

Predicting Attitudes toward Homosexuality: Insights from Personality Psychology

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ABSTRACT - Relative standings on personality dimensions predict many important attitudes. The current research tests the hypothesis that people who score higher on the personality dimension of Openness to Experience report more favorable attitudes toward homosexuality. Using data secured by the General Social Survey of respondents (N = 1,012) residing in the USA, several correlates of Openness to Experience were identified and entered into multiple regressions predicting attitudes toward homosexuality. The results provide support for the hypothesis, and suggest that large social surveys might be useful for assessing relationships between personality dimensions and important social attitudes such as attitudes toward homosexuality.

In the world today, there are many views on a person's sexual preference (e.g., Rouse, 2002). Although prejudice against lesbians and gay men is widespread in American society (e.g., Herek, 2000, Whitley & Aegisdottir, 2000), Americans' attitudes toward lesbians and gay men have become less negative over the past 30

years¹, with a gradual increase in the liberalization of American public opinion about homosexuality and a gradual increase in adherence to the belief that homosexuality is an acceptable alternative lifestyle. And although in the past the majority of Americans viewed homosexuality as morally unacceptable (e.g., Yang, 1997), there also has been a shift in attitudes about the legality of homosexuality, with a majority of Americans — 54% — now agreeing that “homosexual relations between consenting adults” should be legal, compared to 43% who felt this way in 1977. In terms of specific issues, a majority of Americans remain opposed to the extension of marriage benefits to gay and lesbian partners joined in civil unions. However, over 80% of Americans accept the idea of including homosexuals under the protection of equal opportunity provisions in the workplace.²

Attitudes toward homosexuality are complex and multifaceted (see, e.g., Davies, 2004). Kite and Whitley (1996) classified attitudes toward homosexuality into three subcomponents: attitudes toward homosexual persons, attitudes toward homosexual behavior, and attitudes toward homosexual persons’ civil rights. Attitudes toward homosexual persons was conceptualized by Kite and Whitley as, “homosexuality as a threat to the respondent, to people close to the respondent, and to strangers, and the management of homosexuality by means of social restrictions” (p. 337). They conceptualized attitudes toward homosexual behavior as, “the moral reprehensibility of homosexuality as a deviant sexual act and lifestyle” (p. 339). Finally, they conceptualized attitudes toward homosexual persons’ civil rights as, “issues such as free speech, parental rights, and other legal and constitutional issues” (p. 339). Previous research has identified several predictors of attitudes toward homosexuality, such as respondent sex, general attitudes toward sexuality, age, education level, income, urbanicity, political attitudes, and knowing a homosexual person (for reviews, see Weishut, 2000). To the best of our knowledge, however, no study has considered respondent’s trait personality correlates—or considered predictors in the framework of personality psychology—of attitudes toward homosexuality in a representative sample. The aim of the current study therefore was to investigate personality correlates relating to negative attitudes toward homosexuality. Personality may predispose individuals to form particular kinds of attitudes and toward homosexuality, in particular (Haslam & Levy, 2006).

Personality is comprised of a collection of traits or dimensions that are enduring over time and situation, are present at different levels across individuals, and have

^{1,2} The Gallup Organization has a detailed analysis of all of its recent homosexuality-related polls. See: "POLL ANALYSES: *American Attitudes Toward Homosexuality Continue to Become More Tolerant*: New Gallup poll shows continuation of slow, but steady, liberalization of attitudes," 2001-JUN-4, by Frank Newport.

relevance in social situations. Although specific attitudes can change over time, the trait underlying the attitude may remain stable. The “Big Five” or “Five Factor Model” (FFM) is a hierarchical taxonomy in which specific traits are subsumed within five overarching dimensions. Extraversion represents the tendency to be sociable and to experience positive affect. Agreeableness represents the tendency to be interpersonally pleasant. Persons high in Conscientiousness possess task-oriented characteristics such as being dependable, responsible, and orderly. Emotional Stability represents the tendency to be emotionally even. Openness to Experience reflects a broad range of characteristics such as unconventional values, aesthetic sensitivity, and need for variety. In summary, these five personality dimensions describe the ways in which individuals differ in their enduring emotional, interpersonal, experiential, attitudinal, and motivational styles (see Costa & Widiger, 1994, John, 1990, and McCrae & John, 1992, for reviews of the Big Five).

Openness to Experience

Heterosexuals’ negative attitudes toward homosexuality are reasoned to stem, at least in part, from their conformity to *traditional* gender belief systems (Kite & Whitley, 1998). It seems, therefore, that negative attitudes toward homosexuality may be part of a construct broader than just negative attitudes toward homosexuality and that endorsing negative attitudes toward homosexuality demonstrates a *general traditional* belief system. Accordingly, attitudes toward homosexuality might be conceptualized as a manifestation of a more general multi-trait factor of personality: Openness to Experience (low traditionalism). Openness to Experience also has been labeled Culture, Intelligence, and Openness. The most elusive of the Big Five to describe succinctly, Costa and Widiger (1994) comment that Openness to Experience, “involves the active seeking and appreciation of experiences for their own sake. Open individuals are curious, imaginative, and willing to entertain novel ideas and unconventional values; they experience the whole gamut of emotions more vividly than do closed individuals” (p. 3). Closed individuals, in contrast, “tend to be conventional in their beliefs and attitudes, conservative in their tastes, dogmatic, and rigid in their beliefs; they are behaviorally set in their ways and emotionally unresponsive” (p. 3).

