

# Covert Discrimination Against Gay Men by U.S. College Students

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**ABSTRACT.** This study examined the use of sexual orientation as a meaningful social category and the consequences of using this category. The sample consisted of 260 U.S. college students who viewed a video and completed a 29-item scale (L. L. Thompson & J. Crocker, 1990) and the 7-item Homophobia Scale (R. A. Bouton et al., 1987). Results showed that participants' adjective ratings of targets favored gay men. Participants did not exhibit greater bias toward gay men when provided with justification. However, there was a pattern of bias in which participants showed favoritism toward heterosexual male targets when provided with no justification for bias.

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**SOCIAL CATEGORIZATIONS** guide the evaluations of individuals in social settings (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). When making evaluations, individuals seek cues that allow them to ascribe category memberships that direct their interpretations of other people's actions. Researchers have investigated categories such as gender and race as salient social categories used to organize and evaluate information (McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978; McGuire, McGuire, & Winton, 1979; Taylor & Fiske, 1978; Taylor, Fiske, Etcoff, & Ruderman, 1978). However, few studies have investigated the social category of sexual orientation. Our study examined the plausibility of sexual orientation, specifically, the category of gay male, as a social category and the implications of the use of such a category.

Attention to social categories is a process that is part of human cognition, allowing perceivers to use schematic shortcuts that save important cognitive resources (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Category memberships often drive evaluations of

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novel individuals (Biernat & Vescio, 1993; Taylor et al., 1978). When an individual is novel, category membership becomes salient, leading to interpretations of the individual's actions in terms of his or her category.

Early research on prejudice and stereotyping suggested that evaluations of individuals who represent salient categories (e.g., African Americans, women) favor negative stereotypes of the groups (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986). However, current research points toward a pattern of evaluation in which the salience of category memberships combined with societal pressures lead individuals to make overtly positive (or neutral) evaluations, while maintaining covert negative attitudes. Our research is based on the assumption that bias always exists, even though sensitivity to societal sanctions against racism reduces the overt expression of bias.

### **Covert Forms of Bias**

Current perspectives on racism exhibited by White Americans maintain that negative affect toward African Americans is acquired early in life, resulting from immersion in a society with a long history of racial bias (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1991; McConahay, Hardee, & Batts, 1981). Although the affective components of racism remain resistant to change, societal pressures against racist feelings have changed the expression of negative affect, resulting in a shift from overt expressions of racist feelings to more covert forms of bias (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; McConahay, 1983; Sears, 1988). Furthermore, some forms of expression of overt bias are now illegal in the United States (e.g., as a result of the Civil Rights Act of 1964).

The conflict between deeply ingrained negative feelings and societal sanctions against the expression of such feelings has led to complex forms of biased expressions. Modern perspectives maintain that positive evaluations of negatively valued groups occur more frequently in situations in which negative behaviors could bring about accusations of bigotry against the evaluator (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1991; McConahay, 1986). The new type of racist avoids expressing blatantly racist attitudes, favoring negative evaluations only when they are defensible on nonracial grounds (Katz, Wackenhut, & Hass, 1986). Particularly relevant to this topic is research on aversive racism.

The aversive racism paradigm suggests that negative attitudes toward racial minorities are always present (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1991). However, traditional forms of racism are no longer the predominant means of expression. Bias has become more subtle (Dovidio, Gaertner, Anastasio, & Sanitioso, 1992). In situations in which judgments would appear to be based solely on race (such as evaluating an African American person less favorably than a White person when all else is equal), bias is unlikely. However, when aspects of the situation can allow the individual to rationalize his or her evaluation on the basis of nonracial characteristics, negative biases occur.

This hypothesis has been supported by previous researchers who found that when all aspects of a situation are equal, African Americans and Whites are evaluated in the same way. However, when aspects of a situation allow individuals to ascribe their negative feelings toward the target to ostensibly nonracial factors, such as a negative comment (Donnerstein & Donnerstein, 1972, 1975), lack of effort (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986), or an ambiguous confrontation (Duncan, 1976), people respond with more negative reactions toward the Black target compared with the White one.

