Prejudiced Behavior Toward Lesbians and Gay Men
A Field Experiment on Everyday Helping

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Abstract. Investigations of prejudice toward lesbians and gay men mostly rely on self-report questionnaires and rarely make use of indirect, behavioral measures. This field experiment investigated helping in an everyday face-to-face situation as an indicator of discrimination. Members of the public (N = 240) were approached by a person asking for 10 pence for a parking meter. The requestor wore either a neutral or a pro-gay T-shirt. Additional independent variables were the requestor's and the target person's gender. Results showed that a person perceived as being a lesbian or a gay man received much less help, especially from men, than the same person perceived as being heterosexual. Findings are discussed in comparison with earlier studies involving either behavioral or self-report measures.

Keywords: sexual prejudice, discrimination, homosexuality, lesbians and gay men, field experiment, helping behavior

Introduction

Recent studies of sexual prejudice – defined as a negative attitude toward someone because of his or her sexual orientation (Herek, 2000) – indicate a general trend in Western countries toward less prejudiced attitudes toward lesbians and gay men (and bisexuals), albeit on a still very unfavorable overall level (Ratcliff, Lassiter, Markman, & Snyder, 2006; Steffens & Wagner, 2004; Tucker & Potocky-Tripodi, 2006; Walters & More, 2002; Yang, 1997). This also involves a shift from traditional, open forms of prejudice and discrimination toward modern, indirect modes of expression (e.g., Morison, Morison, & Franklin, 2009).

A caveat in interpreting these findings comes from the fact that the vast majority of relevant research has investigated self-reported attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. Self-report measures are typically vulnerable to self-presentation concerns and social desirability bias, particularly in research on prejudice. This leaves the possibility that sexual discrimination persists at the behavioral level, despite an apparent decline in self-reports, leading some researchers to highlight the need for behavioral studies of sexual discrimination (e.g., Franklin, 2000; Kite & Whitney, 1998). Such research might serve to validate – or contradict – the findings of questionnaire-based studies. This pertains not only to the overall level of prejudice, but also to the impact of third variables on prejudiced attitudes vs. discriminatory behavior. For example, self-report-based studies show that men hold more negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men than do women (Herek, 2000; Steffens & Wagner, 2004). Will the same effect also emerge in discriminatory behavior?

Behavioral Research into Sexual Discrimination

Only a handful of studies have investigated sexual prejudice at the behavioral level, typically involving (reduced) helping as an indicator. Shaw, Borough, and Fink (1994), using a staged “wrong-number” situation, found that less help was given to perceived gay callers, as compared to (male) heterosexual callers. A replication by Gore, Tobiesen, and Kayson (1997) extended these findings to perceived lesbians and heterosexual women. In a further study by Gray, Russell, and Blockley (1991), a simple request for change was made to both male and female shoppers by either a perceived gay/lesbian or heterosexual male/female, as implied by the requestor wearing either a blank T-shirt or a pro-gay slogan T-shirt. A gain, this study found evidence for sexual prejudice at the behavioral level.

While these results demonstrate some convergence between self-report/attitudinal and behavioral studies of sexual prejudice, a striking finding from the behavioral studies is the absence of any gender effects. Unlike the self-report/attitudinal literature, neither study found evidence for higher levels of prejudiced behavior by men or toward (gay) men. Gabriel and Banse (2006), comparing replications of the “wrong number” experiment across four countries (including two recent ones in Switzerland and Germany), summarized that “women showed only marginally less negative attitudes toward gay persons than men, when actual helping behavior was used as an attitude index” (p. 690). This might suggest a principal discrepancy be-
tween attitudes and behavior that would be in line with the social psychological literature in general (see, e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 1998; Kite & Whitley, 1998).

Rationale for the Current Study

As many of the behavioral studies described above date back to the 1990s, a new study investigating behavioral discrimination toward lesbians and gay men will be of interest. A part from the extent of sexual prejudice at the behavioral level, we were particularly interested – given the above-mentioned inconsistencies between self-report and behavioral studies – in any moderating effects of gender. As it happens (though we were not aware of this at the time), our study essentially replicated the methodology of Gray et al. (1991).

