



The effect of self-affirmation on sexual prejudice

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 February 2009

Revised 10 November 2009

Available online 23 November 2009

Keywords:

Self-affirmation
Sexual prejudice
Gay and lesbian
Values

ABSTRACT

In three experiments, we explored the impact of a self-affirmation treatment on sexual prejudice (i.e., negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians). Studies 1 and 2 found that participants who were affirmed by valuing relationships with family and friends were significantly more prejudiced than participants who were affirmed by valuing other self-relevant characteristics. Relative to a non-affirmed control, the family/friends affirmation did not actually increase prejudice; however, other affirmations decreased bias. Study 3 replicated the finding that prejudice was higher among participants who affirmed to family/friends compared to those who affirmed to other values, and showed a mediator of the effect: the endorsement of traditional family values. That is, affirming to family/friends was associated with support for family values, which was positively associated with prejudice. These findings add to a growing body of evidence demonstrating the potential for self-affirmation to reduce bias, but establish that the type of value affirmed is an important consideration. Specifically, familial-based affirmations may undermine reduction of sexual prejudice because they remind individuals of values that many people see as being in conflict with expressing tolerant attitudes toward gays and lesbians.

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Introduction

Sexual prejudice is a broad term that encompasses all forms of bias based upon sexual orientation (Herek, 2000). Although this definition includes bias directed toward heterosexuals, such prejudice is typically directed toward persons with homosexual or bisexual orientations. Research indicates that sexual prejudice is widespread in the United States, with nearly half of the adult population regarding homosexual behavior as wrong and persons with non-heterosexual orientations negatively (Herek, 2002; Pew Research Center, 2003). As a consequence, gay and lesbian individuals often find themselves to be the targets of harassment and discrimination. For instance, one in three gay men and one in eight lesbians report having experienced personal violence or property crimes as a result of their sexual orientation (Herek, 2008).

Sexual prejudice is also evident in the current controversy surrounding legalized same-sex relationships. Attempts to extend equal rights to same-sex couples are often met with fierce resistance by politicians and the public alike (Schmitt, Lehmiller, & Walsh, 2007). Perhaps nowhere was this more evident in recent history than in the 2008 US election where voters in the state of

California passed Proposition 8, which effectively repealed the legal marriage status of same-sex couples that had previously been granted by the state's Supreme Court (Morain & Garrison, 2008). The following year, voters in the state of Maine repealed a same-sex marriage law enacted by the state legislature. Given the prevalence of sexual prejudice and the harmful consequences often experienced by its targets, it is important for researchers to consider potential means of reducing this form of bias.

The goal of the present research was to experimentally test a novel means of attenuating sexual prejudice. In a series of studies, we consider whether administering a self-affirmation treatment to heterosexual participants would reduce bias against gays and lesbians. This technique has been shown in previous research to reduce defensive biases against other marginalized groups (Adams, Tormala, & O'Brien, 2006; Unzueta & Lowery, 2008).

Sexual prejudice

The majority of studies that have addressed sexual prejudice have been correlational in nature (Herek, 2000). Among the factors positively associated with sexual prejudice are right-wing authoritarianism (Haddock & Zanna, 1998), political conservatism (Yang, 1998), and frequency of attending church services (Herek & Capitano, 1996). Greater sexual prejudice has also been documented among those who are older, less educated, and living in rural areas (Herek, 1994). Factors associated with lower levels of sexual

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prejudice include openness to experience (Cullen, Wright, & Alessandri, 2002), being female (Herek, 1994), and having had close, interpersonal contact with gay or lesbian individuals (Herek & Capitanio, 1996).

In one of the few experimental attempts to reduce sexual prejudice, Grack and Richman (1996) examined the effect of cooperative contact on sexual prejudice. In this study, participants worked collaboratively with confederates whose sexual orientation had been experimentally manipulated at the outset of the study to be either heterosexual or homosexual. Participants working alongside ostensibly homosexual confederates experienced a substantial reduction in sexual prejudice from their pre-study level compared to participants working alongside heterosexual confederates.

Turner, Crisp, and Lambert (2007) tested whether simply imagining intergroup contact might reduce sexual prejudice. The authors found that heterosexual male participants who imagined having a conversation with a homosexual man later exhibited less anti-gay prejudice and intergroup anxiety compared to a control group. It is important to note, however, that although imagined contact might have some benefit, it is unlikely to yield prejudice reductions equivalent to actual, interpersonal contact. Nonetheless, the findings of these experiments are generally consistent with the broader literature on intergroup contact, which indicates that intergroup harmony may result from positive interactions among majority and minority group members (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kawakami, 2003; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Aside from manipulations of contact (real or imagined) with gays and lesbians, little other research has attempted to experimentally reduce sexual prejudice. One method of bias reduction that has recently begun to be explored in the case of sexual prejudice is self-affirmation.

