology classes who participated as part of the ordinary course curriculum. The sample consisted of 148 women, 88 men, and 25 students who did not state their gender. Random assignment of students to each class section and thus lecture quality condition was not possible; however, each class was largely representative of the total population of undergraduate students at the university (i.e., the majority of students were White, between 18 and 22 years of age, and Colorado residents).

Materials

We gave the students a 10-item teacher evaluation form similar to those used for course evaluations at the university. They responded to each item on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Items included statements such as "The instructor's lecture was interesting" and "I learned a lot from this lecture." We combined the 10 items into a reliable scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$). Each student's score was the average of his or her responses to the 10 items.

Procedure

At the beginning of their normally scheduled class period, we asked participants to listen to and evaluate a guest lecturer visiting their class (one or the other

of two confederates). The participation of students in the evaluation process was voluntary. We offered those who chose to participate extra credit.

We then gave participants in each of the four classes a curriculum vitae for the guest lecturer. In each of the four classes, about half of the participants (n = 125) received a curriculum vitae implying that the lecturer was a gay man or a lesbian, by stating that the lecturer had received an award for being an outstanding gay male or lesbian researcher and had research expertise on violence against gay men and lesbians. The other half—roughly speaking—of the participants in each class (n = 136) received a curriculum vitae in which there was no reference to sexual orientation, stating that the lecturer had received an award for being an outstanding graduate researcher and had research expertise on violence against women.

In an additional sample of similar students (n = 49), we gave participants one of the four curricula vitae—there were two for each of the two lecturers—to examine and then asked them whether they believed the lecturer was a gay man or lesbian. Those participants whom we presented with curricula vitae that implied a gay male or lesbian orientation were significantly more likely to believe that the lecturer was a gay man or a lesbian, $z = 2.39$, $p < .017$.

We used the middle aisle of the classroom to determine which of the two versions of the lecturer's curriculum vitae we would give students. We chose this method to ensure that students would not observe the curriculum vitae differences in comparing their curriculum vitae with that of students sitting next to them. Although a complete random assignment of students to sexual orientation condition was not possible with this design, we see no reason to believe that the nonrandom seating choice affected our results.

Once students had read the curriculum vitae, we introduced them to either a male (2 sections; n = 145) or a female (2 sections; n = 116) guest lecturer. The lecturer gave either a strong (animated and direct; n = 144) or a weak (dry and indirect; n = 117) lecture for approximately 30 min. We included the weak lecture manipulation to provide the excuse that participants could use to evaluate gay male or lesbian lecturers negatively without appearing prejudiced. We had trained the two lecturers to give the same lecture to all classes, only varying their lecture style. The lecture was on the subject of advanced studies and careers related to the field of psychology. Both lecturers were White, were approximately 30 years of age, had 3 to 5 years of teaching experience, and had similar prior teaching evaluations.

At the end of the 30-min lecture, students rated the guest lecturer on the 10-item teacher evaluation form. Participants gave their consent by choosing to hand in the evaluation form at the end of the class period. Participant evaluation forms remained anonymous, with no identifying information. We circulated a separate sign-up sheet in the room for extra credit purposes. All students chose to participate.

We thoroughly debriefed students after they rated the guest lecturer. We asked all students if they suspected the study purposes. None of the students indicated that they had suspected the topic of interest, gay male or lesbian orientation.

Results

Table 1 summarizes the teacher evaluations. We subjected those evaluations to a 2 (lecturer sexual orientation) × 2 (lecture quality) × 2 (lecturer gender) analysis of variance. As anticipated, we found a significant main effect of lecture quality, $F(1, 253) = 7.05$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = .027$, with weak lectures being rated significantly more negatively ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.74$) than strong lectures ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.74$). We found no main effects for lecturer sexual orientation or lecturer gender.

