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To cite this article: George B. Cunningham & E. Nicole Melton (2013): The Moderating Effects of Contact with Lesbian and Gay Friends on the Relationships among Religious Fundamentalism, Sexism, and Sexual Prejudice, Journal of Sex Research, 50:3-4, 401-408

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2011.648029

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The Moderating Effects of Contact with Lesbian and Gay Friends on the Relationships among Religious Fundamentalism, Sexism, and Sexual Prejudice

George B. Cunningham and E. Nicole Melton
Department of Health and Kinesiology, Texas A&M University

The purpose of this study was to examine the degree to which contact with lesbian and gay friends moderated the effects of religious fundamentalism and sexism on sexual prejudice. The authors gathered data from 269 heterosexual adults living in Texas. Results indicate that the effects of religious fundamentalism on sexual prejudice were reduced when contact was high. However, the positive association between modern sexism and sexual prejudice was not moderated by contact. The authors discuss theoretical and practical implications.

Given the negative effects prejudice and discrimination have on lesbians’ and gay men’s health and psychological well-being (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 2009; Meyer, 2003; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2009, 2011), a number of researchers have examined predictors and correlates of sexual prejudice, with the ultimate goal of minimizing its occurrence. Sexism and religiosity represent two of the more robust antecedents of prejudice expressed toward lesbians and gay men. Stereotypical notions of homosexuality challenge the gender binary endorsed by people holding sexist beliefs, as people frequently associate gay men with femininity and lesbians with masculinity (Rich, 1980; Sandfort, 2005). The result of this cognitive dissonance is bias expressed toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals. Indeed, in his meta-analysis, Whitley (2001) found that sexism held a moderate to strong association with prejudice expressed toward sexual minorities (see also Elling & Janssens, 2009). With respect to religiosity, people who are religious fundamentalists, those who attend religious services on a regular basis, and individuals who belong to conservative religious entities are more likely to express sexual prejudice than are their peers (Finlay & Walther, 2003; Schulte & Battle, 2004; Whitley, 2009; Wood & Bartkowski, 2004). Whitley’s (2009) meta-analysis suggests that religious fundamentalism holds the strongest association with sexual prejudice among these constructs.

Although the linkage among sexism, religiosity, and sexual prejudice is firmly established, less attention has been paid to understanding factors that might influence these relationships. Therein lies the importance of moderating variables, or variables that alter the direction or strength of association between a predictor and outcome variable (Baron & Kenny, 1986). In addition to being a meaningful way to add to existing theoretical understandings (Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007), moderators provide cues about when, where, how, and under what conditions relationships might occur (Whetten, 1989). Thus, in the case of this discussion, it is possible that a moderating variable might serve to lessen the effects of either sexism or religious beliefs on sexual prejudice. If this is the case, then researchers and activists could use this information in prejudice reduction interventions.

In this study, we examined the efficacy of one such moderator: contact with sexual minorities. As discussed in greater detail in the following sections, researchers have shown a positive association between interactions with lesbians and gay men, and attitudes toward them (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Smith, Axelton, & Saucier, 2009). However, we were unable to identify research that examined the degree to which contact might lessen the effects of various antecedents, such as sexism or religious beliefs, on sexual prejudice. In seeking to explore this possibility, the purpose of this study was to examine the degree to which contact with sexual minorities moderated the relationship between religious fundamentalism, modern sexism, and sexual prejudice. Modern sexism, which is more commonplace today than traditional forms of sexism, represents a form of prejudice in which people reject that discrimination exists, react negatively to such claims, and resist efforts to reduce inequality (Swim & Hyers, 2009), whereas religious fundamentalism reflects the belief that there is a single set of religious teachings reflecting the truth about personkind and deity (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992). We focus on these particular constructs because

This research was funded by a grant from the Race and Ethnic Studies Institute, Texas A&M.
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of their prevalence in society and their strong association with sexual prejudice (Swim & Hyers, 2009; Whitley, 2009). In the following section, we provide an overview of our theoretical framework and offer specific hypotheses.

Theoretical Framework

Our work is grounded in Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis, which holds that interacting with people different from the self should reduce bias expressed toward that group. He originally suggested that prejudice reduction was most likely to occur when the interactions were marked by equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and support from authorities. However, more recent conceptualizations (e.g., Binder et al., 2009; Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Pettigrew, 1998) no longer attach these qualifiers to the importance of contact. Pettigrew and Tropp (2008), in their meta-analysis, showed that as people spend more time with dissimilar others, they also learn more about the out-group, develop empathy for them, and become less anxious during their interactions. All of these factors serve to result in a reappraisal of the out-group and, thus, a reduction in prejudice expressed toward them.