Method

Participants and Design

A total of 240 local residents (120 male and 120 female) were approached in a car park near a shopping center in Havant/UK (a 120,000-citizen town in a densely populated area of Southern England) and observed using a 2 x 2 x 2 independent groups design including, as independent variables, (1) the Perceived sexual orientation of the requestor: heterosexual or lesbian/gay, (2) the Gender of the requestor: male or female, and (3) the Gender of the participant: male or female. The dependent variable was whether the participant displayed helpful behavior, that is, helped the requestor out with money. Thirty participants were observed in each cell of the design. Because of the observational nature of the study, no demographic data could be obtained from the participants; however, according to informal inspection, they were typically between 20 and 50 years of age and from a working-class or middle-class background (the latter reflecting the population distribution in this specific area).

Procedure

The requestor approached the participants in the car park and asked if they had a 10-pence piece they could spare. The request, identical in each condition, was as follows: “Excuse me, can you help me please, I am short of change and need 10 pence to pay my parking fee, could you check to see if you have a 10-pence piece I could have?” The requestor smiled and spoke calmly and politely to the participant regardless of how they reacted. The requestor’s response to the participant’s behavior was always: “Thanks for your help.” A pilot study (N = 80) had indicated that merely asking for a 10-pence piece in exchange for two 5-pence pieces produced ceiling effects in terms of helping behavior. Hence, the procedure was changed to asking for 10 pence in exchange for nothing in the main study. This reduced the level of help in the main study to a suitable level in terms of the subsequent data analysis.

The data were collected across several weekdays in January 2007, from 10:00 until 18:00 hours. Only people who were on their own were approached, in order to eradicate any differences in “group size” between conditions, which may have affected helping behavior (e.g., via the bystander effect; Latané & Nida, 1981). In order to ensure that participant choice was random, the requestor was required to make a request every 5 minutes and always to the first, single person that walked toward the area where the parking meter was situated. Aiso, the condition being tested was alternated after two participants had been recruited for one condition. Thus conditions were rotated, about every 10 min, throughout the day.

In the heterosexual conditions, the requestor wore a black, blank T-shirt. In the lesbian/gay conditions, he/she wore a black, pro-gay T-shirt which displayed the words “Gay pride” on the front in large, red lettering to enable all participants to see the words. The same male or female requestor was employed in the heterosexual and lesbian/gay conditions. They also wore identical clothing in all conditions, except for the T-shirt, and were about equally attractive. In order to check for possible differences in requestor behavior between conditions (e.g., as a result of feeling uncomfortable with openly displaying a pro-gay T-shirt), an independent observer rated the friendliness of the first 80 requests. As the request was well rehearsed, it was rated as maximally polite and friendly (on a 5-point scale) under all conditions, and the observer also reported no additional unintended procedure differences between conditions.1

Participant responses were recorded as (a) helpful behavior if they handed change over to the requestor or if they looked for change but were unsuccessful. If the participant did not check for change, was rude to the requestor, or ignored the requestor, this was recorded as (b) non-helpful behavior. The responses (a) and (b) happened to be mutually exclusive, that is, there were no instances of being rude while looking for change, for instance. A check on the reliability of the coding, conducted on the first 80 interactions by comparing the codings of the first author (who unobtrusively observed the interactions) and the requestors, yielded 100% agreement, mainly owing to the unambiguous nature of the participants’ responses.

1 A better way to control possible self-perception effects of wearing the T-shirt might have been to wear a cap with or without a slogan, which can be put on without the confederates being aware of their experimental condition (see Hebl, Foster, Mannix, & Dovidio, 2002). However, as the encounter in the car park was brief, it is possible that a slogan on a cap would not have been noticed by all participants.
Results

For purposes of analysis, the frequencies of people helping or not were arranged in a four-dimensional frequency table including the three independent variables and the dependent variable (help: yes or no). Table 1 gives the raw frequencies of helping but omits the frequencies of non-helping for simplicity (the latter are redundant because the total number of participants in each cell is always 30). We then conducted a $\chi^2$ decomposition after Sutcliffe (1957; analysis type 2b). This is an analog of the ANOVA for frequency data and allows calculating anything from main effects to higher-order interactions.

