The Influence of Applicant Sexual Orientation, Applicant Gender, and Rater Gender on Ascribed Attributions and Hiring Recommendations of Personal Trainers

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The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of job applicant sexual orientation on subsequent evaluations and hiring recommendations. Data were gathered from 106 students (48 men, 57 women) who participated in a 2 (applicant sexual orientation: heterosexual, sexual minority) × 2 (rater gender: female, male) × 2 (applicant gender: female, male) experiment related to the hiring of a personal trainer for a fitness organization. Analysis of variance indicated that sexual minority job applicants received poorer evaluations than did heterosexuals. These effects were moderated by the rater gender, as men provided harsher ratings of sexual minorities than did women. Finally, applicant ratings were reliably related to hiring recommendations. Results are discussed in terms of contributions to the literature, limitations, and future directions.

Though Americans’ general attitudes toward gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) persons have become increasingly positive over the past several years, sexual prejudice remains deeply engrained into the American culture (Herek, 2000; Yang, 1997). Such prejudice negatively affects the opportunities people have and their experiences both within and outside the workplace. For instance, GLB persons face access discrimination (Hebl, Foster, Mannix, & Dovidio, 2002; Horvath & Ryan, 2003), are paid less than their heterosexual counterparts (Meyer, 2003), and potentially face hostile work environments, especially in the sport context (Krane & Barber,...

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2005). Ragins and Cornwell’s (2001) findings lend support to this general trend, as the authors observed that sexual prejudice experienced in the workplace was negatively related to organizational commitment, career commitment, self-esteem, job satisfaction, opportunities for promotion, and the overall promotion rate. Not surprisingly, GLB persons oftentimes do not disclose their sexual identity at work, especially when the culture is one that promotes heteronormativity (Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005; Krane & Barber, 2003; Rostosky & Riggle, 2002).

The influence of context on the formation of sexual prejudice is particularly relevant to sport and physical activity. GLB persons have traditionally been disadvantaged as a result of sport’s heterosexist and homonegative discourse (Anderson, 2005; Krane, 2001; Messner, 1992; Plummer, 2006). Consequently, sexual minorities are oftentimes silenced and afforded second-class status (Krane & Barber, 2003). Indeed, the structure of sport is gendered such that male dominance and power are preserved by the maintenance and acceptance of institutionalized norms and practices (Cunningham & Sagas, 2008; Kolnes, 1995; Krane, 2001; Messner, 1992). Consider, for instance, the masculine notion of the “ideal” athlete (i.e., pure power, strength, and assumed heterosexuality; see Messner, 1992) or who is considered to the prototypical sport organizational employee (i.e., White, Protestant, able-bodied, heterosexual male; see Fink & Pastore, 1999; Fink, Pastore, & Reimer, 2001). In both cases, the prototypes within sport bear little to no resemblance to the gender-based, stereotypical notions of homosexuality. Despite unsubstantiated bases for their respective origins and scientific evidence to the contrary (see Gramick, 1973), these often defamatory stereotypes remain quite pervasive, and, as a result, contribute to sport’s homophobic discourse and heterosexist structures. These structures, in turn, construct considerable barriers with which sexual minorities must contend.

Collectively, this literature suggests that sexual minorities face prejudice and discrimination both in the workplace and in the sport and physical activity context. The purpose of this study was to examine these issues in greater depth by considering the incidence of sexual prejudice expressed toward GLB sport organization employees. Specifically, we drew from sexual prejudice theory (Herek, 2000) and the concept of compulsory heterosexuality, or the belief that heterosexual is the only accepted sexual orientation (Rich, 1980), to investigate potential biases and negative character evaluations in hiring preferences for GLB personal trainers. We hypothesized that, despite equally impressive qualifications, GLB job applicants would be rated poorer than would their heterosexual counterparts. These ratings were then expected to be qualified by the gender of the rater (with men providing harsher ratings of GLB individuals than women) and to be positively associated with hiring recommendations. In the following sections, we provide an overview of our theoretical framework and present specific hypotheses.