Empirical support for the value of contact in reducing prejudice is impressive. In a meta-analysis of 515 studies, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) observed a robust, negative association between contact and prejudice, and research specifically focusing on contact and sexual prejudice also supports this trend. For instance, in a study of Australian university students, de Bruin and Arndt (2010) found that participants who knew a bisexual woman or man had more positive attitudes toward bisexuals (both women and men) than did persons who did not have bisexual acquaintances. These findings mirror those reported more than one decade earlier by Herek and Capitanio (1996). In a longitudinal, national, telephone survey of American adults, the authors found that sexual prejudice was lower for persons who had close contact with friends who were lesbians and gay men and whose friends had personally disclosed their sexual orientation to the participant than for persons who did not maintain this level of contact with sexual minorities. Smith et al.’s (2009) meta-analysis of 41 studies also provided support for these relationships, as they found that contact reduced prejudice toward sexual minorities.

Finally, several authors have found that not all types of contact are the same; instead, contact with lesbian and gay friends has a more powerful effect on prejudice reduction than do other types of contact (Eldridge, 2003; Altemyer, 2003; Altemyer & Hunsberger, 1992). Indeed, several authors have argued that contact with dissimilar others is most effective when in the form of friendships (Pettigrew, 1998) or when the potential for such relationships exists (Cunningham, 2008). When intergroup contact is in the form of friendships, people have developed close affective ties and know the individual on a personal level. This is a different form of contact than simply knowing someone (e.g., a coworker) who is different from the self, as affective ties are not as strong with acquaintances as they are with friends. Empirical research supports this reasoning. Wood and Bartkowski, for example, found that people with close lesbian or gay friends engaged in less stereotyping of, were less prejudicial toward, and expressed greater support for sexual minorities than did people who had lesbian or gay family members or acquaintances. Similar findings were observed in Eldridge et al.’s (2006) study of college students in rural settings and Heinze and Horn’s (2009) examination of adolescents in the Midwestern United States. Given these findings, we examined the role of having lesbian and gay friends in reducing sexual prejudice.

Moderating Effects of Contact

In this study, we extended this research by examining the manner by which contact moderates the relationships among religious fundamentalism, sexism, and sexual prejudice. Unlike many other ways in which people differ, others do not know one’s sexual orientation unless she or he chooses to disclose that information; thus, as Ragins (2008) noted, sexual orientation represents an invisible stigma. As a result, heterosexuals and sexual minorities might be able to develop friendships and close affective ties that might not have been possible if the latter’s sexual orientation had been known beforehand. If and when the sexual orientation is disclosed, it comes within the context of an already established relationship—one that is marked by positive affective ties and attitudes. The preexisting ties are important. Herek (2009) noted:

To the extent that the qualities of that personal relationship—including positive affect, individualization, and personalization—are carried over to the new intergroup relationship, it is likely that the heterosexual individual will be able to generalize from her or his feelings toward the sexual minority individual to a more positive attitude toward lesbians or gay men as a group. (p. 456)

Brown and Hewstone (2005) made similar arguments related to contact’s effects on other forms of prejudice. This theorizing provides an important cue for how contact might moderate the relationships among religious fundamentalism, sexism, and sexual prejudice. Recall that religious fundamentalists hold that there is a single, inerrant truth guiding persons and deities (Altemyer, 2003; Altemyer & Hunsberger, 1992), and lesbians and gay men are seen as engaging in behaviors and lifestyles that are contrary to this “truth.”
CONTACT AND SEXUAL PREJUDICE

Fundamentalists might also experience intergroup anxiety and perceive sexual minorities as a threat to their belief systems. Given that, absent contact, people are likely to view out-group members as a homogeneous group (Turner, Crisp, & Lambert, 2007), and religious fundamentalists are likely to express this prejudice to all lesbians and gay men, as well as those presumed to be (see Sartore & Cunningham, 2010).

Friendships with sexual minorities, however, have the potential to alter these perspectives. Through developing close affective ties with sexual minorities, religious fundamentalists might come to see that lesbians and gay men are not deviant, that they do not pose a threat, and that they are unique individuals, rather than members of a homogenous out-group. As a result, their inter-group anxiety and sexual prejudice should also diminish. Indeed, a number of researchers have shown that contact is associated with out-group variability (Islam & Hewstone, 1993), reduced threat (Tausch, Hewstone, Kenworthy, Cairns, & Christ, 2007), and less intergroup anxiety (Binder et al., 2009; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Given these possibilities, we hypothesized the following:

H1: Contact with lesbian and gay friends will moderate the relationship between religious fundamentalism and sexual prejudice, such that the association between religious fundamentalism and sexual prejudice will be reduced when contact with lesbian and gay friends is high.

