Sexual Prejudice: Avoiding Unwanted Sexual Interest?

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Abstract

Sexual prejudice may arise from beliefs that certain sexual orientation groups direct unwanted sexual interest, with the implication that heterosexual women believe bisexual men, bisexual women, and lesbians (but not gay men) direct unwanted sexual interest, whereas heterosexual men believe bisexual and gay men (but not bisexual women or lesbians) direct unwanted sexual interest. Study 1 revealed patterns of negativity toward different sexual orientation groups mirroring Study 1's pattern of perceptions of unwanted sexual interest and Study 3 demonstrated that the perception of unwanted sexual interest statistically mediates the relationship between target sexual orientation group and negativity. Existing theoretical approaches for understanding sexual prejudices, including the in-group-out-group heterosexism, gender-role violation, and sexual identity threat approaches, fail to account for the nuanced pattern of findings observed.

Keywords

unwanted sexual interest, prejudice, sexual orientation, homophobia, heterosexism

In trying to explain causes of sexual prejudice—prejudice based on sexual orientation—members have employed the following perspectives ranging from the psychodynamic to the sociological (for reviews, see Hendy, 2004, 2009). We apply an alternative framework from which we derive a novel and controversial hypothesis: Heterosexuals’ prejudice toward nonheterosexuals stems from a desire to avoid persons believed to direct unwanted sexual interest. This hypothesis implies a pattern of sexual prejudice across sexual orientation groups different from those derived from alternative frameworks; we focus on confirming our approach against the three dominant perspectives: the in-group-out-group heterosexism, gender-role violation, and sexual identity threat perspectives.

The In-group-Out-group Heterosexism Perspective (Gilbert, 1975; McArthur & Baron, 1982; Neuberg, Kessick, & Schaller, 2000, 2001) posits that social cognition and behavior serve to manage the potential opportunities and threats others may afford. Cornell and Neuberg (2000) demonstrated, for example, that perceptions of the specific targets posed by a range of different groups (e.g., real/ideal, religious) strongly predicted emotional reactions to these groups; moreover, these threat perceptions accounted for nearly all the variance in these prejudices. Other research has similarly demonstrated the salience of prejudices is perceived threats others pose (e.g., Alexander, Brewer, & Livingstone, 2005; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Suls, Mukai, & Stiff, 1990). An understanding of sexual prejudices may also benefit from an affordance-based approach. Indeed, several studies suggest prejudice against gay men partly arise from perceptions that they pose direct and indirect social threats (Bosson, Hempelmeier, & Pied, 2004; Cornell & Neuberg, 2000; Gallup, 1995; Hendy & Captain, 1999). Here, we propose heterosexuals’ sexual prejudices against nonheterosexual groups (gay men, lesbians, and bisexual women and men) partly arise from a concern that certain nonheterosexuals groups direct unwanted sexual interest toward them.

A range of conceptual perspectives, from evolutionary to feminist (e.g., Buss, 1995; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Lahuent, Hauri, Quinney, & Rice, 2005), point to the in-group-out-group stress created by unwanted sexual interest. Unwanted sexual advances by nonheterosexuals may be viewed by heterosexuals as challenging the autonomy by creating unexpected or unwelcome sexual situations, or by placing doubts about one’s sexual orientation or attractiveness: (e.g., Bosson, Prewitt-Fridline, & Taylor, 2003; Hendy, 2004). Although already exaggerated, heterosexuals may have some reason to believe nonheterosexuals may direct sexual interest against them.

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