Theoretical Framework

To better understand the nature of sexual prejudice, particularly within the fitness context, we turn to the concept of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980). According to this concept, heterosexuality is an institution whereby heterosexual, male power, and dominance are maintained. Specifically, and on the basis of gender norms, heterosexuality serves as the established and accepted norm to which all other sexual orientations are compared. Other sexual orientations thus challenge
traditional conceptions of gender and sexuality and are subsequently deemed abnormal and subordinate (Jackson, 2006; Rich, 1980; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009; Wright & Clarke, 1999). This heteronormative gendered order and its byproducts (i.e., stigmatization, prejudice, and discrimination) have not only structured society-at-large, but also various social institutions (Herek, 2007; Rich, 1980).

Indeed, the concept of compulsory heterosexuality can be observed in numerous cases across several contexts. For instance, there are many arguments against the GLB lifestyle, whether based on religion, morality, family values, or any of the like (Herek, 2000; Ragins, 2004). Yang (1997) has shown that the American public is not willing to put homosexuality on the same respected level as heterosexuality. The American public supports some civil rights of GLB individuals (e.g., equal employment opportunities and basic civil union rights), but the extent to which the American public is willing to afford GLB individuals equality falls short on seemingly family-orientated values such as full marriage rights and the ability to adopt children (Ragins, 2004). The negative attitudes toward GLB persons have been shown to manifest from traditional gender expectations, a lack of education, and less exposure to GLB individuals (Bernstein, 2004; Herek, 2000).

GLB persons also face discrimination and biases within the organizational context, as workplace discrimination is rampant and very often subtle (Lubensky, Holland, Wiethoff, & Crosby, 2004; Peel, 2001; Ragins, 2004). In their study, Hebl et al. (2002) demonstrated that sexual minority applicants experienced subtle forms of discrimination during the interview process. Specifically, interviewers engaged in shorter conversations and made less eye contact with GLB applicants than with heterosexual applicants. Such differential treatment has meaningful implications, as without an equal opportunity during the interview process, GLB candidates lose opportunities to be hired. Even if hired, however, they may also lose the chance to grow in their current position due to lost networking (Woods, 1993). Within organizations, sexual minority employees who feel that their sexual orientation is threatened are likely to withhold and hide this part of their personal identity from fellow workers in fear of facing discrimination (Clair et al., 2005).

The sporting industry is not absent from being affected by these stereotypical perceptions of GLB individuals. For instance, Gill, Morrow, Collins, Lucey, and Schultz (2006) observed that future sport and fitness professionals held negative attitudes toward sexual minorities. Gill et al. also found that students were particularly keen on ensuring that their heterosexual status was made known, circling the “exclusively heterosexual” option on the questionnaire numerous times. No such efforts were made with other demographic characteristics questions, such as gender, age, or race. In the collegiate coaching context, Krane and Barber (2005) found that many lesbian coaches hid their sexual orientation from others in the workplace for fear of retaliation and discrimination. One coach in their study noted, “It’s a tremendous strain to walk around always being cautious, always looking around . . . always thinking, always trying to be prepared to answer something . . .” (p. 77). Also relevant to the current endeavors is a recent study from Sartore and Cunningham (2009). These authors observed that athletes expressed an unwillingness to play for a gay or lesbian coach (Study 1) and that most parents were reticent to let their children play on teams coached by gays or lesbians (Study 2). With respect to the latter findings, parents based these decisions on their distrust toward GLB coaches, perceived immorality among GLB persons in general, and reliance on demonstrative gay and lesbian stereotypes. These studies, coupled with
related research focusing on sport and physical activity participants (Anderson, 2002; Griffin, 1998; Messner, 1992), all point to compulsory heterosexuality in the sport and physical activity setting.

**Current Study**

Our focus in the current study was on examining sexual prejudice in the context of fitness clubs and the hiring of personal trainers. Our decision to concentrate on the fitness industry was spurred by several factors. First, even though most of the sport-related research in this area has been in the athletics setting (e.g., Anderson, 2008; Krane & Barber, 2005; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009), this particular context only represents a small portion of the overall sport industry (Chelladurai, 2005). Rather, participant sport, under which fitness clubs would be subsumed, actually constitutes a much larger sport industry segment and warrants further attention; hence, our focus here. Second, personal trainers provide a service in which there is prolonged interaction with the consumer in a close physical space. Such dynamics are important, as research suggests that stereotypes and prejudice result in people preferring to interact with similar others in service relationships (Tsui & Gutek, 1999; see also Cunningham & Sagas, 2006). This research has potential implications for our current study related to sexual prejudice, as the preference for heterosexuals might be heightened when considering hiring someone who provides relationship services (i.e., personal trainers).