Social categories become salient in social situations as a means of guiding evaluation, particularly when the situation is ambiguous. Because it is not socially acceptable to express such biases overtly, responses to members of the category become positive so that the individual appears nonbiased. However, when aspects of the situation allow for the focus of evaluation to be diverted from the category (e.g., a rude comment made by the target), evaluations may no longer appear to be based on the social category (e.g., African American) but rather on a negative categorization of the target (e.g., behaving rudely). In this manner, individuals ascribe negative evaluations to nonracial traits.

### **Applying Covert Racism to the Study of Attitudes Toward Gay Men**

In our study, we proposed to extend theories of covert racism to encompass discrimination against gay men. The previously mentioned perspectives do not explicitly deal with reactions to gay men. However, several parallels between Blacks and gay men exist. Homophobic attitudes are similar in origin and form to the prejudice directed against members of other groups who hold little power (Ficarratto, 1990). Gay men are a group characterized by negative stereotypes and attitudes (D'Augelli, 1989; Johnson, 1989). Because this group is stereotyped, the social categorization of individuals in terms of sexual orientation can provide shortcuts to the interpretation of behavior.

Similar to biases against ethnic minorities, the expression of bias toward gay men has rapidly become less overt as societal mores increasingly condemn negative attitudes toward them. The increase in societal acceptance of gay men, combined with a long history of negative attitudes, characterizations, and institutionalized prejudices, may produce reactions toward them that are similar to attitudes found toward African Americans. The roots of aversive racism toward African Americans result from the conflict between egalitarian beliefs and a societal tradition of racism. Similarly, egalitarian beliefs conflicting with traditional societal values favoring heterosexual men produce biases against gay men (Herek, 1984).

If individuals are egalitarian in their views toward sexual orientation, gay men should not be evaluated any differently than heterosexual men. However, we predicted that evaluative differences do exist. Furthermore, we predicted that individuals categorize targets in terms of sexual orientation when category membership (in this case, sexual orientation) is explicit and that membership is unique

(i.e., a gay man presented to a group of predominantly heterosexual people). The result of this categorization will be evaluations that differ on the basis of the target's sexual orientation.

Because the salience of the category gay man activates a desire to appear egalitarian, we predicted that participants will overcompensate and evaluate gay male targets more favorably. As a result of such categorization, gay men will be evaluated in terms of category membership. They will be evaluated more favorably than heterosexual men because the salience of their category membership will elicit an evaluation that serves to absolve the individual from appearing homophobic. Thus, we predicted the following:

*Hypothesis 1.* Gay men will be evaluated more favorably than heterosexual men.

We predicted that biases against gay men become apparent when there is the opportunity to express negative feelings toward them in situations in which non-sexual orientation-based justification exists. When a person's focus is drawn away from the target's category membership in situations in which evaluations can be ascribed to characteristics other than sexual orientation, individuals will show greater negativity toward gay male targets. Thus, we predicted:

*Hypothesis 2.* Bias toward gay men will be shown only when aspects of the situation allow for a justification of the bias.

## Method

### *Participants*

A total of 260 undergraduate students enrolled in lower level psychology courses at several small, private colleges in southern California participated in the study. The sample consisted of 113 men, 143 women, and 4 individuals who declined to state their gender. A total of 143 participants classified themselves as Caucasian, 49 as Asian American, 30 as Latinos or Latinas, 7 as African Americans, and 31 declined to state their ethnicities. There were 55 participants in the heterosexual male–no justification condition, 51 in the gay male–no justification condition, 76 in the heterosexual male–justification condition, and 78 in the gay male–justification condition. Sample sizes for each analysis differed slightly because of the exclusion of respondents who provided incomplete data.

Because college students have been shown to exhibit generally positive attitudes toward gay men (Norris, 1991; Qualls, Cox, & Schehr, 1992) and because education level is positively correlated with reduced overt bias (Herek & Capitano, 1996; Kite & Whitley, 1996), our sample of college students is a particularly appropriate group to use in a study of this phenomenon.

### *Dependent Measures*

We used a 29-item scale, partially adapted from Thompson and Crocker (1990), as the evaluative measure. Participants responded to questions such as "How true do you feel are the following descriptions of the applicant?" Responses ranged from 1 (*almost never true*) to 7 (*almost always true*). Sample items included *friendly*, *sincere*, *trustworthy*, *stupid*, and *careless*. The scale was highly reliable ( $\alpha = .92$ ). There were two subscales designed for this study. The first subscale contained 19 items that indicated positive traits (e.g., *friendly*), and the second scale consisted of 10 items that indicated negative traits (e.g., *incompetent*). The subscales proved highly reliable as well ( $\alpha = .94$  and  $.89$ , respectively).