Predicting Attitudes toward Homosexuality: The General Social Survey

The General Social Survey (GSS) is a personal interview survey of USA households conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (e.g., Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 1993). A key goal of the GSS is to secure information about the social attitudes of USA residents. One of the questions on the 1993 GSS (the most recent

wave of data publicly available at the time of the current analyses) asks how the respondent feels about homosexuality. Of the 1,012 people providing a response, 671 (66.3%) reported that homosexual relations are always wrong, 44 (4.3%) reported that homosexual relations are almost always wrong, 74 (7.3%) reported that homosexual relations are sometimes wrong, and 223 (22.0%) reported that homosexual relations are never wrong.

Predictions

We expected more favorable attitudes toward homosexuality to be reported by people who score higher on Openness to Experience. Those higher on Openness to Experience are relatively more educated, younger, and more politically and religiously liberal (see McCrae & John, 1992). Controlling for respondent's age, those people who reside in the same city at the survey as they did when they were 16 are less likely to have been exposed to the varieties of peoples, cultures, and belief systems that often accompanies a move to a different locale. Thus, we expected to find that geographic immobility will predict unfavorable attitudes toward homosexuality. Finally, if people who have completed less schooling and people who express conservative political views independently report unfavorable attitudes toward homosexuality, we predicted that there will be an interaction between the two variables. Of self-identified conservatives, those persons who have completed fewer years of education are predicted to report more unfavorable attitudes toward homosexuals than people who have completed more years of education.

To construct a multiple regression equation that might predict attitudes toward homosexuality, we first identified variables in the GSS that index Openness to Experience. We reasoned that individuals who are low on Openness to Experience will have unfavorable attitudes toward homosexuality—that is, that they will indicate that homosexual relations are wrong. We identified five markers of Openness to Experience available in the GSS: “educational level” (number of years of education completed), “age” (years), “political views” (degree of liberalism\conservativeness), “religious fundamentalism” (degree of religious commitment), and “geographic mobility since age 16” (current state and city of residence, relative to that at age 16). Educational level and age are continuous variables. For analysis purposes, we recoded political views into “conservatism,” a variable measuring political conservatism (1 = conservative, 0 = moderate, liberal). We recoded religious fundamentalism into “fundamentalism,” a variable measuring religious fundamentalism (1 = fundamentalist, 0 = moderate, liberal). We recoded geographic mobility since age 16 into “geographic immobility,” a variable measuring

geographic immobility since age 16 (1 = live in same city as when 16, 0 = do not live in same city as when 16). Finally, we created one interaction variable (product term) by multiplying educational level and conservatism, to produce “education level X conservatism.” Thus the following regression equation was tested:

$$y = \beta_0 + \beta_1x_1 + \beta_2x_2 + \beta_3x_3 + \beta_4x_4 + \beta_5x_5 + \beta_6(x_1 * x_3) + \varepsilon; \text{ with } y = \text{Attitudes toward homosexuality}; x_1 = \text{educational level}; x_2 = \text{age}; x_3 = \text{conservatism}; x_4 = \text{fundamentalism}; x_5 = \text{geographic immobility}.$$

Results

The results of the model with attitudes toward homosexuality regressed simultaneously on each of the predictor variables produced the following equation (results of analyses that are not specifically reported are available upon request):

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Attitudes toward homosexuality} = & .94 + .13(\text{educational level}) - .01(\text{age}) \\ & + 1.10(\text{conservatism}) - .38(\text{fundamentalism}) - .15(\text{geographic immobility}) - \\ & .12(\text{education level X conservatism}) \end{aligned}$$

The *constant* and *each of the betas* for this model (Model 1) was significantly different from zero at $p < .05$, except for geographic immobility, which was marginally significant, $p = .08$. The addition of each variable significantly increased the variance in attitudes toward homosexuality accounted for by the previous model (all $ps < .05$), with the total model accounting for over 18% of the variance ($R^2 = .18$; *Multiple R* = .43).

Investigating the standardized betas for Model 1, the best predictor of attitudes toward homosexuality was the education level X conservatism interaction term, with *Beta* (standardized) = -.63. This high level of prediction, however, is likely attributable in part to the high multicollinearity associated with the interaction term ($VIF = 20.96$), which correlated $r = -.97$ with conservatism. This situation also generated a high VIF for conservatism ($VIF = 20.27$). It is therefore reasonable to remove the education level X conservatism interaction term from the equation, given high multicollinearity with conservatism. Conducting the multiple regression analysis with the education level X conservatism interaction term removed produced the following equation:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Attitudes toward homosexuality} = & 1.53 + .09(\text{educational level}) - .01(\text{age}) \\ & - .49(\text{conservatism}) - .39(\text{fundamentalism}) - .15(\text{geographic immobility}) \end{aligned}$$

The *constant* and *each of the betas* for this model (Model 2) was significantly different from zero at $p < .05$. Removing the interaction term, however, resulted in several changes in the equation.

