



Interorientation interactions and impressions: Does the timing of disclosure of sexual orientation matter?

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 May 2010

Revised 13 October 2010

Available online 2 November 2010

Keywords:

Intergroup interactions
Sexual orientation
Stereotyping
Sexual prejudice
Impression formation

ABSTRACT

Unlike gender, race, or ethnicity, sexual orientation is not necessarily readily identifiable. The current work tests whether the timing of disclosure of sexual orientation influences reactions to intergroup interactions. Participants in two studies anticipated interacting with a partner for a study of first-time interactions. Prior to the interaction, they received information about the partner in the form of a prerecorded interview. During the interview the partner revealed his sexual orientation either early or late. Male participants whose partner disclosed as gay early in the interview responded with negative and avoidant responses to the upcoming interaction, formed more stereotypic impressions of the interaction partner, and reacted more aggressively toward the partner. Timing of disclosure by a straight partner did not influence responses. In addition, the negative responses toward the gay target who disclosed early were mediated by the stereotypicality of the impression the male participants formed of their interaction partner. These results suggest a primacy effect for group categorization such that greater levels of bias occur when group categorization occurs prior to the receipt of individuating information.

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Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people are some of the most openly and widely discriminated against people in contemporary American society. In fact, recent national polls show that about half of those surveyed believe that homosexuality is morally wrong (Gallup, 2008). Moreover, norms in society seem to suggest that sexual prejudice is not only widespread, but also relatively acceptable compared to other forms of prejudice (Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002). This negative sentiment can lead to institutional discrimination in the form of legislation that denies equal protection and civil liberties to LGB people as well as acts of aggression for which the victims' only offense is not concealing their sexuality (Herek, 2009). In spite of this, existing work on intergroup interactions has largely avoided the unique challenges faced by LGB people.

Unlike gender, race, or ethnicity, sexual orientation is not necessarily readily identifiable and is primarily inferred based on judgment of dynamic features, such as gestures and stereotypic behavior (Ambady, Hallahan, & Conner, 1999; Rule, Ambady, Adams, & Macrae, 2008). Stereotypes about gay men appear to be widely known (Madon, 1997); however, an individual's sexual orientation is not necessarily determined by the presence or absence of stereotypic traits or gestures, and at best, such cues merely provide a strategy for guessing rather than conclusive evidence. Therefore, LGB individuals often have the option of concealing their group identity until they feel comfortable disclosing. The concealable nature of sexual orientation

could lead to situations in which heterosexual people engage in positive interactions with LGB individuals without knowing their interaction partner's sexual orientation until well into the interaction or relationship. Given contact's importance for prejudice reduction (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), such interactions could prove beneficial in reducing antigay prejudice. However, these situations would involve LGB individuals concealing a personal, and likely important, aspect of who they are during at least the early part of interactions. Thus, the current work was designed to examine the implications of timing of disclosure of sexual orientation on heterosexual people's responses to interactions with LGB people.

Primacy and recency effects on impression formation

Research on impression formation suggests that the order in which an individual's traits are presented to a social perceiver can affect the overall evaluation of the individual (Asch, 1946). In particular, traits presented earlier in a list appear to carry more weight than traits presented toward the end of a list (Asch, 1946; Kelley, 1950). Thus, if one of the first things learned about a new acquaintance is his or her sexual orientation, this information could be particularly important in forming an impression about that person. There is also evidence that information presented earlier in impression formation shapes the processing of the subsequent information. That is, the connotation of a particular trait or behavior can vary given the context in which it is evaluated. With people, group membership can have an important influence on context. For instance, research has shown that if a lawyer is described using the

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trait aggressive, this group identity leads people to interpret aggression as meaning the lawyer is a forceful speaker. However, if the context is changed by describing the individual as a construction worker, the same trait of aggressive takes on a connotation of physical violence (Kunda, Sinclair, & Griffin, 1997). Similarly, when participants read two poems by an author and learned the author was gay after the first poem but before the second one, they detected more gay themes in his second poem than they recalled detecting in the first poem (Eibach, Libby, & Gilovich, 2003). This suggests that information about the poet's sexual orientation led to a change in how his poetry was subsequently perceived but did not retroactively influence recall of the earlier poem (also see Golebiowska, 2003).

Based on these findings, it stands to reason that early identification as LGB could strongly influence the reaction to an LGB individual and even bias the processing of subsequent information about the individual. Because homosexuality tends to be perceived as a negative quality in society, disclosure of LGB status could create a negative context and generally negatively bias the overall impression formed and the feelings about interacting with the LGB individual. In addition, early disclosure could lead to subsequent ambiguous behavior and information being interpreted in stereotype-consistent ways. To the extent that disclosure of sexual orientation by an LGB individual leads to the activation of stereotypes about gay men and lesbians, this would likely bias the processing of subsequent information about the person and may lead to an overly stereotypic impression.

