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Sexual orientation differences in attitudes about sexuality, race, and gender



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ABSTRACT

Researchers have extensively documented sociodemographic predictors of race and gender attitudes, and the mechanisms through which such attitudes are formed and change. Despite its growing recognition as an important status characteristic, sexual orientation has received little attention as a predictor of Americans' race and gender attitudes. Using nationally representative data from the American National Election Survey 2012 Time Series Study, I compare heterosexuals' and lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people's attitudes about sexuality, race, and gender. For most attitudes, LGB people hold significantly more liberal attitudes about sexuality, race, and gender than do heterosexuals, even upon controlling for other powerful sociodemographic determinants of social attitudes. However, a substantial proportion of these sexual orientation gaps in attitudes – especially about race and gender – are explained by LGB people's relatively liberal political ideology. The findings provide evidence for the necessity of incorporating sexual orientation in future assessments of Americans' social and political attitudes.

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“The dirty little secret about the homosexual population is that white gay people are just as racist as white straight people.”

(Boykin 1996: 234)

“Gay culture, [gay activists say], is better because it is less sexist, less classist, and less racist than heterosexual culture.”

(Savin-Williams 2005: 17)

1. Introduction

Many scholars and activists have speculated about the race and gender attitudes of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people relative to the views of heterosexuals. Anecdotal accounts, such as the quotes above, have presented two contradictory predictions about the views of LGB people. Some have suggested that LGB people share the views of their heterosexual counterparts, specifically in terms of race and gender attitudes (Smith, 1999; Taywaditep, 2001). Others have argued that LGB culture, organizations, and movements are less likely to harbor prejudice toward other oppressed groups due to their own marginalized status in society (Savin-Williams, 2005). However, little research has empirically examined the effect of sexual

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orientation on Americans' race and gender attitudes. Indeed, although sexual orientation is recognized as an important status characteristic (Johnson, 1995; Webster and Hysom, 1998), one that likely influences individuals' attitudes and values (Mucciaroni, 2011), it is rarely considered in attitudinal research. Scholars have long investigated attitudes toward LGB people, while consistently overlooking the attitudes of LGB people.

The present study uses data from the American National Election Survey (ANES) 2012 Time Series Study, a nationally representative sample of Americans ages 18 and older, to investigate sexual orientation differences in attitudes regarding sexuality, race, and gender. Specifically, this paper investigates two research questions. First, given LGB people's oppressed status in society, do they hold more liberal attitudes toward Black Americans and women, as well as themselves, than their heterosexual counterparts? Second, to what extent are potential sexual orientation gaps in these attitudes explained by sexual orientation differences in education, religion, and/or political ideology?

2. Sexual orientation and attitudes: competing expectations

In addition to documenting trends in sexuality, race, and gender attitudes over time, social scientists have extensively investigated sociodemographic differences in, as well as other social determinants of, such attitudes (e.g., Brooks and Bolzendahl, 2004; Loftus, 2001). Prior research suggests that socioeconomic status (especially education), age, religion, region of the country, and urbanicity are consistent predictors of social attitudes (Bolzendahl and Myers, 2004; Carter and Carter, 2014; Cunningham et al., 2005; Hunt, 2007). Studies on racial differences in gender and sexuality attitudes, and gender differences in race attitudes have yielded mixed findings (Hughes and Tuch, 2003; Kane, 2000; Kane and Whipkey, 2009; Loftus, 2001). While such research is extensive, scholars have rarely considered the effect of sexual orientation on Americans' social attitudes. In addition, though many of these sociodemographic characteristics also predict attitudes toward lesbian women and gay men (Andersen and Fetner, 2008; Loftus, 2001; Powell et al., 2010), research on sexuality attitudes almost exclusively focuses on LGB people as the targets of such attitudes held among heterosexuals. LGB people's own sexuality attitudes, as well as their race and gender attitudes have been understudied.

Generally, most studies on LGB people's social attitudes lack a comparable heterosexual sample (e.g., Harr and Kane, 2008; Hirsch and Rollins, 2007; Rollins and Hirsch, 2003) and/or are limited to attitudes toward themselves or specific LGB subgroups (e.g., Cragun and Sumerau, 2015; Doan et al., 2014; Stone, 2009). Relying on small, non-representative samples, some early studies on sexual orientation differences in race and gender attitudes yield mixed findings. While some studies have found no differences between sexual minorities and heterosexuals in social attitudes in general (Bailey, 1999; Bell and Weinberg, 1978; Saghir and Robins, 1973), others suggest LGB people may be more tolerant toward Black Americans, women, and other stigmatized groups (Beran et al., 1992; Corbett et al., 1977; Lalonde et al., 2000; McDonald and Moore, 1978). More recently, political scientists have used election data and large surveys to examine differences in LGB and heterosexuals' political attitudes and behaviors (Egan, 2012; Hertzog, 1996; Lewis et al., 2011). This research suggests that LGB people are politically distinct from their heterosexual counterparts, finding, in particular, that they are overwhelmingly liberal (Egan, 2012; Hertzog, 1996; Schaffner and Senic, 2006). Such research has not yet extended beyond a limited range of political attitudes. No study to date has used nationally representative data to examine sexual orientation differences in social attitudes – in the present case, attitudes toward Black Americans and women.

The present study offers an exploratory analysis of sexual orientation differences in attitudes about sexuality, race, and gender using nationally representative data. I draw from two sources to propose possible patterns for the association between sexual orientation and individuals' views on sexuality, race, and gender: first, from prior research on sociodemographic (especially racial and gender) differences in social attitudes; and, second, from prior scholarship on the unique social, political, and demographic profile of LGB Americans. Based on this prior research, there exist three possibilities for the effect of sexual orientation and attitudes: (1) no sexual orientation differences in sexuality, race, and gender attitudes, (2) LGB people's significantly more liberal sexuality, but not race or gender, attitudes, and, (3) LGB people's significantly more liberal attitudes toward Black Americans and women, as well as themselves.

2.1. No significant sexual orientation differences in attitudes

The first possible association between sexual orientation and attitudes regarding sexuality, race, and gender is that there is little to no difference between heterosexuals' and sexual minorities' views. One's sexual orientation may simply have no influence on one's attitudes toward LGB people, Black Americans, and women, particularly upon controlling for the effects of other powerful sociodemographic predictors of such attitudes. Prior research on attitudes (especially about gender) has identified primary socialization through one's family as a key mechanism through which one develops particular attitudes (Liao and Cai 1995; Maio et al., 2003). Unlike racial socialization within families of color (Brown and Lesane-Brown, 2006), for example, there is little evidence that socialization processes that center on non-heterosexuality exist (Epstein, 1992; Stacey and Biblarz, 2001). Rather, LGB and heterosexual people alike are overwhelmingly reared in predominantly heterosexual families (Gonsiorek, 1995; Sherrill, 1996). Parenting practices tend to be *heteronormative* – that is, these practices treat heterosexuality as normal, natural, and taken-for-granted, while homosexuality and bisexuality are seen as deviant or are otherwise invisible (Kane, 2006; Martin, 2009). Other agents of socialization, including schools and the media, further contribute to the heteronormative socialization of children (Martin and Kazyak, 2009; Myers and Raymond, 2010).

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