As is evident, both sexual prejudice theory and compulsory heterosexuality have direct relevance to the current examination. Specifically, GLB individuals have lower status in the United States and experience prejudice and discrimination because of their sexual orientation (Herek, 2007; Rich, 1980). The lower status is potentially due to (a) the socially-constructed norms related to the acceptability of homosexuality and (b) value systems (e.g., religious beliefs) that consider homosexuality as deviant (Herek, 2000). In the current study, we examined how job applicants would be rated on three dimensions: the degree to which the applicant was perceived as trustworthy, moral, and ethical. The decision to include these factors was based on the extant literature showing that sexual minorities are oftentimes perceived as “wrong and unnatural” (Herek, 2000, p. 20), “abnormal and unnatural” (Herek, 2007, pp. 907–908), “immoral” (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007, p. 109), and “not trustworthy” (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009, p. 108). Based on the literature related to sexual prejudice and compulsory heterosexuality, we expected that people would hold more positive attitudes toward heterosexuals than they would toward sexual minorities. Put another way, we hypothesize that sexual minority applicants for a personal trainer position will be rated more negatively than would heterosexual job applicants (Hypothesis 1).

Of course, other factors might also impact ratings of sexual minority and heterosexual job applicants, and we examine two of them here: the rater’s gender and the applicant’s gender. With respect to the rater’s gender, researchers have continually found that heterosexual men express more sexual prejudice than do heterosexual women (Herek, 2007). For instance, in his large-scale study of persons in the United States, Herek (2002) found that, when compared with heterosexual women, heterosexual men were more likely to believe homosexuality to be a mental illness and were also less likely to support the rights and protections of GLB persons. Gill et al. (2006) observed similar findings in their study of exercise science students, such that men in their sample expressed the highest levels of sexual prejudice.
Within the context of the current study, this literature suggests that the effects of a job applicant being a sexual minority might have a stronger influence of subsequent perceptions and attitudes for men than it does for women. Thus, we hypothesize that rater gender and applicant sexual orientation will interact such that men will rate presumed sexual minority applicants lower than will women (Hypothesis 2).

The applicant’s gender can also influence the relationship between presumed sexual orientation and ratings. Sport is a “powerful mechanism by which male hegemony is constructed and reconstructed” and a context that “privileges all things male and masculine” (Fink, 2008, p. 146). This privileged masculinity is important in the current context, as gay men oftentimes are stereotyped to be feminine and flamboyant (Bernstein, 2004). Thus, the norms and ideals of what men “should be” in the sport and physical activity context are oftentimes contrary to the preconceptions of who gay men are and how they are believed to act. However, lesbian stereotypes, which include aggressiveness and masculinity (Eliason, Donelan, & Randall, 1992), while potentially violating traditional feminine roles, are generally consistent with notions of what is needed to excel in sport and physical activity. Taken together, this literature suggests that greater sexual prejudice might be harbored toward gay men than toward lesbians. Indeed, the limited but growing empirical evidence in the sport context supports these linkages (Gill et al., 2006; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). Consequently, we hypothesize that applicant gender and applicant sexual orientation will interact such that applicants who are presumed to be gay will be rated more poorly than will applicants presumed to be lesbian (Hypothesis 3).

Finally, perceptions of the applicants as trustworthy, moral, and ethical should be positively related to hiring recommendations. Such a perspective is consistent with the personnel selection literature, such that people’s presumed values and beliefs, coupled with the degree to which they match those of the organization, are key determinants in the decision of whether to offer the applicant the position (Kristof-Brown, 2000). For instance, it is unlikely that a rater would recommend an applicant who is dishonest, immoral, or wicked for a job, as such characteristics are not likely to be compatible with those of the organization. Thus, we predicted that applicant attributions would be positively related to the recommendation to hire that individual (Hypothesis 4).

