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Sexual prejudice, cross-group friendship and hegemonic beliefs in university students

Claudia Castiglione^{a*}, Alberto Rampullo^b, and Orazio Licciardello^b

^aUniversity of Messina, Palacultura Bartolo Cattafi, Via S. Andrea, 239, Barcellona P.G. Messina 98051, Italy

^bUniversity of Catania, Department of Educational Sciences, Via Biblioteca n.4 - Palazzo Ingrassia, Catania 95124, Italy.

Abstract

Sexual prejudice refers to all biased attitudes related to sexual orientation. It is typically directed towards homosexual and bisexual people. Sexual prejudice towards homosexual people is affected by gender, by quantity and quality of contact experienced with outgroup members and by adherence to hegemonic beliefs. The sample consisted of 106 female university students, with an average age of 23.05 years (SD 3.33). Contact with gay men had a positive impact on sexual prejudice towards lesbians and on adherence to hegemonic beliefs. Adherence to hegemonic beliefs was positively related to sexual prejudice towards both lesbians and gay men.

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1. Introduction

Sexual prejudice (Herek, 2000) refers to all biased attitudes related to sexual orientation. It is typically directed towards homosexual and bisexual people (Lehmiller, Law, & Tormala, 2010).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +39-3333908110.

E-mail address: ccastiglione@unime.it.

Several factors have an impact on attitudes towards gay men and lesbians: authoritarianism, cross-group friendship, gender, social dominance, value systems and religion (Whitley, 1999; Goodman, & Moradi, 2008; Rowatt, LaBouff, Johnson, Froese, & Tsang, 2009; Licciardello, Castiglione, & Rampullo, 2011).

One important factor, which has a critical impact on prejudice levels, was found by Altemeyer (1998). The author identified the characteristics of the authoritarian personality. This is characterised by high levels of submissiveness to authority, inflexible adherence to conventional norms, and hostility towards those who violate these norms. Those who display an authoritarian personality develop a vision of themselves as morally superior to outgroup members. They perceive society as a dangerous place, in which the outgroup threatens their superiority and purity. Adherence to hegemonic thinking, legitimates the manifestation of hostile attitudes and discriminatory behaviours towards the outgroup. Adherence to hegemonic beliefs displayed a positive correlation with negative attitude towards homosexuals (Goodman, & Moradi, 2008; Kilianski, 2003; Stefurak, Taylor, & Mehta, 2010; Wilkinson, 2004; Haddock, Zanna, & Esses, 1993; Whitley, 1999; Rowatt, LaBouff, Johnson, Froese, & Tsang, 2009).

Contact with outgroup members instead has a positive impact on attitudes towards members of that group. This positive relationship seems especially effective under specific conditions of cooperation, common goals, equal status and institutional support (Allport, 1954). Contact hypothesis efficacy is confirmed by different studies, particularly by a recent meta-analysis (Pettigrew, & Tropp, 2006). This study also underline the positive effect of cross-group friendship (Pettigrew, 1998). This suggests that prejudice reduction might be achieved by promoting direct friendship between members of different groups. Relations between intergroup contact (Allport, 1954) and prejudice seem to be governed by a circular causality relationship (Binder, et al., 2009).

Intergroup contact also has a positive impact on prejudice levels towards homosexuals (Kite, & Whitley, 1996; Herek, 2000; Anderssen, 2002; Barron, Struckman-Johnson, Quevillon, & Banka, 2008; Goodman, & Moradi, 2008; Binder et al., 2009, Smith, Axelton, & Saucier, 2009, Rampullo, Castiglione, Licciardello, & Scolla, 2013), particularly if intergroup contact is intimate and durable (Herek, & Capitanio, 1996) and heterosexuals have friendship bonds with lesbians and gay men (Heinze, & Horn, 2009). Furthermore, contact is effective in promoting positive attitudes towards homosexuals (Mohipp, & Morry, 2004).

Gender is another important factor, which has a strong impact on sexual prejudice levels and on adherence to hegemonic thinking. Various studies (Barron, Struckman-Johnson, Quevillon & Banka, 2008; Goodman & Moradi, 2008; Heaven & Oxman, 1999; Herek & Capitanio, 1999; La Mar & Kite, 1998) have shown that, compared to women, men have higher sexual prejudice levels, especially towards gay men, and they display higher authoritarianism levels too (Lippa, & Arad, 1999). These studies points out the importance of taking into account the sex of respondents, and of analysing separately attitudes towards gay men and lesbians.

It is very important to understand and prevent factors that have a negative impact on attitude and behaviour against lesbians and gay men to promote an individual and collective well-being (American Psychological Association, 1999), social justice (Goodman, et al., 2004) and interpersonal relations (Franklin, 2000).

2. Hypothesis

This study explored attitudes towards homosexuals in relation to hegemonic beliefs and cross-group friendship.

We hypothesised that: 1) contact with homosexuals has positive effects against sexual prejudice towards homosexuals and adherence to hegemonic beliefs; and 2) students with low adherence to hegemonic beliefs display lower prejudice levels towards homosexuals.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The original sample was composed of 121 female university students in Sicily; we removed from data analysis 15 students who defined their sexual orientation as homosexual. So data concerns 106 female students, who defined their sexual orientation as exclusively heterosexual, with an average age of 23.05 years (SD 3.33) (range 20-37). The religious affiliations provided by each participant were: Catholic (84%), Atheist (8.5%), and Other (7.5%).

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