We expected contact to exert similar effects on the relationship between modern sexism and sexual prejudice. As previously noted, modern sexism is positively associated with prejudice against lesbians and gay men (for a thorough review, see Swim & Hyers, 2009)—a connection that theorists suggest is due to lesbians and gay men breaking traditional gender roles (Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 1997). Stereotypes of sexual minorities challenge the gender binary because people frequently associate gay men with femininity and lesbians with masculinity (Sandfort, 2005; see also Davies, 2004), and this disconnect results in prejudice. Indeed, sexual prejudice is closely interconnected with what it means to be a woman or man in Western cultures (Barron, Struckman-Johnson, Quevillon, & Banka, 2008).

Contact with lesbians and gay men, however, might serve to moderate these effects, and this is likely done in a number of ways. First, people who spend time with lesbians and gay men are likely to find that stereotypes do not hold merit. As an example from the sport context, Jed Hooper, the captain of the Welch rugby team, announced he was gay in October 2011 (Garcia, 2011). Given the hyper-masculine nature of sport, and of rugby in particular, this news helps to dispel myths related to gay men and femininity. Furthermore, even if or when the behavioral stereotypes are confirmed (e.g., lesbians act in a masculine manner), the close affective ties generated with the out-group member should serve to attenuate the effects of previous prejudices (see Brown & Hewstone, 2005). In addition, friendships with sexual minorities should result in perceptions of out-group variability (Islam & Hewstone, 1993). Collectively, these factors suggest that contact with sexual minorities might help to mitigate the association of modern sexism on prejudice directed toward lesbians and gay men. Thus, we hypothesized the following:

H2: Contact with lesbian and gay friends will moderate the relationship between modern sexism and sexual prejudice, such that the association between modern sexism and sexual prejudice will be reduced when contact with lesbian and gay friends is high.

Method

Participants

Study participants included heterosexual adults (N = 269) living in Texas. The sample was comprised of 134 women (49.8%), 132 men (49.1%), and 3 individuals who did not provide their sex. The sample was racially diverse, consisting of 40 African Americans (14.9%), 29 Asians (10.8%), 66 Latinos (24.5%), 4 Native Americans (1.5%), 124 Whites (46.1%), 1 person who listed “other” (0.4%), and 5 individuals who did not divulge their races (1.9%). The mean age was 44.38 years (SD = 13.03), with a range from 19 to 72 years. As discussed in more detail in the following sections, our sample included university employees. This included 169 staff members, 91 faculty members, and 6 persons who listed “other.”

Measures

Participants completed a questionnaire where they provided their demographic information and responded to items designed to measure their sexual prejudice, religious fundamentalism, modern sexism, and contact with sexual minorities.

Demographic information. We asked participants to provide their race (African American, Asian, Latino, Native American, White, or “other”), sex, age, position at the university (staff, faculty, or “other”), and sexual orientation. Sexual orientation was measured by asking the respondents to self-identify their sexual orientation on a 7-point scale ranging from 0 (completely heterosexual) to 6 (completely homosexual).

Sexual prejudice. We measured sexual prejudice by using the short form of Herek’s (1988) Attitudes Toward Lesbians (ATL) and Attitudes Toward Gay Men (ATG) scales, with five items included in each scale. Sample items include, “Female homosexuality is a sin,” and “Homosexual behavior between two men is just plain
Religious fundamentalism. We used six items from Altemeyer and Hunsberger's (1992) scale to measure religious fundamentalism. Our use of an abbreviated version is similar to what others have taken (e.g., Ahrold & Heyers, 2009). A sample item includes, “God has given mankind a complete, unfailing guide to happiness and salvation, which must be totally followed,” and “All of the religions in the world have flaws and wrong teachings” (reverse-scored). Responses were made on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), and the mean across all items represented the final score. The scale demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = .87$).

Sexism. We measured modern sexism using Swim, Aikin, Hall, and Hunter's (1995) scale—an instrument that researchers have used extensively (see Swim & Heyers, 2009). A sample item is, “Discrimination against women is no longer a problem in the United States.” A 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) anchored each item. The reliability was acceptable ($\alpha = .75$), and we used the mean across all items for the final score.