Contrary to this line of reasoning, there is also some evidence that information that is seen as being particularly negative can create a recency effect, whereby negative information presented late can lead to the preceding information being disregarded (Fiske, 1980; Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). Though attitudes toward LGB people have become more positive over the last half century, national polls and the persistent majority support for antigay legislation both suggest that there still exists substantial and widespread negative sentiment toward LGB people (e.g., Gallup, 2008; Yang, 1997). Given that identification as homosexual could be considered by many to be a negative piece of information, it is possible that late disclosure could lead people to ignore preceding, potentially individuating information and form a biased and negative impression.

Research on primacy and recency effects suggests that both of these effects should be particularly influential on impression formation when individuals possess negative attitudes toward LGB people (e.g., Golebiowska, 2003; Sherman, Stroessner, Conrey, & Azam, 2005). Past research has also repeatedly shown that men's and women's attitudes toward gay men differ. Specifically, heterosexual men, more so than women, tend to possess more negative attitudes toward gay men (Herek, 2002; Kite & Whitley, 1996; LaMar & Kite, 1998). The gender difference in responses becomes particularly relevant when examining responses in the context of close contact. Research by LaMar and Kite (1998) showed that responses to contact with a same-sex LGB individual tend to be more negative than responses to contact with an other-sex LGB individual for both men and women. An anticipated interaction with a gay man may be particularly threatening to heterosexual men because it may heighten concerns about being misclassified as homosexual either by the interaction partner or observers (Bosson, Prewitt-Freilino, & Taylor, 2005; Buck & Plant, 2010). As a result, sexual orientation information from a same-sex individual might carry more weight than information about an other-sex individual.

Because of this gender difference in attitudes toward and responses to interacting with gay and lesbian individuals, it is possible that a primacy or recency effect on impression formation will be moderated by participant gender. In the current studies we focused upon responses to a gay man's disclosure of sexual orientation prior to an interaction with that man. We therefore anticipated that our male participants would have a stronger negative response to the gay man's disclosure of his sexual orientation than would our female participants. This could lead

the men to either negatively evaluate all subsequent information shared by the gay man after an early disclosure (i.e., a primacy effect) or to ignore all previously shared information in response to late disclosure (i.e., a recency effect). In either case, we would predict that the women would not respond with such a strong reaction to the disclosure and would tend to have similar responses across the early and late disclosure conditions.

Implications for interactions

In part because of its implications for impression formation, timing of disclosure of sexual orientation is likely to have important implications for the course and quality of intergroup interactions. Work on intergroup contact has repeatedly shown that, although positive contact is a reliable, effective way of reducing prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), intergroup interactions abound with hurdles that can make positive contact a challenge (e.g., Britt, Boniecki, Vescio, Biernat, & Brown, 1996; Butz & Plant, 2006; Mallett, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2008; Plant, Butz, & Tartakovsky, 2008; Plant & Devine, 2003; Shelton, 2003; Shelton & Richeson, 2005; Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2005). Research has increasingly highlighted the key roles of expectations about interactions and the desire to avoid these interactions for intentions and behavior in intergroup interactions. For instance, people who have negative expectations about interracial interactions tend to respond with hostility and the motivation to avoid interracial contact, which leaves them less likely to engage in these interactions (Plant & Devine, 2003). Similarly, when White participants come to dyadic interracial interactions with expectations that the interaction will go poorly, they tend to have shorter interactions, and the interactions tend to be rated as less pleasant by both people involved (Plant & Butz, 2006). Moreover, when people blame their interaction partner for the anticipated difficulty of an intergroup interaction, it can result in anger and hostile behavior directed toward the interaction partner (Butz & Plant, 2006).

Importantly, however, this previous research focuses primarily on groups that are readily identifiable, such as racial or ethnic groups. Because timing of disclosure might influence the weight that is given to sexual orientation in the creation of an initial impression, it is possible that some of the challenges to positive intergroup contact will be mitigated depending on whether individuals disclose their sexual orientation and the timing of this disclosure. For example, if people form an impression of an LGB person prior to disclosure of sexual orientation, it may result in less negative expectations for subsequent interactions and less desire to avoid contact altogether. Additionally, to the degree that an unbiased impression leads to more positive contact and openness to contact, strategic disclosure could lead to a reduction in negative attitudes toward LGB individuals.

Current work

The current work sought to distinguish between two contradicting possibilities. Specifically, across two studies, we examined whether early or late disclosure of sexual orientation by a gay man would lead to a more negative response to interacting with him. Though the preponderance of evidence from previous research leads us to expect a primacy effect, whereby early disclosure of sexual orientation by a gay target would lead to a more negative response to interacting with the target person (compared to late disclosure), the design of our studies also allowed for the testing of the alternative hypothesis; late disclosure could lead participants to disregard preceding information about the person and form a more negative impression of the late disclosing gay target.

Across our studies, we were interested in whether the timing of disclosure of an interaction partner's sexual orientation influenced

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