

Reactions to Gay Men: Contact and Overcorrection in an Employee Selection Simulation

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The current study examines the role of contact on reactions to gay and heterosexual targets by U.S. heterosexual college students. Aversive bias research finds that minority group members receive unfavorable evaluations only when non-category-based information justifies bias. We argue that under other conditions, namely absence of conditions justifying bias, minority group members receive more favorable evaluations than non-minorities, an effect we term overcorrection. We apply this research to the study of attitudes toward gay men. The current study examines this effect on evaluations of a highly qualified male job candidate who is either gay or heterosexual and flawed or not flawed. We predicted and found, among 180 college students, that the overcorrection effect was present only for those individuals who have experienced no friendships with gay men. Those individuals who do have gay male friends did not exhibit overcorrection. We interpret this result as an indication that individuals who have gay friends (contact) ignore category information such as gay/heterosexual and are more likely to exhibit truly egalitarian ratings. Implications for aversive bias and outgroup covariation perspectives are discussed.

Aversive bias research finds that when evaluation criteria are ambiguous, minority group members receive less favorable evaluations than whites. Less prominent in this research are favorable ratings of minority candidates when normative factors support egalitarianism. In this paper, we argue for the presence of this effect (termed overcorrection), examine the role of contact in mitigating overcorrection, and apply this research to U.S. heterosexual college students' attitudes toward gay men.

AVERSIVE RACISM

The aversive racism perspective suggests that individuals from the United States acquire negative attitudes toward minority groups early in life, resulting from immersion in a society with a long history of racial bias (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1991). However, there are pressures against expression of negative attitudes toward minority group members. The conflict between negative feelings and sanctions against the expression of such feelings results in complex forms of biased expression (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986). Thus, positive evaluations of members of negatively valued groups are more frequent in situations where negative evaluations could bring about attributions of bigotry to the evaluator (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1991). In situations where judgments would appear

based solely on race, such as evaluating an African American less favorably than a white when all else was equal, bias is unlikely. However, when aspects of the situation allow the individual to rationalize evaluations based on non-racial characteristics, less favorable evaluations are more likely.

Dovidio and Gaertner (2000) provide a prototypical demonstration of aversive racism. Participants rated an African American or white job candidate who was either strongly, ambiguously, or not qualified. When rating unqualified and strongly qualified applicants, ethnicity did not influence ratings. However, ratings of candidates with ambiguous qualifications (i.e., unclear as to whether qualified or not) indicated stronger support for white applicants. This result indicates that individuals attempt to be egalitarian in their evaluations, however, when the situation was ambiguous; the white applicant was more likely than the African American applicant to receive positive ratings.

Overcorrection: Are Minority Candidates Rated More Positively?

The aversive racism paradigm suggests that normative factors guide evaluations and reactions to members of minority groups. For example, when evaluating a highly qualified job candidate, it would be normative to rate that candidate positively. If a candidate were both highly qualified and African American, a poor rating of the candidate suggests that race was a factor in the decision and the rater, by countering expectations, might be viewed as a racist. However, if qualifications were ambiguous, rating the African American candidate poorly could be attributed to non-racial factors (e.g., she or he is not qualified). We argue that when rating qualified job candidates, normative pressures toward being evenhanded may result in overcorrection in the form of more positive ratings of minority candidates.

Dovidio and Gaertner (2000) found no significant differences between ratings of strongly qualified white and African American candidates. However, further examination of these data indicates that qualified African American job candidates received slightly better ratings in terms of the strength of recommendations and percentage recommended (d -pooled = .29).

A study examining health-care allocation decisions also supports the presence of overcorrection. Participants rated white and African-American patients portrayed as either employed or unemployed in terms of the amount of priority to be given to their care, percentage of funds that should be contributed by the government, amount of money the participant would be willing to contribute, and feelings of resentment. These data provide evidence for the aversive racism paradigm as negative information (being unemployed) yielded more negative ratings of African-American patients compared to white patients. Results from the employed condition showed a pattern of results supporting an overcorrection interpretation. For priority ratings, percent of government funding, amount of personal contribution, and resentment, African-Americans received more favorable evaluations than whites (d -pooled = 1.73; Murphy-Berman, Berman, & Campbell, 1998).