Method

Participants

Participants were 106 students enrolled in physical activity classes at two universities (n = 59 and n = 47, respective) in the United States. One university was located in the Southwest in a state that was conservative-leaning, while the other was located on the east coast in a state that was more progressive-leaning. The sample consisted of 48 men (45.3%) and 57 women (53.8%; 1 person did not provide that information); 81 Whites (76.4%), 15 African Americans (14.2%), 6 Hispanics (5.7%), and 3 persons who listed “other” (2.8%; 1 person did not provide the information). The mean age was 21.36 years (SD = 3.95).

Procedures and Materials

Study packets were randomly distributed to students at the end of the class period. The directions read, “Suppose you are hiring a personal trainer for a fitness
organization. A picture and the qualifications of an applicant are provided below. Please review the applicant’s credentials and then respond to the items on the following page.” Participants then reviewed one of four conditions, which varied by the gender of the applicant (female, male) and the applicant’s presumed sexual orientation (heterosexual, sexual minority). All applicants had the same educational attainment (i.e., Bachelor’s degree in Exercise Science), certifications (i.e., American College of Sport Medicine (ACSM) personal trainer; National Strength and Conditioning Association Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist (CSCS), and previous experience (i.e., Gold’s Gym personal trainer, 2003–2005; Bally’s Total Fitness personal trainer, 2007–present). Differences in the applicant’s presumed sexual orientation were achieved by varying the “additional information” for each person. For the presumed sexual minority condition, participants were informed that the applicant was an “NCAA Division II All-American, Outdoor Track and Field,” “2006 Federation of Gay Games Scholarship Program Recipient,” and “2006 Gay Games Silver Medalist, 400 meter run.” In the presumed heterosexual condition, participants were informed that the applicant was an “NCAA Division II All-American, Outdoor Track and Field,” “2006 Amateur Athletic Union Scholarship Program Recipient,” and “2006 Amateur Athletic Union District Silver Medalist, 400 meter run.”

After reviewing the applicant’s qualifications, participants were asked to respond to items on the following page. Specifically, they were asked to provide their demographic information and to respond to items related to the applicant’s attributions and their hiring recommendations.

In drawing from the sexual prejudice literature (Herek, 2000, 2007; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009) three items were used to assess the characteristics attributed to the applicant. Specifically, participants responded to three semantic differential scales: “trustworthy-dishonest”, “moral-immoral”, and “ethical-wicked” using a 7-point scale. The stem for the items read “In general, I would characterize the applicant as:”. Items were reverse scored so that higher mean scores were representative of more positive attributions. The measure demonstrated acceptable reliability (α = .81).

Hiring recommendations were assessed with three items from Sartore and Cunningham (2007). A sample item is “I would hire this person for the personal trainer position.” Participants responded to items using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The measure’s reliability was acceptable (α = .74).

**Data Analysis**

Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations were computed for all variables. Participant ratings did not vary based on their school affiliation, and consequently, the school attended was not included in the formal analyses. Hypotheses 1–3 were examined through a 2 (applicant sexual orientation: heterosexual, sexual minority) × 2 (rater gender: female, male) × 2 (applicant gender: female, male) analysis of variance (ANOVA), with applicant attributions serving as the dependent variable. Hypothesis 4 was tested through a hierarchical regression analysis, with applicant sexual orientation, rater gender, and applicant gender entered as controls in the first step, applicant attributions entered in the second step, and hiring recommendations serving as the dependent variable.
Results

Manipulation Check

In an effort to assess the efficacy of the manipulation check, we asked participants to indicate whether they thought the applicant was heterosexual, sexual minority, or if they were unsure as to her or his sexual orientation. These questions were situated at the end of the questionnaire so as not to alert the respondents as to the possible purpose of the study. Results from a chi-square analysis indicate significant differences between the two conditions, $\chi^2 (2) = 49.08, p < .001$. In the presumed sexual minority applicant condition, 66.7% ($n = 34$) of the participants believed the applicant was a sexual minority, 25.5% ($n = 13$) indicated that they were unsure of the applicant’s sexual orientation, and 7.8% ($n = 4$) believed the applicant was heterosexual. On the other hand, in the heterosexual applicant condition, 51% ($n = 25$) believed the applicant was heterosexual, 49% ($n = 23$) indicated that they were unsure, and 2% ($n = 1$) thought the applicant was a sexual minority. Overall, these results provide support for the experimental manipulation.