Negatively worded items tap both overt and covert aspects of bias. The use of descriptors such as *incompetent* and *boring* put the rater in the position of making statements about the target that can be interpreted as indicative of an overt dislike for the group as a whole. In essence, if a respondent uses negative traits to describe a gay male target, the respondent could be viewed as homophobic. We predicted that negative evaluations of gay men occur only in situations in which bias could be perceived as justifiable (i.e., covert). When justification for bias (e.g., a rude comment made by the target) does not exist, fewer negative evaluations of the gay male target occur because these responses would indicate overt bias.

Positive trait items tap covert aspects of bias. Previous research indicates that the denial of positive attributes is a form of modern bias (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995). Specifically, heterosexual men who provide no justification for bias receive the most positive ratings. The remaining groups are rated poorly because of justifiable biases (negative comments) or sexual orientation (i.e., gay men who do not provide justification for bias).

We used the 7-item Homophobia Scale, designed by Bouton and colleagues (1987) to measure homophobic attitudes. The Homophobia Scale asks participants to indicate how much they agree or disagree with several statements, including "Homosexuals contribute positively to society" and "Homosexuals corrupt young people." Scores ranged from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). The scale has a reported reliability of  $.89$  (Bouton et al., 1987). When participants were presented with a gay male target, we predicted that there would be a reduction in homophobia scores because of the salience of the category of gay man. When presented with a heterosexual target, we predicted that the ratings would indicate greater homophobia because the category of gay man was not activated.

### *Procedure*

We collected data from groups of 1 to 32 individuals. Each group was randomly assigned to a condition. The large numbers of participants assigned to groups may have compromised random assignment. However, few differences

existed between the participants randomly assigned to each condition. Moreover, situational aspects (such as the time of data collection) were held constant throughout the study. Additionally, the participants were extremely homogeneous in terms of ethnicity, age, and other demographic characteristics. Although the assignment of large blocks of individuals to each condition can compromise random assignment, our use of a homogeneous sample combined with the random assignment of groups to each condition may have alleviated this problem.

The experimenter was introduced as part of a new campuswide HIV–AIDS education project. The experimenter told the participants that they would be viewing a videotape of an interview with a male candidate for the program's position of HIV–AIDS education spokesperson. They were asked to rate the candidate in terms of how well he could relate to students and whether they thought he would be a good spokesperson for the program. Participants were told that the videotapes of the finalists in the job search were being viewed across campus and that their responses would affect the hiring process.

The videotapes were 5 min long, and each participant viewed one of the four videotapes in which the target describes himself as either having contracted HIV from a man he had a "short but sexually intense relationship with" (gay male condition) or as contracting HIV from a woman "he had a short but sexually intense relationship with" (heterosexual condition). Near the end of the videotape, the interviewer asked the target, "Why do you feel college students can relate to you?" In the justified bias condition, the target made the following negative comment: "Look, I was a college student. I know how completely stupid and totally naïve college students are. Come on folks, wake up and smell the coffee." In the unjustified bias condition, the target made no negative comment, simply replying, "Look, I was a college student." Aspects of each videotape were otherwise identical. The same actor wearing the same clothing appeared in each condition.

After viewing the videotape, students filled out the questionnaire. Participants received a full debriefing following the completion of all the questionnaire items.

### *Design*

We used a 2 (heterosexual vs. gay male target)  $\times$  2 (justification for bias vs. no justification) design. Statements by the target actor manipulated sexual orientation and justification of bias. All other aspects of the videotaped interviews were identical.

## **Results**

We used a 2  $\times$  2 (Sexual Orientation  $\times$  Bias Condition) analysis of variance (ANOVA), with sums of squares adjusted for unequal *N* designs (Keppel, 1991). Because dependent measures were positively skewed, we used square root trans-

formations to normalize the distributions (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989). Means and standard deviations are presented for untransformed scores to enhance interpretability (Howell, 1997).

