

HOMOPHOBIA AND GROUP IDENTITY

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AP Psychology

June 2006

Abstract

Research has linked homophobia to gender and gender constructs, but the phenomenon has not been connected to larger models of group identity. In *Us and Them*, David Berreby theorizes that at any given time individuals split humanity on a single categorical axis that divides their own category from all others. Steele's research on stereotype threat has shown the effects that cuing demographics can have on a student's standardized test results. Using a technique based on G.M. Steele and Berreby's ideas, high school students were surveyed on attitudes toward homosexuals after their own gender or age was cued. The two groups' comfort levels around homosexuals were not found to be significantly different.

Introduction

The term "homophobia," in its current usage, refers to both a fear of homosexuals and a negative or hostile attitude toward them, predominantly by heterosexual males (Merriam-Webster). As this outlook is not consistent with the psychological definition of "phobia" and a clinical fear of homosexuals is quite rare, some researchers prefer the term *homonegativity* in reference to discrimination against homosexuals. This paper will not draw that distinction. Homosexuality is frowned upon by many religions and less accepted by certain socioeconomic classes and ethnic groups. These cultural influences on socialization are difficult to determine and control. This research springs from an individual perspective, focusing on personal group membership and identity rather than socialization and mores.

Much of the research on homophobia in recent years has focused on its relationship to gender roles and socio-cultural perceptions of masculinity and femininity in general. Men whose ideal selves are masculine and undesired selves are feminine were found to be more negative toward gay men, perceiving them as threats to their own masculinity (Kilianski, 2004). These men associate homosexual men with negative femininity and lesbian women with masculinity's positive attributes. Thus, sexism and homophobia tend to co-occur, while heterosexual males are markedly less negative toward lesbians. Homophobia has also been shown to correlate positively with traditional masculine role beliefs, as well as beliefs consistent with right-wing authoritarianism (Wilkinson, 2004).

Most research in this field has been correlation, exploring relationships between homophobia and other psychological factors through statistical analysis of psychological inventories. Though these measurements are valuable in determining the course of this fledgling field, their participants' self-reported attitudes and feelings fail to specify the real-world ramifications of homophobia in social interaction. Discursive analysis of male teenagers' guided conversations in control groups has helped illuminate the means by which teenagers avoid seeming prejudiced while asserting their own heterosexual masculinity (Korobov, 2004). Whenever a participant had stepped too far toward either prejudice or tolerance in the course of the conversation, he would use the techniques of discourse (humor, irony) to bring his own position closer to the center again, showing that the fear of seeming intolerant does indeed play a role in keeping discrimination socially in check.

The aforementioned studies primarily treat homophobia along the dimensions of gender roles and social norms. The meager literature on homophobia is a small branch of a much larger body of theory and research on prejudice and discrimination against minority groups. General theories on the larger theme can provide insight into the role of homosexuals as a group and help explain heterosexual's attitudes toward homosexuals.

Kenji Yoshino outlines a theory of minority group status in his 2006 and treatise/memoir *Covering*. According to Yoshino, society's demands on minority groups pass through stages over time. The first two stages have been explored by earlier theorists, and do not apply to every group: conversion, in which group members are required to convert to the majority status; and passing, where they may remain as they are but may not reveal their status publicly. After conversion and passing, Yoshino proposes a new stage, "covering," in which individuals whose minority status is known are nonetheless expected to behave like the in-group in order to be accepted by society. He draws the distinction between group status and group-specific behavior, pointing out that prejudice is still present if minorities must deemphasize their status to be accepted.

In *Us and Them* (2005), David Berreby discusses individuals' tendency to divide humanity into two categories based on the ones they themselves fit into. Though each human falls into many categories (or "human kinds") at once, based on race, religion, nationality, sex and numerous other variables, the tendency is to focus on one variable at a time based on the situation, dividing the world along this axis into those fit who fit into the same category ("us") and those who do not ("them"). According to Berreby, this process is the source of both prejudice and pride, unity and division.

Similar principles have been applied to achievement in tests taking. African-Americans and Latinos have historically scored lower on academic achievement tests, which many logically attribute to many group members' less privileged economic backgrounds and access to underfunded urban schooling. Nonetheless, the resulting stereotype of poor academic performance is assigned to race rather than educational and financial circumstances. Theorists had difficulty explaining why suburban, middle-class African Americans still perform more poorly on tests than their white counterparts. The explanation is that they are aware of the stereotypes that apply to them. Studies have shown that when the variable of race is cued before the test, typically through demographic questions, the fear of confirming stereotypes ("stereotype threat") contributes to the gap in test scores (Steele, 1995) and that anxiety may be a mediating factor (Osborn, 2001). Stereotype threat differs depending on which of an individual's group identities is cued.