Lesbian and gay friends. Finally, we measured the contact with lesbian and gay friends by adapting items from Binder et al.'s (2009) scale. Specifically, we asked, “How many of your friends are lesbians?,” and “How many of your friends are gay men?” Response options included “none,” “1–3,” “4–6,” “7–9,” and “10 or more.” As the items were closely associated with one another ($r = .84$), we took the mean score of both items to represent overall contact with sexual minorities.

Procedure

This study represents part of a larger project aimed at understanding people's sexual prejudice. In this portion of the study, we identified 1,200 persons from four public universities ($n = 300$ at each university) located in Texas. We chose a university population because we wanted to assess the attitudes of working adults (as opposed to the student populations found in much of the extant research) and because the contact information is readily available through university employee directories. The universities were chosen based on the characteristics of each: a primarily White institution located in a largely White community, an historically Black university, an Hispanic-serving institution, and a large, racially diverse public institution located in a large metropolitan area. Both faculty and staff were surveyed.

We then followed Dillman's (2000) recommendations for making multiple contacts in survey research. Each person in the sampling frame received (a) a pre-study postcard alerting them to the study, (b) a questionnaire packet containing a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study, a questionnaire, and a postage-paid return envelope, (c) a second postcard encouraging participation in the study, and (d) a second questionnaire packet containing a cover letter thanking those who had already participated and encouraging non-respondents to complete the questionnaire, a questionnaire, and a postage-paid return envelope. We distributed each mailing in one-week increments. A total of 178 persons responded to the first questionnaire, followed by another 182 to the second, for a total sample of 360 (30.0% response rate). We then trimmed the data to only include responses from heterosexuals or people who marked 0 on the sexual orientation scale. This reduced the sample from 360 to 269 participants.

Whereas some might consider our response rate low, others have suggested that a 30% rate is good for surveys focusing on sensitive issues (see Berdahl & Aquino, 2009). Nevertheless, we can take steps to assess non-response bias. First, some researchers have suggested that late respondents and non-respondents have similar characteristics and, as such, one can test for non-response bias by examining differences between early and late responders (Rogelberg & Luong, 1998). Analysis of variance indicated that the two groups did not differ on any of the study variables. Thus, although we recognize that late respondents “are not ‘pure’ nonrespondents” (Rogelberg & Luong, 1998, p. 63), this pattern of findings does suggest that non-response bias might not be a substantial concern (see also Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007).

Second, we compared the demographics of our sample with those of the state in which the data collection took place. The U.S. Census Bureau (2012) reports that the state is comprised of 45.3% Whites, 37.6% Latinos, 11.8% African Americans, and 3.8% Asians. These figures closely correspond with those in our sample, although we have a slightly higher proportion of Asians and a lower proportion of Latinos. These differences are likely a function of the context in which the data were collected, as Asians are statistically overrepresented in academia. Collectively, however, these data suggest that our sample is largely representative of the state; thus, non-response bias does not appear to be a substantial concern.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations are presented in Table 1. The mean score for the
CONTACT AND SEXUAL PREJUDICE

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Sex</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Age</td>
<td>0.24***</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Race</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>−0.14*</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Position</td>
<td>−0.30***</td>
<td>−0.23**</td>
<td>0.18**</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Religious fundamentalism</td>
<td>−0.17**</td>
<td>−0.09</td>
<td>0.16†</td>
<td>0.26***</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Modern sexism</td>
<td>0.17**</td>
<td>−0.20**</td>
<td>−0.07</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Contact</td>
<td>−0.05</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>−0.07</td>
<td>−0.09</td>
<td>−0.28**</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Sexual prejudice</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>−0.04</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.14†</td>
<td>0.69***</td>
<td>0.29***</td>
<td>−0.28***</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M (%)</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>44.38</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>3.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>13.03</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Ns range from 252 to 266. Sex is coded as 0 = female and 1 = male. Race is coded as 0 = White and 1 = racial minority. Position is coded as 0 = faculty and 1 = staff and “others.”

*p < .05.  **p < .01.  ***p < .001.

Sexual prejudice variable was relatively low, and a one-sample t test showed it was significantly lower than the midpoint of the scale (i.e., 4, t(266) = −9.59, p < .001). Religious fundamentalism, modern sexism, and contact were all significantly associated with sexual prejudice, and in the expected directions. Follow-up analyses indicated that the association between religious fundamentalism and sexual prejudice was significantly stronger than the association sexual prejudice held with either modern sexism (t = 7.03, p < .001) or contact (t = −7.00, p < .001).