### *Evaluations of the Targets*

Ratings for targets on the adjective rating scale supported Hypothesis 1. Gay men were rated significantly more favorably than heterosexual men ( $M = 109.88$ ,  $SD = 20.02$ , vs.  $M = 102.26$ ,  $SD = 20.33$ ),  $F(1, 244) = 9.49$ ,  $p < .01$ . Ratings favored targets in the unjustified bias condition, more than targets in the justified bias condition ( $M = 109.42$ ,  $SD = 21.16$ , vs.  $M = 103.71$ ,  $SD = 19.78$ ),  $F(1, 244) = 5.08$ ,  $p < .05$ . The interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 244)$ ,  $p < 1$ . Planned comparisons indicated that patterns of evaluations for targets in the justified bias condition were the opposite of those that we had predicted in Hypothesis 2; gay men in the justified bias condition was rated more favorably ( $M = 108.23$ ,  $SD = 19.51$ ) than the heterosexual male target in the same condition ( $M = 98.95$ ,  $SD = 19.05$ ),  $F(1, 244) = 8.23$ ,  $p < .01$ . However, splitting items into two categories—negative adjectives (e.g., weak, rude) and positive adjectives (e.g., admirable, sincere)—provided a more detailed analysis of the ratings.

### *Negative Adjectives*

As shown in Table 1, ratings of targets on negative traits revealed a main effect for sexual orientation, with gay men rated less negatively than heterosexual

**TABLE 1**  
**Positive and Negative Adjective Ratings by Sexual Orientation and Bias Condition**

Condition	Positive traits <sup>a</sup>			Negative traits <sup>b</sup>		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i> (1, 242)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i> (1, 250)
Sexual orientation			0.00			14.81***
Heterosexual man	75.74	18.24		23.88	12.95	
Gay man	75.13	15.67		17.80	8.51	
Justification			16.35***			0.13
Justified	71.86	15.95		20.25	9.44	
Not justified	80.67	17.18		21.76	13.71	
Sexual Orientation × Justification			6.67*			0.70

*Note.* *F* values are based on square root transformed scores. Means are untransformed. *MS* error is 0.95 and 1.65 for positive traits and negative traits, respectively.

<sup>a</sup>Higher scores indicate greater positive evaluation. <sup>b</sup>Higher scores indicate greater negative evaluation. \* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

men ( $p < .001$ ), indicating a reluctance to rate gay men negatively regardless of condition. No effect for justification level was present, nor was there an interaction effect.

### *Positive Adjectives*

An analysis of positively worded traits showed a main effect for level of justification. Participants rated targets who justified bias by making a negative comment less positively than those who made no comment ( $p < .001$ ; see Table 1). There were no differences in ratings of gay men and heterosexual men. However, a significant interaction was present ( $p < .05$ ).

Simple effects tests and planned comparisons clarified interaction effects. As shown in Table 2, positive trait ratings for the heterosexual–no justification conditions were higher than scores for all other groups. Results of the contrasts indicate a reluctance to ascribe positive traits to gay men acting positively and an unwillingness to devalue gay men acting negatively.

The pattern of bias that emerges from these data is one in which individuals exhibited bias through the elevation of ratings of the heterosexual target who provided no justification for biased responses. The ratings for gay male targets were not worse for negative items; rather, participants chose to rate heterosexual men better on positive items. In short, participants showed bias in favor of the heterosexual man instead of bias against the gay man.

### *Overt Homophobia*

When presented with a gay male target, participants were less likely to agree with statements that could be construed as homophobic than when presented with a heterosexual male target ( $M = 15.56$ ,  $SD = 5.62$ , vs.  $M = 19.50$ ,  $SD = 4.22$ ),  $F(1, 253) = 40.17$ ,  $p < .001$ . This indicated that when gay man was the

**TABLE 2**  
**Positive Trait Means by Condition**

Condition	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i> (1, 242) <sup>a</sup>
Heterosexual male–not justified	83.81	16.85	
Gay male–not justified	77.06	17.03	3.92*
Heterosexual male–justified	69.69	16.94	22.12***
Gay male–justified	73.89	14.72	10.14**

<sup>a</sup>All *F*s refer to comparisons with the heterosexual–not justified condition. *F*s were derived using simple effects tests or planned contrasts using omnibus *MS* error and *df*.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

salient identity, participants were less likely to make negative statements about the group. No differences existed between justified and unjustified bias conditions ( $M = 17.68$ ,  $SD = 4.89$ , vs.  $M = 17.47$ ,  $SD = 5.63$ ),  $F < 1$ . No interaction was present,  $F < 1$ .