Investigating the standardized betas, the best predictor of attitudes toward homosexuality was educational level, with *Beta* (standardized) = .21. In this

reduced model, each of the *VIFs* was near one, suggesting a lack of multicollinearity. The R^2 was only slightly lower in this reduced model ($R^2 = .16$; *Multiple R* = .41). This reduced model therefore is a superior model, free of the substantial multicollinearity of the full model. Following we interpret each unstandardized parameter of this reduced, superior model.

Those people comprising the reference category of political and religious liberals reported a mean rating of 1.53 regarding attitudes toward homosexuality. Thus, even the politically\religiously liberal reported unfavorable attitudes toward homosexuality, expressing an opinion that homosexuality is about mid-way between “sometimes wrong” and “always wrong.” Controlling for other variables in the equation, an additional year of education completed was associated with a .09 rating unit increase in attitudes toward homosexuality. Thus, more educated respondents reported more favorable attitudes toward homosexuality. Controlling for other variables in the equation, an additional year in age was associated with a decrease of .01 attitude rating units. Thus, older respondents reported less favorable attitudes toward homosexuality. Controlling for other variables in the equation, political conservatism was associated with a .49 unit decrease in the mean rating of attitudes toward homosexuality. Thus, conservative respondents reported less favorable attitudes toward homosexuality. Controlling for other variables in the equation, religious fundamentalism was associated with a .39 unit decrease in the mean rating of attitudes toward homosexuality. Thus, religious fundamentalist respondents reported less favorable attitudes toward homosexuality. Finally, controlling for other variables in the equation, geographic immobility was associated with a .15 unit decrease in the mean rating of attitudes toward homosexuality. Thus, geographically immobile respondents reported less favorable attitudes toward homosexuality.

Discussion

Herek (1984) has argued that most of the research into homophobia, its correlates, effects, and maintenance factors, lacks a framework for synthesizing the products of research with theory. In a series of articles and research studies, Herek (for review see Herek, 1998) develops such a framework. He takes the functional perspective, arguing that homophobic beliefs and attitudes, similarly to other opinions, may serve different purposes based on the psychological benefits derived. These functions can be either *Experiential-Schematic* or *Expressive*. Homophobic attitudes which serve *Experiential-Schematic* functions are derived directly from past negative experiences with homosexuals. *Expressive functions*, which support the majority of homophobic attitudes, are indirect in that they are not based on

previous unfavorable interactions. They are either Defensive (serving, for example, to avoid psychosexual conflict or repressed homosexuality) or Symbolic. If symbolic, they are either Value-Expressive (serving, for example, a religious affirmation) or Social-Expressive (serving, for example, as a vehicle for gaining peer approval). The current results indicate that respondents that are less educated, older, conservative, religious fundamentalist, and geographically immobile report less favorable attitudes toward homosexuality. It therefore seems that respondents that score lower on Openness to Experience may be more threatened by non-traditional lifestyles and that their negative attitude toward homosexuality may be a result of psychological benefits that satisfy both defensive and symbolic needs which, in turn, may provide religious affirmation and peer approval and help respondents reduce psychological conflicts and anxiety (or homophobia).

Personality psychologists have identified five major factors or dimensions along which personality varies. The fifth of these factors is Openness to Experience. An open person—someone that scores high on Openness to Experience—seeks out novel experiences, is unconventional, creative, intelligent, and emotionally expressive. A closed person, in contrast, is dogmatic, rigid, traditional, conforming, stubborn, and one-track minded. Open people, relative to closed people, have more education, are younger, and are more politically and religiously liberal (John, 1990; McCrae & John, 1992; Costa & Widiger, 1994). Each of these findings is replicated using data from the General Social Survey (GSS). The prediction that relatively geographically immobile people have less favorable attitudes toward homosexuality was tested and supported. Finally, we predicted that if the less educated and the politically conservative independently report unfavorable attitudes toward homosexuality, there may be an interaction between the two variables. Of self-identified conservatives, those who are less educated were predicted to report more unfavorable attitudes toward homosexuals than those who are more educated. This predicted interaction did emerge, but because of high multicollinearity and an unimpressive increase in the variance explained, the interaction term was dropped from the model.

The current results are congruent with the assumption that personality predisposes individuals to form particular kinds of attitudes. For example, substantial research has linked the trait of authoritarianism and attitudes about a variety of stigmatized groups, including homosexuality (e.g., Heaven & St. Quintin, 2003; Haslam & Levy, 2006). Using data secured from general surveys such as the GSS is relatively rare in the broad field of personality psychology and individual differences. The current research suggests that surveys such as the GSS can be used effectively to investigate the attitudinal correlates of broad dimensions of

personality. More generally, the current research suggests that large social surveys might be useful for assessing relationships between personality dimensions and important social attitudes such as attitudes toward homosexuality.

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