Building off this research on multiple group identities and the effects of cueing, it was hypothesized that heterosexual males would demonstrate more negative attitudes toward gay men when their own gender and masculinity were cued rather than when their age, a factor less associated with homophobia, was.

Method

A random sample of 40 male psychology students at Chatham High School was contacted by email and asked to participate in the survey. Students were to report to the psychology classroom where they filled out the questionnaire in exchange for donuts, offered as a motivator to reduce non response. Chatham High students are predominantly white, from a moderately affluent community in Northern New Jersey. All psychology students were in the eleventh or twelfth grades.

The survey was distributed in two forms (see Appendix). Form A began by asking subjects their gender, even though unbeknownst to them there were no females in the sample, and proceeded to ask several gender-related questions. Subjects were told to rate their masculinity on a scale from 1 to 10 (a femininity scale was included for females though

no females were surveyed), and then rate the “ideal” masculinity level and the level for a “typical homosexual” of the same sex as the subject. Form B began by asking subjects their age and whether they preferred to spend free time with people their own age, younger, or older. The next question on both forms asked subjects to imagine they were in a crowded room filled with strangers of either the opposite sex (Form A) or far apart in age from the subject (Form B), except for one homosexual of the same sex (and age, in Form B). Would they choose to start a conversation with the homosexual, start one with the others, or keep to themselves? They were asked to describe their general attitude towards homosexuals from a list of choices, rate their comfort level around homosexuals, and choose whether they identified more with their age/gender or their sexual orientation. Finally, the demographic not cued in each form (age in A, sex in B) was collected, as well as the number of times the subject attended religious services in the past month.

Results

Refer to the appendix for question numbers on each form.

Form A ($n = 17$)

2. $\bar{x} = 6.85$; $s = 1.17$
3. $\bar{x} = 7.38$; $s = 1.11$
4. $\bar{x} = 4.53$; $s = 1.46$
5. (a) 23.53% (b) 70.59% (c) 5.88%
6. (a) 52.94% (b) 41.18% (c) 5.88%
7. $\bar{x} = 7.03$; $s = 2.27$
8. (a) 64.71% (b) 35.29%
9. $\bar{x} = 17.29$; $s = 0.77$
10. $\bar{x} = 1.88$; $s = 1.87$

Form B ($n=16$)

1. $\bar{x} = 17.5$; $s = .52$
2. (a) 12.5% (b) 68.75% (c) 0% (d) 18.75%
3. (a) 18.75% (b) 18.75% (c) 18.75%
(d) 43.75
4. (a) 25% (b) 50% (c) 6.25% (f) 12.5%
(g) 6.25%
5. $\bar{x} = 7.06$; $s = 2.11$
6. (a) 81.25% (b) 18.75%
8. $\bar{x} = 0.69$; $s = 1.30$

Discussion

The two forms did not demonstrate a statistically significant difference in attitudes toward homosexuals between the two groups of subjects. Few, if any participants, demonstrated homophobia in their survey responses, making it difficult to draw conclusions about the sources of this phenomenon.

The average comfort level around other male homosexuals was 7, 10 being the most comfortable, and only six of the participants rated their comfort below the midway mark of five. Seventy-eight percent of all participants chose that homosexuals either “don’t bother me as long as they aren’t interested in me sexually” or “are just like anyone else and I don’t treat them differently from anyone else.” These two answers were the least homonegative among the seven answer choices.

In the crowded room scenario, about a quarter of respondents who took Form A, and a fifth of those who took Form B, said that they would choose to speak to the homosexual over the others. The decision regarding the female-filled room would be affected by a heterosexual’s confidence around women, which this study did not measure. The large proportion (40%) of respondents for the room with a crowd distant in age who

chose to stay by themselves was noteworthy. The explanation for this is not readily apparent, except perhaps for the differing social components of the two scenarios.