An alternative explanation for the present results could be that more positive overall ratings of gay men indicated that participants believed that a gay man is a more qualified candidate than a heterosexual man for the position of HIV-AIDS spokesperson. However, our data do not indicate that this interpretation was true. An analysis of variables indicating how well students felt they could relate to the candidate, how effective the candidate would be, and how likely they would be to recommend the candidate for the position all indicated a significant interaction in which the heterosexual man who provided no justification for bias was favored for all the variables,  $F_s(1, 256) = 7.67, 4.50, \text{ and } 4.33$ , respectively, all  $ps < .05$ .

## Discussion

Target evaluation data support our hypotheses regarding the use of sexual orientation as a social category by U.S. college students. Additionally, the aversive homophobia hypothesis received support from an examination of positively worded adjective items. An examination of contrasts based on the positive adjective items indicated that the most favorable evaluations existed for heterosexual targets who did not provide justification for bias (i.e., those who did not make negative comments). This finding may be evidence of a covert form of bias in which individuals did not exhibit bias overtly through devaluing gay men but by elevating evaluations of heterosexual targets. These results parallel the findings of previous studies of attitudes toward ethnic outgroups in which individuals were more likely to differentiate through use of positive traits favoring the in-group (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995).

A different pattern of response was found for negative trait items. Contrary to our prediction, greater bias toward gay men did not exist in the condition in which justification could be provided (i.e., gay man making a negative comment). Instead, negative trait items indicated strong preferences for gay male targets and positive items indicated a preference for heterosexual targets. A plausible interpretation of this is that negative items indicated how participants felt that they should respond, whereas positively worded items indicated participants' true attitudes.

Responses to the Homophobia Scale showed a strong effect for sexual orientation. When presented with a gay man, participants were less likely to endorse items such as "I think homosexuality is a sin." This effect supports the idea that the salience of the social category gay man may activate a desire to make the socially accepted response (e.g., the unbiased response). In our study, when the actor portrayed himself as a heterosexual man, the social category gay man was not activated; thus, responses to overt homophobia items were not influenced by social desirability.

Our findings fit well with both social desirability and covert bias explanations. Overall, negative trait items received little support as descriptors of gay male targets. Additionally, participants who rated a gay man showed reduced endorsements of overtly homophobic items on the Homophobia Scale. Such results indicated a desire to appear nonbiased, perhaps resulting from overcompensation for negative attitudes.

Our study focused on the similarities between racism and homophobia, but it also may be of use in examining situations in which the two prejudices diverge. Changes in the United States have, at least by law, eliminated institutional bias against African Americans (Sears, 1988) but not against gay men. There are still basic inequalities between gay men and heterosexual men afforded by the government. Gay men in the armed forces must suppress their gay identities. Gay marriages are not legally valid unions. Thus, it may be that realistic conflict resultant from legal equality (e.g., Bobo, 1983, 1988) has yet to become a factor in bias against gay males.

A primary limitation of this study may be the categorization of individuals. We assumed that participants classified the gay man as homosexual, although it is unclear how participants classified the heterosexual male target. The category of heterosexual is not unique and thus may not be a category used to guide evaluations of a target. Several possibilities exist regarding the categorization of the heterosexual target. One is the categorization of the target as a "heterosexual with HIV." Other possible alternatives exist, such as the categorization of the heterosexual target as promiscuous, irresponsible, unlucky, or even as a gay man who is denying his sexual orientation. Thus, the comparisons between the groups may not be a simple comparison of a gay male target with a heterosexual male target.

We attempted to link research on covert racial bias to gay men, another socially devalued group. The evidence from this study suggests that the label *gay man* does evoke social categorization and that this categorization leads to certain biases in evaluations. Our findings show that, like bias against racial minorities, bias against gay men is not expressed overtly by U.S. college students; more covert negative attitudes are present. Overt measures of bias follow a pattern in which responses favor gay men, a finding we attributed to social desirability. Therefore, our findings have strong implications for attempting to identify and change prejudice based on sexual orientation and warrant further research to better understand the covert nature of this bias.

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