Our preliminary work on aversive bias against gay men also supports this proposition. We provided participants with videos of either a gay or a heterosexual job candidate who was either rude or pleasant. Gay targets received more favorable overall

evaluations than heterosexual targets ($d = 0.38$). When evaluating reactions to rude candidates and pleasant candidates, candidate attitude only influenced ratings of the heterosexual candidates; gay candidates received ratings similar to heterosexual candidates, regardless of behavior (Aberson, Swan, & Emerson, 1999).

We interpret these results to suggest a pattern of overcorrection where, under certain conditions, outgroup targets receive more favorable ratings. Following from an aversive bias perspective, positive ratings of highly qualified outgroup candidates result from attempts to appear egalitarian. However, there are other potential interpretations for this finding. Linville and Jones (1980) found that highly qualified African American job candidates received more favorable ratings than white job candidates who were highly qualified. When candidates were unqualified, African Americans received worse ratings. Linville (1982) suggested that lack of information about outgroups explains this result. Lack of information results in reduced cognitive complexity surrounding representations of outgroup members, thus leading to more extreme (either positive or negative) reactions to outgroup members. Later termed the outgroup covariation effect, these results suggest that the pattern of more positive ratings discussed above result from underlying cognitive processes rather than a desire to appear unbiased (Linville, Fischer, & Yoon, 1996).

APPLYING MODERN FORMS OF RACISM TO SEXUAL PREJUDICE

The present study applies the aversive racism paradigm to sexual prejudice, specifically discrimination against gay men. There are several parallels between attitudes toward gays and African Americans. Sexual prejudice is similar in origin and form to prejudice directed against other groups (Ficarratto, 1990). Similar to bias against ethnic minorities, expression of bias toward gay men has rapidly become less overt as societal mores increasingly condemn such negative attitudes. Increased societal acceptance, combined with a long history of negative attitudes, characterizations, and institutionalized prejudice may produce reactions toward gay men similar to those found toward African-Americans.

CONTACT

There is a large body of research on the relationship between contact and attitudes toward minority groups. A meta-analysis of over 200 studies finds strong and consistent effects indicating that contact improves attitudes toward outgroups (Pettigrew & Tropp, 1998). More specifically, individuals with gay and lesbian friends indicate more positive attitudes toward gays and lesbians as a group (Herek & Capitanio, 1996).

Linville's work also addresses the role of contact. Focusing on the role of familiarity in perceptions of outgroup homogeneity, Linville finds that individuals who are less familiar with outgroups tend to view the outgroup as more homogeneous and exhibit more extremity in ratings of outgroup members. Those individuals who are familiar with the outgroup view the group as less homogeneous and are less extreme in their ratings. Linville likens this result to statistical sampling, the larger the sample of outgroup members (i.e., the more familiarity), the better the estimate of variation amongst traits (Linville, 1998; Linville et. al., 1996).

THE CURRENT STUDY

The current study asks one primary question, “does contact reduce overcorrection effects?” We hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1: Individuals who have gay friends rate gay and heterosexual job candidates equally. Negative information about a job candidate (in this study, a history of alcoholism) results in lower ratings of gay and heterosexual candidates. Those individuals who do not have gay friends will rate gay and heterosexual candidates differently depending on the presence/absence of negative information. Statistically, the first hypothesis predicts a three-way interaction between contact, sexual orientation of target, and presence of negative information. Breaking results into contact/no contact groups, we predict a two-way interaction between sexual orientation and negative information for the non-contact group but only a main effect for negative information for the contact group.

Specifically examining the non-contact group we predict:

Hypothesis 2: Gay job candidates receive more favorable evaluations than heterosexual candidates.

Hypothesis 3: Presenting negative information about the job candidate will result in negative evaluations of the heterosexual but not the gay job candidate. This is the primary overcorrection effect.

Hypotheses 2 and 3 will be tested using orthogonal contrasts examining gay vs. heterosexual candidates overall and comparing alcoholics vs. non-alcoholics for gay and heterosexual targets.

Tests of the hypotheses above contrast the overcorrection and outgroup covariation models. If the outgroup covariation effect model is supported then the presence of negative information should result in worse ratings for all targets. The idea that the schema is simplistic and lack of information leads to extremely positive ratings due to the tendency to rate as either all good or all bad should be reduced when the candidate information includes positive and negative traits. This effect should only be present if information about the candidate is exclusively positive. In the presence of negative and positive information, the outgroup candidate (the gay candidate) should be rated more negatively than the ingroup candidate (the heterosexual candidate). If the overcorrection model is supported, as we predict, then the presence of negative information should not influence ratings of the outgroup candidate as the rater is consciously trying to appear unbiased.