In designing the experimental manipulations, we sought to depict all applicants as highly qualified, thereby ensuring that any potential differences in the hiring recommendations could be attributed to their sexual orientation rather than other factors. To examine this issue, we asked participants to rate the qualifications of the job applicant, with response options including “qualified” and “unqualified.” Frequency analysis indicated that all of the participants (100%) rated the job applicant as qualified, irrespective of the applicant’s sexual orientation. Thus, the qualification manipulation was also successful.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. Of note, neither the applicant’s sexual orientation, her or his gender, nor the rater’s gender were significantly related to either attributions or hiring recommendations. The latter two variables were significantly related to one another ($r = .42$), however.

Table 1  Means, Standard Deviations, and Bivariate Correlations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
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<th>5</th>
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<td>2. Rater gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Applicant gender</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Attributions</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Hiring recommendation</td>
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<td>.16</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.42*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>6.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>1.12</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. ***$p < .001$. Applicant sexual orientation coded as 0 = sexual minority, 1 = heterosexual. Rater gender coded as 0 = male, 1 = female. Applicant gender coded as 0 = male, 1 = female.
Hypotheses 1–3 were tested through an ANOVA. With Hypothesis 1, we predicted that sexual minorities would receive lower ratings than would heterosexuals. This prediction was not supported, as the mean ratings of sexual minorities ($M = 5.19$, $SD = 1.06$) did not vary from their heterosexual counterparts ($M = 5.45$, $SD = 1.16$), $F (1, 90) = 1.22, p = .27$.

Our second hypothesis was that the rater’s gender would moderate the relationship between the presumed sexual orientation of the job applicant and subsequent ratings. Results from the ANOVA supported this expectation, $F (1, 90) = 5.17, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$. The results are depicted in Figure 1. As expected male raters differed in their ratings of sexual minority ($M = 4.76$, $SD = .99$) and heterosexual applicants ($M = 5.52$, $SD = 1.13$), while women did not ($M = 5.65$, $SD = .95$ and $M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.20$, respectively).

With Hypothesis 3, we predicted that the applicant’s gender would interact with her or his presumed sexual orientation to influence applicant ratings. This hypothesis was not supported, $F (1, 90) = .35, p = .56$. Ratings of gay and heterosexual men did not vary ($M = 5.23$, $SD = .96$ and $M = 5.32$, $SD = 1.13$, respectively), nor did ratings of lesbians ($M = 5.17$, $SD = 1.19$) and heterosexual women ($M = 5.58$, $SD = 1.22$).

Though not specifically hypothesized, it is also worth noting that the 3-way interaction (applicant sexual orientation $\times$ rater gender $\times$ applicant gender) was also not significant, $F (1, 90) = .03, p = .87$.

Finally, Hypothesis 4 held that applicant attributions—that is, how they were perceived as trustworthy, moral, and ethical—would be significantly related to hiring recommendations. Results are presented in Table 2. The applicant’s presumed sexual orientation significantly influenced the applicant’s ratings. Male applicants were rated higher than female applicants ($M = 5.77$, $SD = .94$ vs. $M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.13$).

![Figure 1](image-url) — The influence of rater gender on the relationship between applicant sexual orientation and applicant attribution.
orientation, her or his gender, and the rater’s gender cumulatively accounted for
4% (p = .31) of the variance. After controlling for these effects, attributions were
positively associated with hiring recommendations (β = .40, p < .001), explaining
15% unique variance in hiring recommendations. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

Discussion

Though attitudes toward GLB individuals have improved in some sectors over
time (Yang, 1997), there is still evidence that sexual minorities continue to face
discrimination in the workplace, particularly in the sport and physical activity
context (Anderson, 2005, 2008; Krane, 2001; Messner, 1992; Plummer, 2006). In
seeking to expand this literature and the understanding of sexual prejudice, our
primary objective in this study was to examine potential biases and negative char-
acter evaluations in hiring preferences for GLB personal trainers. We did not find
main effects for the presumed sexual orientation of the applicant, the applicant’s
gender, or the rater’s gender. Rather, we observed a more nuanced effect, as the
presumed sexual orientation of the applicant interacted with the rater’s gender to
predict applicant attributions—that is, the degree to which the applicant was ethical,
moral, and trustworthy. These attributions were important, as they were positively
associated with hiring recommendations. In the following sections, we discuss
these findings in greater detail, highlight possible implications, outline potential
limitations, and delineate areas for future research.

