



What's love got to do with it? Sexual prejudice predicts unitization of men in same-sex romantic relationships[☆]



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We examine how prejudice affects impression formation of romantically involved men.
- Prejudiced perceivers rate same- vs. opposite-sex couples as lower in cohesiveness.
- Prejudice predicts use of couple category in impressions of romantically involved men.
- Prejudice predicts perceiving romantically involved men as separate individuals.

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ABSTRACT

We hypothesized that perceivers high in sexual prejudice would fail to unitize romantically involved men into a single mental representation, instead of perceiving the men as separate individuals. Two studies provided support for our hypothesis. In Study 1, sexual prejudice predicted perceptions of compatibility, intimacy, emotional satisfaction, and temporal stability for couples described as same-sex male but not for couples described as opposite sex. In Study 2, participants completed a modified who-said-what task in which men of two different same-sex couples presented facts about their relationships. Those low, versus high, in sexual prejudice committed significantly more within-couple relative to between-couple errors in their ascriptions, indicating that prejudice negatively predicted categorization along the dimension of couple. These results have important implications for how those high in sexual prejudice form impressions of same-sex couples and, ultimately, for how prejudiced attitudes affect mental representations of romantic couples.

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Introduction

Prejudice toward gays and lesbians is one of the central civil rights issues in modern American life, with nearly half of Americans (47%) opposing efforts to legalize same-sex marriage (CBS News, 2013). A growing scientific literature details the consequences of sexual prejudice for perceptions of and interactions with gay individuals (e.g., Bosson, Weaver, Caswell, & Burnaford, 2012; Buck & Plant, 2011; Dasgupta & Rivera, 2006; Herek, 1993). Indeed, a substantive research tradition has focused on the affective component of sexual prejudice, which often takes the form of disgust (e.g., Giner-Sorolla, Bosson, Caswell, & Hettinger, 2012; Inbar, Pizarro, Knobe, & Bloom, 2009).

Despite a strong focus on the relationship between sexual prejudice and disgust-related affect targeted towards gay individuals, less empirical work has explored how sexual prejudice may translate into cognitive biases against same-sex couples. In the current work we seek to

address this gap by examining the relationship between sexual prejudice and how same-sex couples are represented in memory. Specifically, we were interested in the relationship between sexual prejudice and the extent to which one *unitizes* (i.e., perceives romantically involved individuals as a single cohesive unit) same- versus opposite-sex couples both in judgment and in overlap in a shared mental representation (see Sedikides, Olsen, & Reis, 1993; Smith, Coats, & Walling, 1999). Thus, the current work sought to extend the previous work on sexual prejudice by examining whether prejudiced perceivers mentally represent men in same-sex relationships differently than do non-prejudiced perceivers. To this end, we first briefly review the relevant literature on perceiving romantically involved individuals as a meaningful social unit, and then focus on recent research in the domain of sexual prejudice. We then present two novel studies employing classic cognitive techniques demonstrating that people high in sexual prejudice do not cognitively unitize romantically involved men in same-sex relationships.

Unitizing individuals in a romantic relationship

Central to the current work is the idea that mental representations of romantically involved individuals can become *unitized*, both in the

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minds of the relationships' constituents and in the minds of those outside of the relationship. Of specific interest in the current work is whether sexual prejudice predicts whether perceivers represent same-sex individuals in romantic relationships as a single cohesive unit in memory (Sedikides et al., 1993; Smith et al., 1999). Notably, work in the close relationships literature suggests that individuals in committed relationships unitize their own personalities and self-concepts over time (e.g., Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Such individuals readily adopt the traits and preferences of their partners, for instance (Slotter & Gardner, 2009). Consequently, the self-concepts of those in relationships tend to meld over time, which is one reason long-term relationship dissolution can be such a traumatic experience (Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2010).

Given the frequency with which romantically involved individuals unitize their own personalities and self-concepts with each other, it may not be surprising that perceivers also tend to unitize romantically involved individuals into a single mental representation, presumably as a means of simplifying social perception. Demonstrating this, Sedikides et al. (1993) found that perceivers spontaneously organize the information they learn about individuals in opposite-sex romantic relationships at the level of couple. Specifically, Sedikides and colleagues illustrated this using a who-said-what task in which participants read statements made by members of opposite-sex married couples. As predicted, perceivers made significantly more within-couple versus between-couple errors in the task, demonstrating that they spontaneously organized their recall of information along the dimension of romantic relationship. Thus, perceivers spontaneously unitize members of opposite-sex romantic relationships into meaningful social categories, and those categories are used to organize information about the relationships' constituents.

