

Differences in Prejudices Regarding Gay Youth and Adults

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Abstract

Research has consistently shown that sexual minorities often experience prejudices in school systems from both peers and adults, yet there is limited research regarding differences in adults' biases toward gay youth and gay adults (Hazel *et al.*, 2018; Elischberger *et al.*, 2016). There are two types of measurement techniques to identify such biases, known as implicit and explicit measures (Dickter *et al.*, 2015; Butz & Plant, 2009). In the present study, explicit and implicit biases of participants, ages 25-65, were assessed to understand possible differences for both a youth (16-year-old) and adult (45-year-old) condition. Specifically, participants were presented with a set of vignettes where a gay person's behavior was criticized, visual stimuli with a subsequent pleasantness scale to measure participants' responses, and an implicit measure for participants' reaction times. For the vignettes, the age condition (16-year-olds vs. 45-year-olds) was between-subjects and the vignette type was within-subjects, but the pleasantness rating and implicit measure of reaction time were within-subjects for both the age condition and image type. Results showed that there was no significant main effect for the age condition of the vignettes or for the age regarding the participants' reaction times, but there was a significant main effect for age on the pleasantness ratings, $F(1, 107) = 36.28, p < 0.05$. This study presents findings consistent with the current hypothesis and previous research while also acknowledging the mixed support for a difference in adults' prejudices toward gay youth and gay adults.

Introduction

Because LG people tend to deviate from the sexuality and gender norms of a heteronormative society, they may become victims of prejudices (Elischberger *et al.*, 2016). Although there has been some progress reducing prejudices toward the LG community, significant negative effects continue to weigh down sexual minorities (Elischberger *et al.*, 2016). For example, change in public support and actual gain in rights for LG people are shifting, but there are certain demographics that still hold negative attitudes toward homosexual people, such as people in more rural areas (Worthen *et al.*, 2019). A less accepting environment for sexual minorities could prevent a LG individual from "coming out," causing lower self-esteem and higher levels of anxiety for them (Zaikman *et al.*, 2020). Despite there being some benefits to "coming out," such as better mental health, more cohesion, life satisfaction, and a better sense of comfort and integrity, victimization and discrimination still are likely to occur (Zaikman *et al.*, 2020). The prejudices imposed on LG people lead to decreased school engagement, psychological well-being, and possibly higher levels of substance use, so it is important that researchers work to understand the implications regarding adults' prejudices toward LG youth and adults (Hazel *et al.*, 2018; Kosciw *et al.*, 2016; Cochran *et al.*, 2003; Coker *et al.*, 2008). This study is aimed at examining possible differences in adults' prejudices in regards to gay youth and adults.

LG students are likely to be underserved in their school systems, so they become more vulnerable, creating negative effects for them (Hazel *et al.*, 2018). Reduced student engagement is connected to their success rates, creating academic failure,

emotional distress, compromised relationships, risk-taking behavior, and suicidality (Hazel *et al.*, 2018). In a United States survey, 27% of GSM youth reported experiencing physical harassment, 13% physical assault, 49% electronic harassment, and 60% sexual harassment because of their sexual orientation (Kosciw *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, the victimization that GSM students experience in school derives from more than their peers, with 56% of GSM students reporting they have heard homophobic comments from teachers and other faculty within their institutions, highlighting LG students' feelings of vulnerability and unwillingness to report instances of harassment to school officials (Kosciw *et al.*, 2016). The variations of prejudices imposed on LG people reveal that further studies could contribute an understanding to adults' attitudes toward sexual minority youth. Not only are there concerns for LG people in school settings, but there are also negative outcomes of prejudice for LGB people overall (Cochran *et al.*, 2003). In one study, the authors found that gay-bisexual men were 3.0 times more likely to meet criteria for major depression and 4.7 times more likely to meet criteria for a panic disorder than that of their heterosexual counterparts. Also, lesbian-bisexual women were more likely to express generalized anxiety disorder than heterosexual women (Cochran *et al.*, 2003). Not only do LGB people tend to have adversities regarding school engagement and psychological well-being, but there is also evidence that they tend to engage in more substance abuse than heterosexual people (Coker *et al.*, 2008). In a case study, Mandel, (2013) explains that their client, who was a sexual minority, expressed a liking for alcohol and substance use in the attempts to self-medicate their depression, eliminate their feelings of being

different, and socialize with others in a more relaxed manner. With remaining pervasive negative attitudes toward sexual orientation minorities, research pertaining to the behavioral and neural constructs responsible for the biases involved becomes relevant (Dickter *et al.*, 2015).