In terms of the demographic variables, men expressed more sexism but held less fundamentalist religious beliefs. Whites expressed more sexism than racial minorities. Age was positively associated with religious fundamentalism. Finally, faculty members expressed less fundamentalism and less sexual prejudice than staff and persons listed as “other.”

Hypothesis Testing

H1 and H2 predicted that contact with lesbian and gay friends would moderate the relationship sexual prejudice has with religious fundamentalism and modern sexism, respectively. We tested these hypotheses through moderated regression analysis by entering the controls in Step 1, the standardized religious fundamentalism, modern sexism, and contact with lesbian and gay friends variables in Step 2, and the Contact × Religious Fundamentalism and Contact × Modern Sexism product terms in Step 3. The condition index (12.78) was <30, suggesting that multicollinearity was not a concern (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). Results are presented in Table 2.

The controls accounted for 1% (p = .80) of the variance. After accounting for these effects, the first-order variables contributed an additional 52% (p < .001) of unique variance. Religious fundamentalism (β = .66, p < .001), modern sexism (β = .13, p = .03), and contact (β = −.18, p = .001) were all significantly associated with sexual prejudice. The third step, which contained the two-way interaction terms, was also significant, and the variables contributed 4% (p < .001) of unique variance. In support of H1, the Contact × Religious Fundamentalism interaction term was significant (β = −.21, p < .001). However, the Contact × Modern Sexism

Table 2. Results of Moderated Regression Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>−.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td>−.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>−.03</td>
<td>−.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious fundamentalism (RF)</td>
<td>.66***</td>
<td>.60***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern sexism (MS)</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact (C)</td>
<td>−.18**</td>
<td>−.20**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C × RF</td>
<td>−.21***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C × MS</td>
<td>−.09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔR²</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.52***</td>
<td>.04***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Sex is coded as 0 = female and 1 = male. Race is coded as 0 = White and 1 = racial minority. Position is coded as 0 = faculty and 1 = staff and “others.”

*p < .05.  **p < .01.  ***p < .001.

Figure 1. Moderating effects of contact with lesbian and gay friends on the relationship between religious fundamentalism and sexual prejudice.
interaction term was not significant ($\beta = -0.09, p = .13$); thus, H2 was not supported.

We conducted a simple slopes analysis (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003) to better understand the Contact × Religious Fundamentalism interaction (see Figure 1). Results indicated that the association between religious fundamentalism and sexual prejudice was stronger when people had few lesbian and gay friends ($B = 1.49, p < .001$) than it was when they had many lesbian and gay friends ($B = 0.71, p < .001$). This is consistent with the theoretical rationale behind H1.

Discussion

Researchers have firmly established that sexism and religious fundamentalism are both positively associated with sexual prejudice, whereas contact with lesbians and gay men holds a negative association with such biases (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Smith et al., 2009; Whitley, 2001, 2009). However, investigation of how these variables might interact with one another to influence sexual prejudice has remained unexplored. We addressed this issue in our study. Results indicate that having friends who are lesbians and gay men can serve to attenuate the positive association between religious fundamentalism and sexual prejudice, although no such effects were observed for modern sexism. In the remainder of this section, we further explore these findings, outline implications, and discuss contributions, limitations, and future directions.

Our results demonstrate that friendships with lesbians and gay men can lessen the impact that religious fundamentalism has on sexual prejudice. As Herek (2009) noted, it is possible that the friendships with sexual minorities cause people to reevaluate their attitudes toward lesbians and gay men, in general—that is, by developing close affective ties with sexual minorities, religious fundamentalists might come to see that lesbians and gay men do not have values, attitudes, and behaviors that are contrary to fundamentalists’ beliefs. They might also come to recognize that their friends are really just individuals (rather than members of a homogeneous out-group; see also Islam & Hewstone, 1993). All of this should serve to reduce intergroup anxiety and sexual prejudice.

That friendships with lesbian and gay individuals did serve as a key moderator in reducing prejudice also brings about new questions. For instance, when did people who hold religious fundamentalist views learn of their friends’ sexual orientations? Given the general level of prejudice expressed by people who maintain fundamentalist views (Altemeyer, 2003), it is unlikely that they would develop friendships with people they knew were sexual minorities, but with these data, we do not know this for certain. Thus, an interesting extension of this research is to examine how and when the disclosure occurs during the relationship influences prejudice toward sexual minorities.