Of particular interest, we observed an interactive effect between the rater’s
gender and the applicant’s sexual orientation: men rated sexual minorities poorer
than they did heterosexuals while women did not differ in their applicant ratings.
These findings are consistent with past research showing that women and men
differ in their attitudes toward sexual minorities (Gill et al., 2006; Herek, 2002,
2007; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). For instance, in their large-scale national
survey, Herek (2002) found that men, relative to women, were less supportive of
employment protection and adoption rights for sexual minorities, less supportive
of recognition to same-sex couples, and held more stereotypical beliefs and nega-
tive affect toward sexual minorities. But, why are these effects present? In drawing
from the extant literature, we offer three possibilities: differences between men

<table>
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<th>β</th>
<th>R²</th>
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<td>.10</td>
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<td>Rater gender</td>
<td>.31</td>
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<td>.14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Applicant gender</td>
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<td>.23</td>
<td>−.08</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attributions</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.40***</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.15***</td>
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</table>

Note. ***p < .001. Applicant sexual orientation coded as 0 = sexual minority, 1 = heterosexual. Rater
gender coded as 0 = male, 1 = female. Applicant gender coded as 0 = male, 1 = female.
and women in their (a) linkage of sport/physical activity and heterosexuality, (b) attitudes toward sexuality, and (b) gender belief systems. Each of these is explicated in more detail in the following space.

First, it is possible that there is a strong association between sport/physical activity and heteronormativity (see Anderson, 2008; Fink, 2008; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009), and that these effects are stronger for men than they are for women. We can draw from associative learning theory (Klein, 1991) to better understand these dynamics. Specifically, the theory suggests that different concepts are linked in one’s mind to form an associated network of memory, and once connected, the related concepts are gathered once the other is elicited (Anderson, 1983; Till & Shimp, 1998). These ideas are oftentimes observed in the use of celebrity endorsers to market various products. As Cunningham, Fink, and Kenix (2008) explained, “when endorsers are used to market products, an individual’s experiences and attitudes about both are summoned and a link is developed. Over time, the product and endorser become part of one’s ‘association set,’ and when either of the two is observed, the other immediately comes to mind” (p. 372; see also Till & Busler, 2000).

These ideas are applicable to the current linkage among sport/physical activity and heteronormativity among men. From early on in their sport life, boys are taught that masculinity and heterosexuality are the norm and that variance from this is looked down upon (Anderson, 2009; Plummer, 1999, 2001, 2006), thereby creating an association set. Plummer (2006, p. 124), in his analysis of sexual prejudice and youth sport involvement among boys, aptly noted:

It is observed that boys start using homophobic words such as “poofter” and “faggot” during primary school and that these words become commonplace in boys’ talk before puberty, before their sexual identity consolidates, and before they know much (if anything) about homosexuality. Yet it is also notable that words such as “poofter” and “faggot” were never deployed as random, meaningless insults—on the contrary, from their earliest appearance, they are invested with very specific, powerful meanings. These early meanings and their sequential appearance provide further crucial insights into the workings and significance of homophobia.

Thus, boys are indoctrinated into a culture of sexual prejudice early in their sport lives, and this prejudice stays with them and is continually reinforced throughout their sport involvement (Plummer, 2006). Notably absent in the literature are similar observations (at least to the same degree and vigor) pertaining to girls and women in their sport participation. From an early age, then, boys (but not girls) are taught that sport and heteronormativity are inextricably linked. Thus, in again drawing from tenets set forth in associative learning theory (Klein, 1991), it is possible that when the “sport/physical activity” concept is primed in boys, so too is the “heteronormativity” concept, thereby resulting in the manifestation of their sexual prejudice.