Although reported attitudes toward sexual minorities seem to be shifting in a more positive manner, it is possible that these reports are not valid (Dickter *et al.*, 2015). There are two distinct motivations that an individual may have for responding without prejudice (Butz & Plant, 2009). Examination of such explicit biases could represent one's tendency to respond according with what society deems appropriate (Dickter *et al.*, 2015). Even though a participant expresses positive attitudes toward oppressed groups on a survey, they can still hold negative beliefs overall (Dickter *et al.*, 2015). This reflects an external motivation, which is the individual's desire to regulate their response in accordance with social pressure, making it less effective (Butz & Plant, 2009).

However, when an individual has an internal motivation to respond without prejudice, they are more likely to control such prejudices (Butz & Plant, 2009). People with internal motivation may have close relationships with outgroups or empathize with those directly affected from prejudices (Butz & Plant, 2009). What could be interpreted from this is that just because an individual has a biased attitude, does not mean that they have to act in accordance with it. Since there are multiple motivations for adjusting one's attitude when being administered an explicit measure, researchers have begun examining individuals' prejudices with implicit measures (Dickter *et al.*, 2015).

Researchers have gained interest in examining one's biases by using implicit measurement techniques, which evaluate attitudes without directly asking participants for the information (Fazio & Olson, 2003). There are multiple ways to measure one's possible implicit biases. Attention processes are commonly used to assess participants' implicit perceptions of minoritized groups (Hamm *et al.*, 1997; Fazio & Olson, 2003). In some studies, individuals' implicit biases are revealed by measuring the reaction time that participants have to visual stimuli (Hamm *et al.*, 1997; Dickter *et al.*, 2015; Dickter *et al.*, 2017; Cunningham *et al.*, 2013). For example, participants tend to view outgroups for a shorter time than in-groups when given the opportunity to terminate the images (Hamm *et al.*, 1997). When an image is terminated with a faster reaction time, it is believed to reflect an avoidance response by the participant (Hamm *et al.*, 1997). Consistent with the idea that gay couples tend to be processed as out-groups, there is

evidence that participants tend to terminate images of gay people more quickly (Dickter *et al.*, 2015; Hamm *et al.*, 1997).

Although there are limited investigations regarding differences in prejudices when examining the LG person's age, one study suggests that youth may be less likely to experience such prejudices in comparison to the adult population (Elischberger *et al.*, 2016). Elischberger *et al.* (2016) used a survey-based study to identify adults' explicit biases regarding transgender children and adolescents. The results from this study showed higher levels of approval regarding transgender people than previous research. The authors proposed a possible explanation for this was because they examined adults' perceptions of specifically transgender youth. The researchers further suggested that it is possible that children and adolescents are not judged as severely because they may not be considered as responsible for their behavior as adults. However, Elischberger *et al.* (2016) did not directly test the differences between perceptions of adults and youth, so a research gap remains regarding the possible differences in individuals' prejudices.

To fill the research gap regarding possible differences in adults' prejudices between LG youth and LG adults, the current study will examine participants' responses to a set of vignettes that vary the described person's age. A set of images of adults and youth will also be presented to participants to measure their responses for both a pleasantness rating and their implicit biases for a possible difference. It is hypothesized that if adults are evaluating LG people, then they will be more likely to express more tolerance toward LG youth than they will LG adults. Specifically, it is expected that participants will express more tolerance toward the youth sample on the vignettes and pleasantness rating while also having a longer reaction time on the implicit scale for youth.

Methods

Participants.

The sample consisted of 110 participants, ages 25-65, who were recruited through Cloud Research and were compensated for their time spent completing the experiment. The study was conducted using Qualtrics, and each participant completed informed consent prior to beginning the study.

Materials.

Vignettes. There were three sets of vignettes used. Each vignette provided a description of an openly gay male (Ethan) regarding his engagement in

society as sexual minority, but each set varied. Specifically, there was a pride vignette regarding Ethan's interest in attending a pride event, a clothing vignette pertaining to Ethan's non-gender-conforming clothing styles, and an intimacy vignette that described Ethan's physical intimacy in a public location with his boyfriend, Mark; each vignette described someone criticizing Ethan's behavior. In one set of the vignettes, Ethan was a 16-year-old, and in the other set of vignettes, Ethan was a 45-year-old. The vignettes were matched regarding the wording in each for both the youth and adult sample. There was a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) asking the extent that the participant agreed with the criticism of Ethan and a subsequent list of 6 items that asked for the participant's reasoning for their response, in which they were able to select all that applied. Two of the reasons provided in the study were "Ethan's behavior will hurt his relationship with others" and "It is good that Ethan has the courage to express his true identity."