METHOD

Participants

One hundred ninety-five undergraduates at a state university ($n = 136$) and a private liberal arts college ($n = 59$) participated in a study of reactions to job candidates. Participants received either extra credit or a modest cash stipend (\$5) for participation. We eliminated thirteen gay/lesbian/bisexual participants from analyses. Missing data re-

sulted in elimination of two cases, leaving 180 cases. Participants were primarily white (83%) and women (71%). The median age of participants was 20.

Procedure and Measures

Participants received a questionnaire informing them that the study examines hiring decisions, the types of information that people use to make decisions, and that they would answer several questions about gay men. Instructions indicated that responses were anonymous and participants could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Participants read the following instructions: "Imagine that you are acting as the student representative for your school's HIV/AIDS awareness campaign...One of the tasks facing the committee is to hire an individual to run the program. The job involves organizing educational events and safe sex campaigns, giving lectures on safe sex, and working directly with student organizations." Participants read a summary of a job candidate's qualifications and a personal statement. Qualifications for all candidates included three years of experience as an Assistant Education Coordinator with responsibilities similar to those required of the current position. Candidate descriptions portrayed each as 27 years old and white. It is important to note that instructions clearly indicated that the student was to imagine that they were serving on a hiring committee. In no way did we deceive participants to believe that they were making actual hiring decisions.

Candidate personal statements manipulated sexual orientation and alcohol abuse status. The candidate indicated that he became interested in HIV/AIDS education when a former sexual partner became infected with HIV. The candidate was tested and learned that he was not infected. We manipulated sexual orientation within the candidate's personal statement by referring to the former partner as an ex-girlfriend (heterosexual condition) or an ex-boyfriend (gay condition).

The candidate then indicated that a close friend had died from AIDS in 1995, resulting in the candidate's commitment to HIV/AIDS education. For those candidates portrayed as recovering alcoholics, three additional sentences reported that the candidate spent several years "drowning my pain in alcohol." Those candidates who were not alcoholics provided a slightly shorter personal statement without mention of alcohol.

Participants rated the candidate on eight items such as "I believe this candidate would be able to relate to college students" and "I think that this person could have a negative impact on the education program." Responses ranged from (0) *disagree completely* to (10) *agree completely*. Reliability for the scale was good ($\alpha = .89$). A subset of participants rated candidate qualifications on a single-item ranging from (0) *not at all* to (10) *completely*. This subset allows for assessment of the impact of focusing the participant on qualifications-influenced ratings.

A single question asking the participant to indicate the number of gay men that they considered friends comprised the contact with gay men measure. The final questionnaire items measured demographic information including participant sexual orientation.

RESULTS

Assumptions, Data Cleaning, and Coding

One case included a missing value on one of the rating variables and received the mean rating for the variable. The primary dependent variable for analyses, overall ratings of the job candidate (the sum of responses to the 8-item scale with four reverse-scaled items), was negatively skewed. A reflected logarithm transformation normalized this distribution. Following transformation, variances between cells were adequate to meet homogeneity of variance assumptions.

We defined contact as number of gay friends ($M = 2.39$, $SD = 3.15$). Despite the average number of gay friends being high, 30% of the sample had no gay friends. We coded these data into a new variable that indicated whether the participant had zero gay friends or one or more gay friends. We refer to this variable as contact below.

Manipulation Checks

We assumed that participants perceived job candidates as qualified and that the independent variables did not influence qualification ratings. A subset of participants ($n = 88$) rated candidate qualifications. Participants perceived the candidate as highly qualified ($M = 8.17$ out of 10, $SD = 1.91$). A three-way ANOVA examined effects of candidate sexual orientation, alcohol abuse status, and contact on qualification ratings. Results indicated no significant effects for any of the main effects or interactions (seven F 's (1, 80), all ns). The independent variables thus did not influence perceptions of candidate qualifications.

Main Analyses

Table 1 details results of a three-way ANOVA examining overall ratings by target sexual orientation, alcohol abuse status, and contact. This test yields significant effects for alcohol abuse status, the sexual orientation by alcohol interaction, and the three-way interaction.

