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Is subjective ambivalence toward gays a modern form of bias?



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ABSTRACT

Theoretically, modern racism and sexism are characterized by ambivalence. We directly examined the consequence of being higher in *subjective ambivalence* toward gays (i.e. attitudes that feel “torn”) with regard to gay rights support. In Study 1, greater subjective ambivalence was associated with more negative attitudes (and *not* more positive attitudes), more ideological opposition to gays, more negative intergroup emotions, and less gay rights support. In Study 2, less opposition to gay bullying was predicted by: (a) greater subjective ambivalence (through lower intergroup empathy); and (b) experimentally-salient bullying justification norms (through lower collective guilt). These effects held controlling for Attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men (i.e., traditional negative attitudes). Although not overtly negative, individual differences in subjective ambivalence tap a unique, subtle, and less objectionable form of bias, consistent with aversive racism and justification–suppression frameworks of explaining modern biases.

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1. Introduction

Attitudes toward gays are becoming increasingly tolerant, with 59% of Americans finding gay relations morally acceptable (Gallup, 2013). However, being gay is still very stigmatized (Herek, 2007), with homosexuality often framed as a deficit (Herek, 2010). In addition, whereas self-reported attitudes toward gays are generally favorable, indirect measures indicate more negativity (e.g. Steffens, 2005). Overall, Western societies appear conflicted toward gays. We directly examine the relation between reporting internal conflict (i.e. subjective ambivalence) toward gays and explicit expressions of anti-gay bias.

Like racism and sexism, anti-gay prejudice has become socially and politically controversial. Same-sex marriage is hotly debated in the US at the state level (Human Rights Campaign, 2013). Shifting norms toward anti-gay prejudice, racism, and sexism make these topics socially controversial, prompting interest among researchers (Crandall & Warner, 2005). Importantly, when topics are controversial, self-presentation goals impact subjective ambivalence: Instructing participants to portray themselves positively (vs. negatively) increases subjective ambivalence toward controversial topics (e.g. Genetically Modified Organisms) (Pillaud, Cavazza, & Butera, 2013). Holding “mixed”, “conflicted” attitudes (i.e., subjectively ambivalence) can outwardly convey nuanced understanding

of a controversial topic (Pillaud et al., 2013). Because prejudicial expressions are controversial, modern prejudice is often subtle and takes more “justifiable” forms (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). For instance, although gay (vs. straight) job applicants do not (significantly) face direct discrimination (i.e. denying the right to apply for a job), they experience significantly greater subtle discrimination (e.g. employer using fewer spoken words, avoiding eye contact) (Hebl, Bigazzi Foster, Mannix, & Dovidio, 2002).

We propose that subjective ambivalence toward gays represents a modern, subtle, and less objectionable form of anti-gay bias. Although psychological conflict toward gays has not been directly examined, recent research supports this potential. Garner (2013) demonstrated that conservatives, Republicans, and evangelical Christians who know a gay person hold particularly variable attitudes toward gay rights, an effect interpreted as reflecting conflict between ideological opposition to gay rights and prejudice-reducing benefits of contact. Indeed, ambivalence toward *other* social targets (women, Blacks) is considered common (e.g. Glick & Fiske, 1996; Katz & Hass, 1988). For instance, ambivalent sexism is characterized by conflict between heterosexual intimacy and desire for dominance over women (Lee, Fiske, & Glick, 2010), where affection is expressed toward gender-conforming women (e.g. housewives) but hostility toward women violating gender roles (e.g. feminists), restricting women while maintaining a veneer of benevolence (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002).

Conflict between anti-Black feelings and egalitarianism (i.e., opposing overt racism) is also theoretically characterized by ambivalence, perpetuating biases (Hodson, Dovidio, & Gaertner,

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2004). As such, aversive racists primarily express subtle bias (e.g. crossing the street to avoid outgroups; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). Social “cover” or justifications facilitate expressions of aversive racism, such as rejecting job applications from Black (but not White) applicants with mixed-quality qualifications (e.g., Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). Moreover, by emphasizing weak aspects of Black applications, White reviewers can attribute outgroup rejection to under-qualification yet appear egalitarian (Hodson, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2002).

Within the Justification–Suppression Model of prejudice (JSM; Crandall & Eshleman, 2003), pressures to suppress prejudice mean that biases are expressed when justifications “release” underlying prejudice and suppression is low. Psychological ambivalence theoretically results from tension between these factors (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). Hence, person-based, *internal mechanisms* can justify socially undesirable anti-outgroup attitudes, and *context-based* factors increase or decrease prejudice expression (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003).

1.1. The present research

Ambivalence is critical to understanding modern racism (e.g. Hodson et al., 2004) and sexism (e.g. Glick & Fiske, 1996), yet it is unknown whether those reporting greater (vs. lower) ambivalence toward gays demonstrate more anti-gay bias. If subjective ambivalence actually reflects individual differences in subtle anti-gay bias, ambivalence would positively associate with anti-gay attitudes, prejudice-relevant individual differences (e.g. authoritarianism), negative intergroup emotions, and lower support for gay rights. In Study 1, we examine the relation between subjective ambivalence toward gays, anti-gay bias, and correlates of anti-gay prejudice. In Study 2, we examine potential mediation processes of such relations, and consider contextual norm-based factors that might exacerbate bias.