Visual Stimuli. There were three sets of visual stimuli (pride, and gender nonconforming clothing style choices, and physical intimacy). The images in each set consisted of a total of eight pictures, with four in the adolescent condition and four in the adult condition, making it a total of twenty-four visual stimuli. Each of the pictures were appropriately cropped to focus on the target stimuli. Black and white images were used for the physical intimacy and gender nonconforming clothing style images. The images were pretested regarding the clarity, complexity, and to ensure that the age of the person fit the condition (16 vs. 45-year-olds). The selected pictures only included white males to ensure that additional biases regarding race, ethnicity, or gender would not interfere with the results.

Procedure.

Participants were given informed consent prior to their involvement in the study. After agreeing to participate, they were asked to complete a series of questions pertaining to the vignettes that randomized the described person's age. To measure the level of the participants' implicit biases, they were instructed to rate all 24 images as pleasant or unpleasant, on a 5-point scale from 5 ("very unpleasant") to 1 ("very pleasant.") It is important to note that, for the pleasantness ratings, lower ratings are more pleasant and higher ratings are less pleasant. The time between the presentation of an image and when the participant pressed the page submit arrow served as a measure of viewing time. Following Dickter *et al.* (2015), the faster that a participant pressed the page submit arrow, the more of an implicit bias they showed. Each participant received a debriefing form upon their completion of the study.

Results

To test the hypothesis that if adults are evaluating LG people, then they will express more tolerance toward LG youth than they will LG adults in regards to responses to the vignettes, a mixed Analysis of Variance was conducted with the age of the person described (16 years old vs. 45 years old) as the between-subjects variable and the scenario provided by the vignette (attending Pride event, gender non-comforming dress, physical intimacy) as the within-subjects variable. Results showed that there was no significant main effect for the age condition of the vignettes, $F(1,107)= 4.94$, *n.s.* There was a significant main effect for the vignettes, $F(2,107)= 3.24$, $p < 0.05$. Specifically, there was a significant difference between the pride vignette ($\bar{x}= 3.87$) and both gender non-comforming dress ($\bar{x}= 3.67$) and physical intimacy ($\bar{x}= 3.64$), but there was not a significant difference between the gender non-comforming dress and physical intimacy vignettes. There was no significant interaction between the vignette and age condition, $F(2,107)= 0.16$, $p= 0.85$.

To test the hypothesis that if adults are evaluating LG people, then they will express more tolerance toward LG youth than they will LG adults in regards to the ratings of the images, a repeated measures Analysis of Variance was conducted with the age of the person described (16 years old vs. 45 years old) and the image type (attending Pride event, gender non-comforming dress, physical intimacy) as within-subjects variables. Results showed that there was a significant main effect for age on the pleasantness ratings, $F(1, 107)= 36.28$, $p < 0.05$. Ratings for the youth condition ($\bar{x}= 2.76$) were significantly more pleasant than ratings for the adult ($\bar{x}= 2.93$).

To test the hypothesis that if adults are evaluating LG people, then they will express more tolerance toward LG youth than they will LG adults in regards to reaction times, a repeated measures Analysis of Variance was conducted with the age of the person described (16 years old vs. 45 years old) and the image type (attending Pride event, gender non-comforming dress, physical intimacy) as within-subjects variables. Results showed that there was no significant main effect for age regarding the participants' reaction times, $F(1,62)= 0.51$, *n.s.*

Supplemental analyses were conducted to better understand the differences between the images provided (attending Pride event, gender non-comforming dress, physical intimacy). Results showed that there was a significant main effect for the pleasantness ratings overall, $F(2, 107)= 31.88$, $p < 0.05$. Specifically, there was a significant difference between the pride images ($\bar{x}= 2.58$) to both gender

non-conforming dress (\bar{x} = 2.99) and physical intimacy images (\bar{x} = 2.96).

Results also showed that there was a significant main effect for the reaction time between the images provided, $F(2,62)= 17.61$, $p < 0.05$. Specifically, reaction times for non-conforming dress (\bar{x} = 3.10) images were significantly faster than that of the reaction times for pride images (\bar{x} = 2.81) and physical intimacy images (\bar{x} = 2.71).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine possible differences in adults' prejudices toward gay youth and gay adults. It was hypothesized that if adults are evaluating LG people, then they will be more likely to express more tolerance toward LG youth than they will LG adults. There was mixed support regarding the results of the current hypothesis. The current study found a significant main effect for the age condition on the pleasantness ratings, with the youth condition being rated more pleasantly than the adult condition. However, there was no significant difference for the age condition of the vignettes or participants' reaction times of the images, differing from the current hypothesis and previous findings.