The first hypothesis predicted the contact group to be more egalitarian in their ratings of job candidates than individuals without contact. Specifically, we predicted a main effect for alcohol abuse status for candidate ratings by individuals with gay friends (the contact group). For candidate ratings by individuals without friends (the no contact group), we predicted an overcorrection effect wherein gay candidates would be rated more positively overall and alcohol abuse status would not influence ratings of gay candidates but would influence ratings of heterosexual candidates.

A simple interactions test, shown in Table 2, is the most direct way to test hypotheses regarding the contact group. Those individuals with contact rated the former alcohol abuser less favorably than they rated non-alcoholics. Sexual orientation and the orientation by alcohol abuse status interaction produced no evaluative differences.

Table 1
Overall Target Ratings by Condition and Three-Factor ANOVA

	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Target Sexual Orientation		<1	.73	.00
Heterosexual (<i>n</i> = 87)	7.93			
Gay (<i>n</i> = 94)	7.94			
Alcohol Abuse Status		12.1	.001	.07
Alcoholic (<i>n</i> = 86)	7.65			
No Alcohol (<i>n</i> = 95)	8.22			
Friendships?		<1	.33	.01
No Gay Friends (<i>n</i> = 54)	7.78			
Gay Friends (<i>n</i> = 127)	8.09			
Sexual X Alcohol		7.7	.006	.04
Sexual X Friendship		<1	.86	.00
Alcohol X Friendship		<1	.36	.01
Sexual X Alcohol X Friendship		5.1	.025	.03
Error				

Note: Means presented as untransformed to retain interpretability. Analyses use reflected log transformed dependent variable. For all tests, *df* = 1, 172.

Table 2
Simple Effects Tests for Contact and No Contact Groups

<i>Effect</i>	<i>No Contact Group</i>				<i>Contact Group</i>			
	<i>M</i> (<i>n</i>)	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2	<i>M</i> (<i>n</i>)	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Target Sexual Orientation		<1	.76	.00		<1	.88	.00
Heterosexual	7.62(27)				8.17(60)			
Gay	7.81(27)				8.10(66)			
Alcohol Abuse Status		2.3	.13	.01		16.1	<.001	.08
Alcoholic	7.60(30)				7.65(56)			
No Alcohol	7.86(24)				8.52(70)			
Sexual X Alcohol		9.1	.003	.05		<1	.63	.00
Hetero – Alcoholic	6.97(16)				7.64(26)			
Hetero – Non-Alcoholic	8.57(11)				8.49(34)			
Gay – Alcoholic	8.33(14)				7.67(30)			
Gay – Non-Alcoholic	7.26(13)				8.55(36)			
<i>Orthogonal Contrasts</i>		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2				
Heterosexual vs. Gay		<1	.76	.00				
Hetero – Alcoholic vs.								
Hetero – Non-Alcoholic		-1.1	.29	.01				
Gay – Alcoholic vs.								
Gay – Non-Alcoholic		3.2	.002	.05				

Note: All values calculated using mean square from initial analysis and error tested against *F*(1,172) (see Howell, 1997). Means presented as untransformed to retain interpretability. Analyses use reflected log transformed dependent variable.

Table 3

Comparisons of Concern over Past Problems for No Contact Group				
Effect		<i>M</i> (<i>n</i>)	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
η^2				
Target Sexual Orientation		<1	.71	.00
Heterosexual	3.93(27)			
Gay	3.33(27)			
Alcohol Abuse Status		8.9	.004	.15
Alcoholic	4.60(30)			
No Alcohol	2.27(24)			
Sexual X Alcohol		4.6	.04	.09
Hetero – Alcoholic	5.56(16)			
Hetero – Non-Alcoholic	1.55(11)			
Gay – Alcoholic	3.64(14)			
Gay – Non-Alcoholic	3.00(13)			
<i>Tukey Comparisons</i>			<i>p</i>	
Hetero – Alcoholic vs. Hetero – Non-Alcoholic			.004	
Gay – Alcoholic vs. Gay – Non-Alcoholic			.94	

Table 2 also presents orthogonal contrasts regarding the non-contact group, testing Hypotheses 2 and 3. The first contrast compared gay and heterosexual job candidate ratings and found no differences in ratings of gay and heterosexual candidates. Though this result seems to counter predictions, additional contrasts support hypotheses. Gay candidates who were alcoholics received ratings similar to candidates who were not alcoholics. However, heterosexual alcoholics received worse ratings than heterosexual non-alcoholics. These results indicate that for those participants who have no gay friends, alcohol abuse status only influenced ratings of heterosexuals.