We found a significant interaction of sexual orientation and lecture quality, $F(1, 253) = 16.22$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .060$, but this interaction did not fulfill our attributional ambiguity predictions. Instead, we observed a spreading interaction so that participants moderated their ratings of gay male and lesbian lecturers ($M_{strong} = 3.55$, $SD = 0.76$; $M_{weak} = 3.69$, $SD = 0.77$) and used lecture quality only when evaluating unspecified lecturers ($M_{strong} = 4.03$, $SD = 0.65$; $M_{weak} = 3.43$, $SD = 0.69$). Figure 1 displays this interaction.

Additionally, we found a marginally significant interaction between lecturer gender, lecture quality, and lecturer sexual orientation, $F(1, 253) = 3.60$, $p < .06$, $\eta^2 = .014$. That interaction qualifies the earlier interaction by showing that the interaction effect of the lecturer's sexual orientation and lecture quality was much larger for the male lecturer than for the female lecturer.

TABLE 1. Mean Evaluations and Standard Deviations of Female and Male Lecturers by Sexual Orientation and Lecture Quality

	Lecture quality			
	Weak		Strong	
Sexual orientation	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
	Female lecturer			
Unspecified	3.59	.70	3.95	.77
Lesbian	3.67	.93	3.65	.82
	Male lecturer			
Unspecified	3.23	.64	4.08	.56
Gay male	3.70	.65	3.48	.68

Note. For the female lecturers, the 2-way interaction effect was nonsignificant, $F(1, 112) = 1.65$, $p = .20$, $\eta^2 = .015$. For the male lecturers, there was a 2-way interaction effect, $F(1, 141) = 24.28$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .147$.

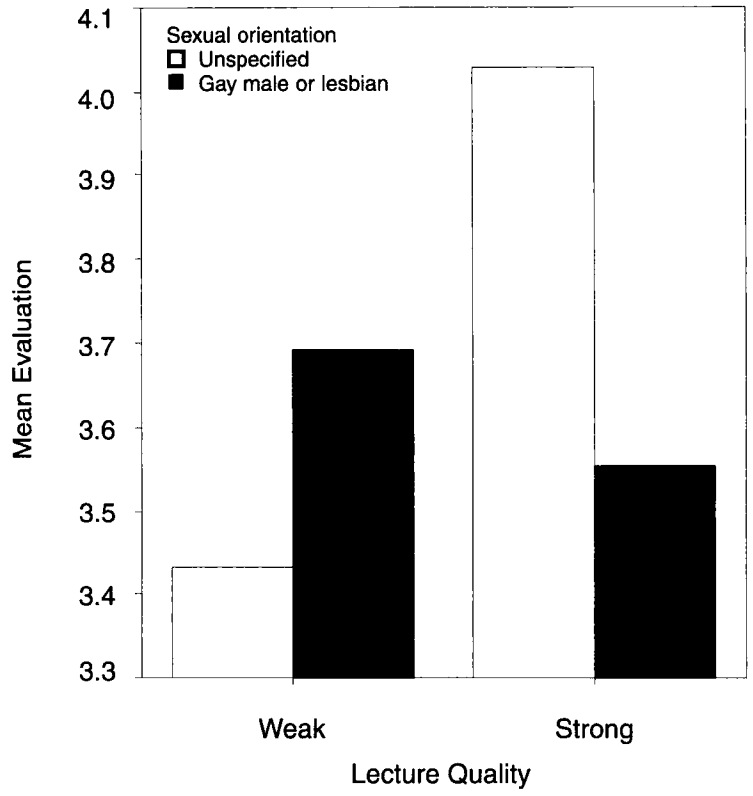

FIGURE 1. Mean evaluation of lecturers as a function of lecture quality and sexual orientation.