Current research: sexual prejudice and the unitization of romantically involved men

As noted earlier, overt sexual prejudice is both widespread in modern American society (CBS News, 2013), and has serious negative implications for targets of prejudice (e.g., Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 2009; Lehmler & Agnew, 2006). In the current work, we hypothesized that sexual prejudice would also be associated with differential unitization of same-sex and opposite-sex couples. Specifically, we predicted that those high in sexual prejudice would fail to unitize two men in a same-sex relationship. We chose to focus on same-sex male couples in the current work because prior work has found that prejudice against gay men is stronger than prejudice against gay women (e.g., Herek, 2002). Thus, the most fertile ground for testing our hypothesis was for the unitization of same-sex male rather than same-sex female couples.

We tested this hypothesis in two studies using different techniques. In Study 1, participants read about same-sex male and opposite-sex couples that varied in objective quality and rated each couple on measures of relationship quality and strength as an indirect measure of unitization. We assessed perceptions of couple quality along several dimensions—romantic compatibility, inclusion of other in the self (IOS; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992), emotional satisfaction, and temporal stability—that all represented face-valid measures of cohesiveness in the context of a romantic relationship (Skinner & Goodfriend, 2009). We expected sexual prejudice to be associated with the perception that the relationships were less cohesive when they were same versus opposite sex. In Study 2, participants completed a modified who-said-what task (Taylor, Fiske, Etcoff, & Ruderman, 1978). To the extent that perceivers unitize targets into psychologically meaningful dyads, they should be more likely to rely on the couple dimension when recalling information about distinct couples (Sedikides et al., 1993). In the who-said-what task, categorization is assessed by examining the errors participants make in the recall of the information they learn about individuals. In the context of this study, we expected that sexual prejudice would predict the extent to which participants encoded information about romantically involved men at the level of couple, which would

be evidenced by the commission of more within-couple errors than between-couple errors when recalling the information.

Study 1

Study 1 was designed to test two hypotheses. First, Study 1 served as an initial test of the relationship between sexual prejudice and unitization of same- versus opposite-sex couples. Participants read several vignettes depicting same-sex male and opposite-sex couples and rated the relationships on measures of cohesiveness. As unitized individuals should be rated as higher in cohesiveness (e.g., emotional connectedness, temporal stability) than non-unitized individuals, we predicted that those high, but not low, in sexual prejudice would see the same-sex couples as lower in cohesiveness than opposite-sex couples.

Second, Study 1 allowed us to examine if the relationship between sexual prejudice and unitization of same- versus opposite-sex couples occurs most strongly in ambiguous contexts. Research on racial prejudice, for instance, consistently finds that discrimination is expressed more strongly in contexts where either (a) targets' performance or behavior is ambiguous (Hugenberg & Bodenhausen, 2003; Sagar & Schofield, 1980) or (b) perceivers do not know that their responses may be indicative of prejudice (e.g., Gaertner & Dovidio, 1977; Pearson, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2009). Consistent with this, we speculated that high-prejudice participants may display the greatest degree of discrimination between same- and opposite-sex couples when the couples' relationships were of ambiguous or middling quality (i.e., neither very strong nor weak) and when they were less aware that our study was about discrimination between same- versus opposite-sex couples (i.e., when prejudice was measured after but not before rating the couples). To explore these possibilities, we asked participants to rate couples depicted in vignettes that varied not only in sexual orientation (same-sex male and opposite-sex), but also in objective quality (weak, mediocre, and strong). We also measured participants' sexual prejudice either immediately before or after they rated the couples. Of interest was whether the effect of sexual prejudice on unitization of same- versus opposite-sex couples differed depending on whether the relationship quality was objectively weak, ambiguous, or strong and the timing of the prejudice measure.

Method

Participants

Fifty-eight introductory psychology students (37 female; 55 White) at a midsized public Midwestern university participated for partial course credit.¹

Stimuli

To develop the impression formation stimuli, we wrote twenty-four vignettes, each about a unique couple. We pretested these twenty-four stories (all depicting opposite-sex couples) using thirty-five separate participants from the same participant population to assess which vignettes appeared weak, mediocre, and strong to our potential participants. These pretest participants were asked to rate how romantically compatible the people in each relationship were with each other on a seven-point (1 = *not at all compatible* and 7 = *very compatible*) scale. We then selected the four stories with mean ratings near the bottom of the scale (range: 2.09–3.03), the four in the middle of the scale (range: 3.91–4.48), and the four near the top of the scale (range: 6.00–6.23). These twelve vignettes, when averaged within their respective quality levels, exhibited a strong linear trend in perceived compatibility (see Appendix A for an example vignette). Those in the four objectively weak relationship vignettes were rated ($M = 2.39, SD = .74$) as lower in compatibility than those in the objectively mediocre relationships

¹ Participant sex was included as a factor in all subsequent analyses and did not produce any significant effects.

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