One of the scale items, “I am concerned with the candidate’s past problems,” is particularly relevant to the alcohol abuse variable. For this item, non-contact participants indicated greater concern for alcohol abusing candidates than non-abusing candidates. A significant interaction between sexual orientation and alcohol abuse status qualified this finding. Gay alcoholics and gay non-alcoholics were rated similarly. However, participants indicated greater concern for heterosexual alcoholics as compared to hetero non-alcoholics. No other pairs differed significantly. Again, alcoholism only influenced ratings of heterosexual job candidates.

Gender Effects

To assess the impact of gender on our results, we analyzed our data adding gender as a predictor variable. This analysis comprised a four-way ANOVA examining overall ratings by target sexual orientation, alcohol abuse status, contact, and gender. Women ($M = 8.25$) rated all candidates more favorably than men ($M = 7.50$), $F(1, 163) = 5.6$, $p = .019, \eta^2 = .03$. However, there were no significant interactions between gender and any of the other predictor variables, all F 's < 1. The lack of significant interaction effects

indicates that gender differences did not produce the differences in overcorrection reported above.

DISCUSSION

The primary finding of this study is that, among heterosexual U.S. college students, contact moderates overcorrection. Those individuals who had no gay friends overcorrected in their evaluations by rating flawed (alcoholic) gay candidates the same as unflawed gay candidates. This pattern did not exist for ratings of heterosexual candidates, wherein flawed candidates received worse ratings. Those individuals who had gay friends rated gay and heterosexual candidates the same and rated recovering alcoholics less favorably regardless of sexual orientation. Participants may be so concerned about appearing biased that the presence of negative information attached to a highly qualified candidate is not sufficient to result in lowered ratings of the gay job candidate.

Given the presence of negative information that would justify poor ratings, the non-contact group failed to use the information when rating gay job candidates. This information did influence ratings of heterosexual job candidates. We interpret this as an effect of overcorrection rather than outgroup covariation. One explanation for results that seem to counter the outgroup covariation research findings is the observation that our study examines reactions to gay men whereas Linville et al. (1996) examines reactions to older adults and occupation groups. These differences may be attributable to the fact that social sanctions against biases toward older adults or certain occupational groups are not as strong as sanctions against sexual prejudice. This should not be taken to imply that outgroup covariation effects are not plausible. The focus of outgroup covariation research is perceptions of outgroup homogeneity. As this study does not include a measure of homogeneity, we cannot comment on the role of contact with gays on the perceptions of homogeneity.

Though overcorrection effects have not received as much empirical attention as other aspects of the aversive bias such as poor ratings of minorities under ambiguous conditions, this should not imply that the effect is not important. Whereas this effect is not as problematic as ratings under ambiguous conditions, it may have implications for employee evaluation. In this study, it appears that individuals were so concerned with appearing egalitarian that they failed to give justifiably negative ratings to flawed gay job candidates. This might imply an advantage to being a minority when one is highly qualified.

Contact mitigated the overcorrection effect. Individuals with gay friends do not overcorrect. This group apparently ignored category information such as gay/heterosexual and only varies evaluations based on candidate flaws. As such, individuals with gay male friends exhibited truly egalitarian ratings.

Limitations

Several limitations temper the conclusions of this research. First is the limited nature of our sample. White women comprised a majority of our sample. In general, women

tend to have more positive attitudes toward gay men than do men (Herek, 2002). Of course, our examination focused on less overt forms of bias. To our knowledge, there is currently no research exploring the relationship between gender and overcorrection biases. Additionally, this limitation is somewhat ameliorated by our findings of no interactions between gender and our variables of interest.

Second, the use of hypothetical written scenarios potentially limits experimental realism. One specific critique is that students may not have sufficient work experience to evaluate job candidates. However, the variables of interest in this study focused on attitudes toward the job candidate rather than hiring issues (e.g., recommended starting salary). In this context, the employment scenario served primarily as a medium to present target stimuli. Given these limitations, the applicability of these results to real-world hiring situations is not clearly established.

NOTES

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