Discussion

In the present study, after a strong lecture, students rated acknowledged gay male and lesbian lecturers more negatively than lecturers of unspecified sexual orientation; but after a weak lecture, students rated acknowledged gay male and lesbian lecturers more positively than lecturers of unspecified sexual orientation. Contrary to attributional ambiguity predictions, providing an excuse for a negative evaluation, the weakness of the lecture, did not lead to more negative evaluations for gay male and lesbian lecturers than when no excuses were provided. Instead, students moderated their evaluations of gay male and lesbian lecturers and did not appear to take lecture quality into account when rating them. In contrast, lecture quality appears to have been the important factor in the ratings of

lecturers of unspecified sexual orientation, because students gave them more negative ratings for weak lectures and more positive ratings for strong lectures.

These results are consistent with an analysis by Pettigrew and Meertens (1995), who noted that subtle prejudice often involves both the denial of positive evaluations to out-groups and restraint in applying negative evaluations. Thus, possible student prejudice against gay male and lesbian lecturers might have been exhibited subtly not through explicitly negative evaluations but rather through the denial of deserved positive ratings. Also, other research has suggested that social pressures on people to not appear prejudiced might lead participants to provide neutral as opposed to negative evaluations of minority groups (Aberson et al., 1999).

Although our findings did not replicate those of attributional ambiguity studies of prejudice against other minority populations, such as African Americans or people with disabilities (Fajardo, 1985; Snyder et al., 1979), we suggest that the content of stereotypes about different groups might result in differing patterns of discrimination in different contexts. Whereas racism has sometimes led to beliefs about out-group genetic inferiority in areas such as intellectual ability (Meertens & Pettigrew, 1997), sexual prejudice typically has not. As Madon (1997) recently reported, stereotypes about gay men tend to focus predominantly on their female gender-typed qualities and on the violation of male gender roles through traits, behaviors, and physical characteristics. None of the stereotype-relevant beliefs that Madon reported dealt with intellectual or professional competence. Although recent studies of the content of stereotypes about lesbians are not available, it is likely that this stereotype is also unrelated to judgments of intellectual or professional capabilities (Bohan, 1996). In contrast to the present results, future research results might confirm attributional ambiguity predictions when stereotype content is more relevant to the judgments involved. Thus, we suggest that whereas researchers have treated discrimination as a broadly applied negative judgment in the past, prejudiced individuals could sometimes apply such discriminatory judgments in a domain-specific way. Gay men and lesbians might face greater discrimination when they are acting in a domain in which stereotype content is relevant rather than irrelevant. Such possibilities warrant further empirical study.

Our results were somewhat stronger when our stimulus person was male rather than female. That pattern was consistent with findings suggesting that attitudes toward gay men are more negative in general than attitudes toward lesbians (Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Kite & Whitley, 1998). In most research, this greater animosity toward gay men is stronger from heterosexual male respondents than heterosexual female respondents; however, in the present study, we did not find any significant effects of participant gender. Instead, our male instructor seemed to polarize ratings to a more significant degree than our female instructor—both when sexual orientation was specified as gay male and when it was unspecified (creating a crossover interaction for our male but not our female instructor). Obviously, this result might have been due to the specific stimulus persons that we

used, but we consider the consistency with past research on attitudinal differences in reactions to gay men and lesbians important.

Finally, the tragic and well-publicized murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay male college student from Wyoming (Cornelius, Miniclier, & Hughes, 1998), might have affected our results. We collected data within an hour's drive of the murder site approximately 6 months later. Within the community, discussions related to prejudice and discrimination that gay men and lesbians face had increased. Such discussions might have created a greater awareness of the types of discrimination that gay men and lesbians face and perhaps a greater effort to avoid demonstrating prejudice.

The evidence from the present study supports newer research on subtle prejudice showing a pattern of neutral evaluations of minority group members rather than appropriately positive or negative evaluations (Aberson et al., 1999). Consequently, people's actual evaluations of these individuals on the basis of areas such as merit, skill, or likeability might be difficult to assess. Because many employers use evaluations in hiring people or giving raises to them, this difficulty in assessment is highly problematic. The present research helped to identify how prejudice against gay male and lesbian people is now manifesting itself in the United States. With a new understanding of the nature of such subtle prejudice, researchers can begin to examine ways to eradicate it.

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