Related to the time of disclosure is the type of disclosure. Claire, Beatty, and MacLean (2005) outlined three types of disclosure: signaling, where people disclose their sexual orientation by sending subtle hints and cues; normalizing, where people reveal their sexual orientation to others by seeking to assimilate and downplay differences; and differentiating, where people disclose their sexual orientation and highlight how it makes them different and unique from others. Given the stigma attached to homosexuality among religious conservatives (Herek, 2009), we suspect that differentiating techniques might substantiate preexisting stereotypes and lead to the rejection of lesbians and gay men. On the other hand, normalizing might allow people to see their similarities with their sexual minority friends, thereby strengthening ties with them (see also Pettigrew, 1998).

Interestingly, results indicate that contact did not moderate the relationship between modern sexism and sexual prejudice. It is possible that the influence of contact might have been stronger with other forms of sexism. We chose to examine modern sexism because of its prevalence in society relative to other, more “old-fashioned” forms of sexism (Swim & Hyers, 2009), the latter of which focuses on the endorsement of traditional gender stereotypes and gender inequalities (Swim & Hyers, 2009; Swim et al., 1995). However, some researchers have found that sexual prejudice is more closely associated with old-fashioned sexism than with modern sexism (see Whitley, 2001). Thus, future researchers should examine the role of contact in reducing the relationship between old-fashioned sexism and sexual prejudice.

Contributions, Limitations, and Future Directions

This study makes several contributions to the literature. First, past researchers have predominantly examined the additive effects of various antecedents of sexual prejudice (e.g., Barron et al., 2008; Eldridge et al., 2006; Wood & Bartkowski, 2004), or when they have included moderators, they investigated the degree to which the antecedents varied based on demographic characteristics (e.g., Cunningham, Sartore, & McCullough, 2010; Whitley, Childs, & Collins, 2011). In extending this research, we show that behavioral factors (i.e., contact) can moderate the relationship between beliefs (i.e., religious fundamentalism) and prejudices. Our sample is also unique, as other than Herek’s (1988; Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Herek et al., 2009) work, most of the social psychological investigations of sexual prejudice work have drawn from college student samples. Certainly, college students can and do express sexual prejudice, but by extending the work to include adult samples, we demonstrate that the relationships uncovered in this study are applicable to a wide
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range of persons, across ages, sexes, and races. Indeed, the primacy of reducing sexual prejudice is highlighted by research showing that LGBT youth oftentimes feel unsafe at school, but these feelings are reduced when they have many supportive staff at their school (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). Thus, researchers need to understand how to reduce sexual prejudice among working adults, particularly those who may be working with lesbian and gay college students.

Despite the contributions of this study, there are also potential limitations. First, some might consider our 30% response rate low. However, as demonstrated in the Procedure section, others have achieved similar responses rates in their research focusing on sensitive issues (Berdahl & Aquino, 2009), early and late respondents did not differ, and the sample was representative of the population from which it was drawn. Thus, non-response bias was likely not a concern. Second, all of the data were collected on a single questionnaire, thereby raising the potential for method variance. We note, however, that method variance is not a concern when testing for moderation, as we did in this study (McClelland & Judd, 1993). In addition, our instruments might serve as a limitation, as we used an older scale to assess sexual prejudice and two items to measure contact. We might have observed different patterns using, for example, Morrison and Morrison’s (2002) Modern Homonegativity Scale. Finally, our entire sample came from universities in Texas; thus, the results might not be generalizable to other settings.

Finally, there are several avenues for future research. We previously mentioned some of these: examination of both when and how disclosure of one’s sexual orientation takes place, and how this influences sexual prejudice, as well as the influence of contact on other forms of sexism. In addition, we examined an overt form of sexual prejudice, but researchers have also demonstrated the efficacy of investigating implicit forms of prejudice toward lesbians and gay men (Snowden, Wichter, & Gray, 2008). Future researchers should also examine antecedents and potential moderators of this subtle form of prejudice. In addition, we focused on attitudes toward and contact with lesbians and gay men. Future research is needed to understand the effects of contact with bisexuals and transgender persons. Finally, efforts are needed to better understand how to implement opportunities for interactions with lesbians and gay men. In the university setting, this might include LGBT events or diversity workshops. Within the organizational context, several researchers have pointed to the importance of stronger leadership and organizational culture. When managers actively support sexual minority rights and the organizational culture is one of diversity and inclusion, intergroup interactions are likely to increase, just as prejudice and discrimination are likely to decrease (see Cunningham, 2011; Cunningham & Melton, 2011). Given the prevalence of sexual prejudice today, such environments are sorely needed.

References