Second, and somewhat related to the first explanation, it is possible that gender differences in the expression of sexual prejudice is a function of attitudes toward sexuality. Herek (2002) noted that “because of homosexuality’s stigmatized status, many heterosexuals wish to avoid being labeled gay or lesbian, and this concern is probably stronger among men in U.S. society” (p. 43). One way of avoiding this stigma is to distance the self from sexual minorities. This can be done physically,
by not interacting with sexual minorities, or psychologically, through the expression of negative attitudes. In the context of the current study, men might have expressed more negative attitudes toward sexual minority job applicants because of their desire to distance themselves from all things gay. Consistent with Herek’s argument, this desire was not present among women raters, presumably because the concern with being labeled a lesbian was not as strong for them.

Third, gender differences in the expression of sexual prejudice could be a function of the varying gender belief systems between men and women (Kite & Whitley, 1998). As Whitley (2001) explained, this belief system “includes factors such as stereotypes about men and women, attitudes toward appropriate roles for the sexes, and perceptions of those who presumably violate the traditional gender roles, including lesbians and gay men” (p. 692). One’s gender belief system is linked to sexual prejudice because of the perceived discrepancies among the attitudes, roles, and behaviors of gay men and lesbians relative to the attitudes, roles, and behaviors men and women are “supposed” to hold. This prejudice is further intensified among people who maintain traditional gender belief systems, as sexual minorities pose a threat to the worldview that places masculinity and femininity at opposite ends of a bipolar continuum. These dynamics are important to the current discussion because men have been found to hold more traditional gender belief systems than women, findings that have been observed across cultures as well (Nierman, Thompson, Bryan, & Mahaffey, 2007; Whitley, 2001). In extrapolating these tenets to the current study, the gender differences in ratings of sexual minority candidates could be a function of different gender beliefs held by men and women raters.

Finally, we found that applicants’ ratings—that is, how our raters perceived the applicants as trustworthy, ethical, and moral—were reliably related to hiring recommendations. From one perspective, this finding supports organizational behavior research showing that people’s presumed values and attitudes, and how well they match those of the organization, are key determinants in whether to pursue a job applicant (Kristof-Brown, 2000). From another perspective, our results might point to the foundations of a more subtle form of prejudice. Recall that all applicants were rated as qualified for the position, but men rated sexual minorities more poorly than the other applicants. Given that these ratings were reliably related to hiring recommendations, it is possible that people use non-work-related attributes to justify their personnel decisions toward GLB applicants. Such a position is consistent with Hebl et al.’s (2002) research showing that employers were more likely to display subtle, rather than overt, forms of discrimination when interacting with sexual minority job applicants.

**Implications**

Our research also has the potential to inform practice. Most poignantly, strategies are needed to reduce the sexual prejudice espoused by men in this study (and in others). Such techniques could be difficult considering that sexual prejudice is oftentimes couched in one’s religious and spiritual beliefs (Herek, 2000). Nevertheless, researchers examining prejudice reduction in the broader field of social psychology have identified several potential mechanisms.

First, research suggests that exposure to dissimilar others reduces biases expressed toward those persons. Eller and Abrams (2003) argued that people with
friends who differ from the self are likely to “learn more about customs and way of life of the outgroup, re-evaluate their ingroup as a result of this long-term contact, and change their behavior vis-à-vis other outgroup members given their attitude change” (p. 59). And, researchers have empirically supported this contention. For instance, in his analysis of Europeans, Pettigrew (1997) found that persons who had friends demographically dissimilar to the self were also unlikely to hold prejudicial attitudes toward out-group members. Particularly germane to the current study, Herek and Capitanio (1996) observed that persons who had friends who disclosed their homosexuality to them had more positive attitudes toward sexual minorities than did their counterparts. These findings suggest forming friends with out-group members might help to assuage the negative effects of diversity in a group setting (see also Cunningham, 2008; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005).

Second, others have argued that there is a business case for sexual orientation workforce diversity (Lubensky et al., 2004). For instance, Cunningham (2007) argued that a workforce that is diverse along sexual orientation lines “is thought to excel in certain areas—creativity, breadth of decision making, and confronting the challenges of a changing marketplace . . . Thus, the presence of GLB employees is highly desired” (p. 200). Furthermore, the presence of GLB employees might help in attracting a broader customer base because of the increased marketplace understanding. It is important to alert others to this “business case” for diversity, as recent work from van Knippenberg and his colleagues (Homan, van Knippenberg, Van Kleef, & De Dreu, 2007; van Knippenberg, Haslam, & Platow, 2007) suggested that diverse groups function better when the group members value diversity and appreciate the benefits of differences in the group (see also Button, 2001, for similar work).