Respondents identified more with their age group and gender than their sexual orientation, although more answered “sexual orientation” when it was compared to gender in Form A. These are perhaps the only data that support the hypothesis by showing the greater relationship of gender identity with attitudes toward sexual orientation. The frequencies of the answer can be explained by a homonegative reactionary tendency on the Form A question. Respondents might choose that they identify more with their own orientation to exclude homosexuals from their chosen group. This would be more prevalent in the gender question, because gender and sexual orientation are more related and thus more comparable. The finer distinction might lead one to consider co-members being included and excluded from each choice. The relative status of these groups on individuals’ hierarchy of identity also reflects one’s awareness of peers. It is normal to actively seek out peers of one’s own age; heterosexuals usually have no trouble finding others who share their sexual orientation.

The failure of the two forms (and their respective group membership cues) to draw out significant differences in homonegativity levels can be attributed to various factors. The study of and interest in psychology sets the sample apart from the larger high school population. Perhaps a group more diverse in grades and interests might have shown a greater instance of homophobia. Also, the cultural norm in the New York area that stresses political correctness may have affected students’ willingness to admit to any form of discrimination. The survey form itself may have been too brief to strongly cue one of the subjects’ identities, or the process and results of cueing such an identity may not be as the experimenter imagined. In the future, it would be valuable to repeat this research with a larger, broader sample and a longer, more specific survey form. Self-reported ratings could be replaced by established psychological inventories, and a more thorough exploratory statistical analysis might help discover relationships that are not immediately apparent.

References

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Appendix

Form A

Please answer the questions in order. You may have as much time as you like for each one, but do not return to previous questions or change your answers once you are finished.

1. **Sex:** Male Female
(circle one)

2. **If you are male, rate your masculinity on a scale from 1 to 10, where 10 is the most masculine and 1 is the least.**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

If you are female, rate your femininity on a scale from 1 to 10, where 10 is the most feminine and 1 is the least.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

3. **What is the ideal masculinity or femininity rating for someone the same sex as you?**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

4. **Rate a typical homosexual of your sex on the same masculinity or femininity scale you used in questions 2 and 3.**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

5. **If you were in a crowded room full of strangers who were all the opposite sex, except for one homosexual of the same sex, which of the following would you do?**

- a. Start a conversation with the homosexual.
- b. Start a conversation with one of the other people.
- c. Keep to myself.

6. **What is your general attitude towards homosexuals of the same sex as you?**
(choose one)

- a. They don't bother me as long as they aren't interested in me sexually.
- b. They are just like anyone else and I don't treat them differently from anyone else.

- c. I avoid being around them whenever possible.
- d. Their way of life is wrong so I try to put them in their place.
- e. Their way of life is wrong but I try not to hold it against them as people.
- f. I am curious about them but I have no negative feelings towards them.
- g. I don't know any personally so I have no opinion.

7. **Rate your comfort around homosexuals of your sex on a scale from 1 to 10, where 10 is the most comfortable and 1 is the least.**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

8. **Which do you identify more with?**

- a. your gender
- b. your sexual orientation

Please answer a few more questions about yourself.

9. **Age:** 14 15 16 17 18 19

10. **About how many times have you attended religious services of any kind within the past month?**

Form B

Please answer the questions in order. You may have as much time as you like for each one, but do not return to previous questions or change your answers once you are finished.

1. **Age:** 14 15 16 17 18 19
(circle one)

2. **What ages are the people you prefer to spend time with?**

- a. Generally younger than me.
- b. Generally the same age as me.
- c. Generally older than me.
- d. Various ages.

3. **If you were in a crowded room full of strangers much older or younger than you, except for one homosexual of the same sex and age, which of the following would you do?**

- a. Start a conversation with the homosexual.
- b. Start a conversation with one of the older people.
- c. Start a conversation with one of the younger people.
- d. Keep to myself.

4. **What is your general attitude towards homosexuals of the same sex as you?**
(choose one)

- a. They don't bother me as long as they aren't interested in me sexually.
- b. They are just like anyone else and I don't treat them differently from anyone else.
- c. I avoid being around them whenever possible.
- d. Their way of life is wrong so I try to put them in their place.
- e. Their way of life is wrong but I try not to hold it against them as people.
- f. I am curious about them but I have no negative feelings towards them.
- g. I don't know any personally so I have no opinion.

5. **Rate your comfort around homosexuals of your sex on a scale from 1 to 10, where 10 is the most comfortable and 1 is the least.**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

6. **Which do you identify more with?**

- a. your age group
- b. your sexual orientation

Please answer a few more questions about yourself.

7. **Sex:** Male Female

8. **About how many times have you attended religious services of any kind within the past month?**