The significant main effect for the pleasantness ratings is consistent with the current hypothesis and the previous research of Elischberger *et al.* (2016). Although the researchers in this study did not directly test for differences in one's tolerance of LGBTQ+ youth and LGBTQ+ adults, the results showed higher levels of approval than previous research. The authors suggested that a possible explanation for this was that the study examined adult's perceptions of transgender children and that youth may not be judged as severely because they may not be considered as responsible for their behavior as the adult population is (Elischberger *et al.*, 2016). Since the current hypothesis was only supported for the pleasantness ratings, it can be interpreted that differences in adults' prejudices toward gay youth and adults are more complex than the previous explanations of Elischberger *et al.* (2016).

With the pleasantness ratings of the age condition having a significant main effect and the vignette types not revealing a significant main effect, possible explanations to further understand this difference were considered. The current study showed that there is a possible distinction between reading a description of the vignettes and seeing actual visual stimuli regarding the age condition. It could be interpreted that participants revealed stronger effects for the pleasantness ratings of the visual stimuli and not the vignette descriptions because seeing an image

could make someone more aware of their biases. Not only is it possible that seeing an image of the person engaging in typical gay behavior could make them more aware of their biases, but it is also possible that participants approve of gay people, so long as they do not have to see the behavior firsthand. Accordingly, it is possible that reading a description about a gay person engaging in such behavior does not put a direct image in one's head as the visual stimuli do, forcing the individual to confront their possible biases.

Considering the mixed support regarding the results of the current hypothesis, a further investigation should examine differences in age with an even younger youth condition. For example, Elischberger *et al.* (2016) used vignettes with a between-subjects design for both a description of a child (8-year-old) and an adolescent (16-year-old). It is possible that their results indicated higher levels of approval toward the youth condition because they examined children and adolescents, rather than adolescents only. What could be interpreted from this is that an 8-year-old engaging in typical gay behavior may yield different responses from participants than the current study.

With there being limited support regarding the current hypothesis, supplemental analyses were conducted to better understand the differences between the images provided. The supplemental analyses revealed that there was a significant main effect for the reaction time between the images provided. Specifically, participants tended to have significantly faster reaction times for the gender nonconforming images than the pride and physical intimacy images. These findings are consistent with the research of Hamm *et al.* (1997), which explain that out-group images tend to be viewed with a faster reaction time. Since the findings of the current study are consistent with previous research, it is possible that the gender nonconforming images reflect an avoidance response by the participant (Hamm *et al.*, 1997). To contribute a further understanding to this finding, it is suggested that future studies include emotion words as a subsequent procedure of their study to allow participants to describe their affective response of the image (Ekman *et al.*, 1972; Hamm *et al.*, 1997).

The supplemental analyses also revealed a significant main effect for the type of image on the pleasantness ratings, with the pride images being significantly different than the gender nonconforming dress and physical intimacy images. This shows that the pride images were being rated as significantly more pleasant than the images of gender nonconforming dress and physical intimacy. Although there is limited research in regards to these specific three sets of visual stimuli (pride, and gender

nonconforming clothing style choices, and physical intimacy), there are possible implications for these findings. The physical intimacy and gender nonconforming clothing style images were converted into black and white images while the pride images remained in color. This decision was made to show the pride images compatible with what an actual pride event resembles. It is possible that this distinction is because of the differences in color for the images provided.

Generally, the current study found that there is not a lot of support for a difference in age regarding adults' prejudices. However, that does not discount the importance of this study, considering the remaining pervasive negative attitudes toward gay youth. There is a lack of United States school districts implementing and enforcing anti-bullying policies regarding GSM, highlighting the importance of holding the people that impose such prejudices on GSM accountable (Kull *et al.*, 2015). Not only is it important for a reexamination of anti-bullying policies, but it is also suggested that professional development for faculty should occur (Kull *et al.*, 2015). As a result, the faculty working for institutions will be more prepared to intervene in instances of student bullying and educated on the documentation processes involved afterward. Implementing these efforts will ensure that less incidents of harassment toward LG students will go unaddressed (Kull *et al.*, 2015). Contributing a more comprehensive plan to protect sexual minorities from victimization will likely create better school climates and outcomes for students overall (Kull *et al.*, 2015). Raising awareness of the environmental hostilities imposed on GSM students and working toward the negative effects that they experience is essential for creating institutional change, and research in these areas will only contribute toward these efforts (Kull *et al.*, 2015).

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