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the strengths of the study, there are potential limitations. Critics might argue that the laboratory nature of the study call into question the degree to which results can be generalized. To buttress this contention, they might further suggest that the 3 min spent examining the materials before responding to questions does not really represent the interaction that would occur in a “real” job interview or personnel decision. We counter these claims by turning to Hebl et al.’s (2002) research. These authors found that managers interacted with GLB job seekers for an average of 4 min, 5 s, more than two minutes less than the managers spent interacting with presumed heterosexual applicants. Not surprisingly, managers in Hebl et al.’s study also interacted in a more negative fashion and expressed less employment interest in GLB persons relative to heterosexual job applicants. Furthermore, related work from the social psychology field suggests that several minutes are not needed for people to make decisions; rather, they continually make important estimates in a matter of seconds (see Gladwell, 2007). As such, concerns about the time spent during the experiment are likely unfounded. Finally, recent research from Jawahar and Mattsson (2005) addressed concerns with the student sample. These authors conducted two studies (one with students and the other with human resource professionals) to examine the influence of gender and attractiveness on personnel decisions and found that “the pattern of results was similar and almost identical” (p. 571). We suspect the same is the case here. In fact, given that
older persons express more sexual prejudice than do younger ones (Herek, 2000), if anything, the pattern of results would be augmented in a study of (presumably older) fitness club managers.

Second, some might argue that our underlying framework and the topic of sexual prejudice itself lends itself more to a qualitative approach. Certainly, qualitative studies have advanced the understanding of sexual prejudice, particularly in the athletics context (Anderson, 2002, 2008; Krane & Barber, 2005). However, there are a considerable number of quantitative studies in this area as well, and researchers have employed a number of different methodological techniques, including cross-sectional (Gill et al., 2006; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009) and experimental designs (Hebl et al., 2002; Herek, 2002). Thus, concerns over studying sexual prejudice using an experimental design might be unfounded. The same rationale holds for employee selection studies, in general, as a number of authors have employed experimental designs to study these issues (Hebl et al., 2002; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007).

Finally, we did not ask respondents to provide their sexual orientation, and it is possible that this could have altered the findings. For instance, Gill et al. (2006) found that sexual minorities expressed less prejudice toward a number of groups (e.g., sexual minorities, racial minorities) than did their heterosexual counterparts. It is possible that we would have observed a similar pattern in this study, such that ratings of job applicants could have differed based on the sexual orientation of the rater. Future researchers should consider this possibility.

Notwithstanding these potential limitations, there are several avenues for future research. Perhaps most importantly, future researchers should examine strategies to assuage the incidences and effects of sexual prejudice, such as those outlined in previous sections. While this research is in the early stages, the findings are encouraging and warrant further investigation with respect to sexual prejudice. Additional research is also needed—both in the laboratory and in the field—to continue to examine the nature of sexual prejudice and compulsory heterosexuality. Specifically, we urge more experimentally-based field research, similar to Hebl et al.’s (2002) inspired study. Research in this area might also uncover differences based on the culture of the workplace; for instance, it is possible that sexual prejudice might vary based on the type of fitness club (e.g., Curves versus Gold’s). Future researchers should also consider investigating the potential of various personal characteristics influencing a rater’s hiring decisions. There is evidence, for instance, that women and people of color also experience discrimination in the sport context (Cunningham, Bruening, & Straub, 2006; Shaw & Frisby, 2006). What type of additive or interactive effects would several “minority” characteristics have on the expression of prejudice and discrimination? Given its prevalence, efforts aimed at better understanding and eradicating sexual prejudice are paramount to providing an inclusive workplace.

Note

Rich (1980) maintained that heterosexuality is an institution whereby heterosexual, male power, and dominance are maintained. We recognize, however, that heterosexual power can be expressed by women as well. One example is the negativity many mothers express toward women who do not have children. We are grateful to the reviewer who noted this.
References


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Gender and Sexual Orientation Influence on Hiring of Personal Trainers