When we looked at the main effects of the independent variables first (which are technically interactions between any independent variable and the dependent variable in the Sutcliffe analysis), we found a very strong effect of perceived sexual orientation on helping, $\chi^2 (1) = 16.67$, $p < .0001$ (further described below), as well as significant but much weaker effects of requestor gender, $\chi^2 (1) = 4.74$, $p = .03$, and participant gender, $\chi^2 (1) = 6.00$, $p = .01$. The latter two test results reflect less helping if the requestor was male and also less helping by male participants. In addition to the main effects, there was a marginally significant interactive effect of perceived sexual orientation and participant gender on helping, $\chi^2 (1) = 3.63$, $p = .06$, due to the least help being offered by male participants to perceived lesbian and gay requestors, as compared to all other combinations. Follow-up analyses using simple $\chi^2$ tests and the corresponding marginal frequencies showed a highly significant difference in helping for men, $\chi^2 (1) = 16.59$, $p < .001$, but only a marginally significant amount of discrimination for women, $\chi^2 (1) = 2.73$, $p = .099$. Finally, male participants offered the least help to male requestors, compared with the other combinations, resulting in a significant interaction between requestor gender and participant gender, $\chi^2 (1) = 4.74$, $p = .03$.

It is worth pointing out though that the latter effects and interactions together contributed, in terms of $\chi^2$, approximately as much to the total pattern of helping as the effect of perceived sexual orientation alone. To illustrate the scope of this effect, Figure 1 shows the proportions of participants giving or refusing help to a perceived heterosexual or lesbian/gay requestor. Taking the odds ratio as a measure of effect size, Figure 1 indicates that the chances of receiving help were more than three times lower for a perceived lesbian or gay requestor, compared to a heterosexual requestor (oddslesbian/gay = 1.14; oddshetero = 3.62; odds ratio = 0.32). This is clearly the most important aspect of our results.

Discussion

What do these results tell us about prejudiced behavior toward lesbians and gay men and about the correspondence between attitudinal and behavioral research findings? To begin with, a caveat in interpreting our data relates to our experimental manipulation of perceived sexual orientation via a T-shirt with a “gay pride” slogan.²

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Table 1. Number of participants helping as a function of participant gender, requestor gender and requestor’s perceived sexual orientation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requestor’s perceived sexual orientation</th>
<th>Heterosexual</th>
<th>Lesbian/gay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male requestor</td>
<td>Female requestor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male participants</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female participants</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. There were 30 participants approached for help in each cell of the $2 \times 2 \times 2$ design.

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² A lesser concern is with our operationalization of the heterosexual condition. While there is, of course, no logical relationship between wearing a blank T-shirt and being heterosexual, it seems uncontroversial to assume that, in the absence of any indications to the contrary, a stranger will usually be perceived as heterosexual by default.
Other researchers have argued that this confounds being lesbian or gay with being an activist, and therefore any revealed discrimination may reflect sexual prejudice, annoyance at activism, or both (e.g., Dasgupta & Rivera, 2006). While this is technically true, we note that the perception of activism is normally not independent of the cause the activist supports: It is hard to imagine that activists supporting, say, environmental issues, the church, cancer research, or, for that matter, lesbian and gay issues, would be uniformly perceived as just activists (see Russell & Gray, 1992, p. 1682, for a similar argument and supportive data). Moreover, it is by no means clear that wearing a “gay pride” T-shirt implies activism in the political sense of the word. We think the best way to conceive of our experimental setting and the resulting findings is as addressing prejudiced behavior toward openly lesbian or gay people. Given that the numbers of lesbians and gay men who openly reveal their homosexuality have increased over the last decades, this is a timely issue. The strongest argument against an artifact interpretation, however, lies in our results: If people were merely reacting to activism, one would have to additionally explain why men reacted more strongly than women. By contrast, a more parsimonious and reasonable interpretation is in terms of sexual prejudice, which is known from questionnaire studies to be stronger in men.

Given that our findings reflect prejudiced behavior, how do they compare to previous research? First, addressing changes in the level of prejudice over time, it is noteworthy that we actually needed to ask participants a larger favor (i.e., a donation of 10 pence) than in previous studies in order to obtain statistically meaningful levels of discrimination at all, which might be tentatively interpreted as signaling a reduction of sexual prejudice at the behavioral level. Second, both such a reduction and our finding that men showed more prejudiced behavior than women have their parallels in questionnaire-based research on prejudiced attitudes toward lesbians and gay men, which is methodologically reassuring, given that not all behavioral studies have in fact found a gender difference in sexual discrimination (see Gabriel & Banse, 2006). In summary, then, we interpret our results as showing that there is a pattern of sexually prejudiced behavior that matches the pattern of corresponding prejudiced attitudes, but it seems that such behavior needs facilitating conditions (such as personal costs associated with nonprejudiced behavior) to surface.

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References


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