2. Study 1

We first examine relations between subjective ambivalence and factors related to anti-gay bias. Subjective ambivalence could potentially reflect positivity and negativity. However, as noted by Hodson et al. (2004, pp. 119–120):

many individuals in contemporary society experience psychological ambivalence – a conflict between the almost unavoidable consequences of normal cognitive processing that facilitates prejudicial thinking on the one hand, and nonprejudiced values and self-images on the other. Because of this ambivalence, discrimination currently tends to be expressed in very subtle, and often rationalizable, ways.

From this framework of subjective ambivalence as resulting from underlying prejudicial thinking, we predicted that greater subjective ambivalence would be associated predominantly with anti-gay attitudes, lower gay rights support, ideological, and disgust-sensitivity variables related to anti-gay bias.

2.1. Method

Heterosexual Canadian undergraduates ($n = 185$, Mage = 20.12, $SD = 3.75$, 81% Caucasian, 67.0% female) completed the following questionnaires in private booths:

Polymorphous prejudice against gays and lesbians (7-factor measure, 5-point scales; see Massey, 2009). *Traditional Heterosexism* (19-items, $\alpha = .95$) indicates overt condemnation of homosexuality (e.g. “Male homosexuality is a perversion.”). This measure largely consists of items from *Attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men*

(Herek, 1988), a widely-used anti-gay prejudice measure. *Denial of Continued Discrimination* (9-items, $\alpha = .80$) indicates belief that gays are no longer discriminated against (e.g. “On average, people in our society treat gay people and straight people equally.”). *Aversion Toward Gay Men* (8-items, $\alpha = .90$) indicates avoidance and disgust toward gay men (e.g. “I think male homosexuals are disgusting.”). *Aversion Toward Lesbians* (8-items, $\alpha = .65$) reflects avoidance and disgust toward lesbians (e.g. “I think female homosexuals are disgusting.”). *Value Gay Progress* (8-items, $\alpha = .93$) reflects more support for gay rights (e.g. “I see the lesbian and gay movement as a positive thing.”). *Resist Heteronormativity* (8-items, $\alpha = .86$) indicates rejection of social restrictions on sexuality and gender, and embrace of sexual diversity (e.g. “I feel restricted by the sexual rules and norms of society”). Finally, *Positive Beliefs* (10-items, $\alpha = .85$) indicates endorsement of favorable beliefs about gays (e.g. “Being gay can make a man more compassionate”).

Subjective ambivalence (4-item, 1–5 scale; $\alpha = .90$): Participants were asked: “How conflicted do you feel in your attitudes toward gay men?”, “How conflicted do you feel in your attitudes toward lesbians?”, “To what degree do you have mixed feelings toward gay men?”, and “To what extent do you have mixed feelings toward lesbians?” (based on Visser & Mirabile, 2004), with higher averaged scores reflecting greater subjective ambivalence ($M = 1.99$, $SD = 1.02$). Subjective measures of ambivalence ideally capture individual differences in felt ambivalence (Priester & Petty, 2001).

Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA; 12-item, 7-point measure; $\alpha = .86$): Greater RWA reflects stronger conventionality, submission to authority, and traditional right-wing ideology (Altemeyer, 1998), and strongly predicts anti-gay prejudice (Whitley, 1999).

Social dominance orientation (SDO; 16-item, 7-point measure, $\alpha = .88$). This scale taps preference for inequality between groups (Pratto, Sidanus, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994), predicting prejudices, including anti-gay prejudice (Whitley, 1999).

Religious fundamentalism (12-item, 9-point measure, $\alpha = .94$). This scale taps rigid, traditional, and absolutist views of religion (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004), predicting multiple prejudices, especially anti-gay prejudice (e.g. Hunsberger, Owusu, & Duck, 1999).

Intergroup Disgust Sensitivity (8-item, 7-point scale, $\alpha = .76$). This measure taps affect-laden disgust/repulsion toward outgroup interactions (Hodson et al., 2013), and predicts anti-gay attitudes.

Disgust sensitivity (25-item Disgust Scale-Revised, Olatunji, 2008; 4-point scales, $\alpha = .87$). A sample item reads “I might be willing to try eating monkey meat, under some circumstances”. Greater disgust sensitivity predicts anti-gay attitudes (Olatunji, 2008).

Support for gay and lesbian civil rights (20-items, 7-point scales, $\alpha = .88$). This measure taps positions toward hate crime legislation, housing and job discrimination laws, and gay marriage (Brown & Henriquez, 2011).

2.2. Results and discussion

Associations between subjective ambivalence, the seven Polymorphous Prejudice subscales, and prejudice-relevant constructs (e.g., RWA) are presented in Table 1. Those higher in subjective ambivalence demonstrated stronger traditional heterosexism, aversion toward gay men, aversion toward lesbians, as well as lower valuing gay progress (all $ps < .01$). Subjective ambivalence was marginally associated with more denial of continued discrimination ($r = .13$, $p = .074$), but did not correlate with positive beliefs or resist heteronormativity (i.e., positive scales). Further, higher subjective ambivalence was associated with higher anti-gay ideologies, disgust sensitivities ($rs > .21$, $ps < .01$), and lower gay rights support ($r = -.42$, $p < .001$). Thus, subjective ambivalence is consistently associated with stronger anti-gay attitudes and prejudice

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