Self-affirmation and sexual prejudice

Self-affirmation theory suggests that an important psychological goal is to experience the self as good, competent, and moral (Steele, 1988). When one's conception of the self in these regards is threatened, the natural response is to act in a way that will restore one's feelings of self-worth. In other words, individuals are able to tolerate threats to the self as long as they can maintain global feelings of self-adequacy. One way to do so is by affirming an alternate source of self-adequacy, often one that is in a domain unrelated to the source of self-threat. To be most effective at reducing threat, the self-aspect affirmed must be one that is highly valued and capable of restoring the lost integrity. These self-affirmations fulfill our self-protective needs and can even inoculate us against future threats to the self.

Studies have found that a variety of benefits accompany self-affirmation, including greater open-mindedness (e.g., Correll, Spencer, & Zanna, 2004), fewer defensive biases (e.g., Adams et al., 2006), and reduced feelings of stress (e.g., Creswell et al., 2005). Most relevant to the present research is the finding that self-affirmation is also linked to reductions in some forms of prejudice. Specifically, self-affirmations reduce the need to be prejudiced or to discriminate against others by bolstering one's sense of self-worth (for a review, see Sherman & Cohen (2006)). For instance, in a study by Fein and Spencer (1997), participants were randomly assigned to self-affirm (by writing about a value important to the self) or not (by writing about a relatively unimportant value) prior to evaluating a job candidate from a negatively stereotyped group. Relative to participants who did not have the opportunity to self-affirm, participants who did self-affirm exhibited significantly less prejudice toward and discrimination against the job candidate. A subsequent study revealed that, for non-affirmed participants, derogating an outgroup member served to buffer

their self-esteem (i.e., expressing prejudice was a means of assisting a threatened self-image). Because affirmed participants already received bolstering of their self-worth via the affirmation procedure, they were less likely to engage in outgroup derogation.

Likewise, Adams and colleagues (2006) examined the effect of self-affirmation on perceptions of prejudice against racial minorities. They found that self-affirmed European Americans were significantly more likely to perceive the existence of racism in the United States than those who had not self-affirmed. In other words, majority group members were more willing to endorse the self- and group-threatening idea that racism is prevalent in America when they had been previously able to buffer their sense of self-adequacy. In a similar set of studies, Unzueta and Lowery (2008) found that self-affirmed European Americans were more likely to endorse a conception of racism in institutional terms and to perceive more White privilege compared to non-affirmed participants. Such results provide further evidence that when given an opportunity to protect one's self-image through an affirmation procedure, majority group members become more willing to accept ideas that might be threatening to the self or to one's group.

Extending this line of reasoning, one might expect that self-affirmation would allow heterosexual individuals to become more accepting of homosexuality and same-sex relationships, concepts that heterosexuals often find to be threatening to their personal value structure and group status (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2003; Schmitt et al., 2007). One set of studies has explored the link between self-affirmation and sexual prejudice (Rivera, 2007). In this research, heterosexual men either affirmed their masculinity or not prior to reporting their attitudes toward gay men. Results indicated that participants who had affirmed their masculinity were actually *more* prejudiced against gay men than participants who did not receive such an affirmation. The manipulation did not have an effect on attitudes toward other groups, such as lesbians, heterosexual women, and African Americans. This finding runs counter to most studies measuring the effect of self-affirmation on prejudice. As noted above, one might expect self-affirmation to reduce such bias. In this case, however, heterosexual men were affirming their sense of masculinity, which is likely to be inconsistent with holding a positive attitude toward gay men, given the nature of current societal stereotypes. That is, masculinity is seen as an important ingroup trait for heterosexual men, and a trait in which gay men (an outgroup) are typically seen as deficient (Kite & Deaux, 1987). Following such an affirmation, derogation of gay men might actually help heterosexual men to maintain their masculine self-image.

Put another way, many heterosexual men's feelings about masculinity (the value affirmed in this case) are intertwined with a perception of homosexuality as threatening (e.g., calling a heterosexual man "gay" is often perceived as a threat to his sense of masculinity). Recall that Steele (1988) initially argued that self-affirmations are often most effective when the affirmed value is unrelated to the domain of threat. Consistent with this theorizing, some research has demonstrated that same-domain affirmations (i.e., those in which the affirmation and threat sources are related) are less effective at achieving their goals compared to other-domain affirmations (i.e., those in which the affirmation and threat sources are unrelated). For example, Blanton, Cooper, Skurnik, and Aronson (1997) found that a same-domain affirmation had the effect of increasing rather than decreasing cognitive dissonance.

As argued by Sherman and Cohen (2006), same-domain affirmations can increase an individual's degree of certainty and sense of impunity, thereby resulting in closed-mindedness and, potentially, greater defensiveness. Thus, a same-domain affirmation, such as the one employed by Rivera (2007), might have the effect of licensing one to be prejudiced (in this case, affirming masculinity might embolden a heterosexual man to denigrate others who

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