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Conservatism and Religiosity Predict Low LGBT Favorability, But Weakens With Intergroup Contact

Short Abstract

This study investigates the impact of intergroup contact in informing feelings about LGBT people. 1,164 participants completed surveys measuring their conservatism, religiosity, and support for LGBT people. Results show that conservatives and religious people are more likely to view LGBT people unfavorably and disapprove of same-sex marriage. However, LGBT favorability is moderated through diversity in social network, but not same-sex marriage. The findings suggest intergroup contact informs attitudes about LGBT people, but not policy support.

Long Abstract

Understanding what factors inform our attitudes about LGBT people may be important in mitigating prejudice held by high-power people. Support for same-sex marriage has increased over the past decades, but support for marriage equality lags for conservative and religious people (Sherkat, Powell-William, Maddox, & de Vries, 2011). Conservatism and religiosity predict disapproval of gay marriage (Todd & Ong, 2012), transgender bathroom laws (Pew, 2016; CNN, 2016), and attitudes about LGBT people (Norton & Herek, 2013). Research shows that anti-LGBT sentiment can be explained by the attribution of LGBT identity and its discordance with conservative values (Whitehead, 2014; Wood & Bartkowski, 2004). Alternatively, threat to conservative or religious group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1978; Hamner, 1992) or preference for power hierarchy (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008; Duckitt, 2001; Whitley Jr., 1999) might underly LGBT prejudice.

There is insufficient evidence exploring ways to decrease LGBT prejudice. Research shows that attitudes about LGBT people can be durably improved through discourse (Kalla & Broockman, 2020). Alternatively, intergroup contact theory hypothesizes that diversity in social networks decreases prejudice towards outgroup members (Allport, 1954). Research demonstrates that intergroup contact and friendships are effective change-agents for prejudicial views (Hodson, 2011). This intervention has been observed to reduce LGBT prejudice (Hoffarth & Hodson, 2020). The question becomes whether this intervention is generalizable to the real-world, especially for conservatives and religious people.

This study examines the impact of intergroup contact for conservatives and religious people, specifically regarding support for gay marriage and LGBT favorability through intergroup contact. We hypothesize that religiosity and conservatism will relate to disapproval of marriage equality and less favorable attitudes for LGBT people. Additionally, we theorize that these relationships will be moderated by intergroup contact, where knowing an LGBT individual

will reduce the impact of conservative and religious ideology on attitudes of and support for LGBT people.

Method

We utilized data from the GSS-ANES joint 2020 survey ($N = 176$; 104 women; 32 ethnic minorities; M age = 49). Subjects completed a series of questions across a wide array of topics. We focused on measures that assess their political ideology (1 = liberal to 7 = conservative), religious service attendance (0 = not at all to 8 = several times a week), approval of gay-marriage (1 = agree to 5 = disagree), a score of feelings about LGBT people (0 = negative to 100 = positive), and score of intergroup contact (0 = no contact, 0.5 = contact with one, 1 = contact with both).

Data was processed for linear regression. Feeling thermometer ratings of homosexual and transgender people were aggregated so that a mean rating was determined. Similarly, whether or not they know a homosexual or transgender individual was aggregated so that a mean rating was calculated.

Results

Pearson's R correlations showed that conservatism was correlated with disagreement with same-sex marriage $r(174) = -.435, p < .001$ and less favorable attitudes of LGBT people $r(174) = -.387, p < .001$. Similarly, religiosity was correlated with disagreement with same-sex marriage $r(174) = -.478, p < .001$ and less favorable attitudes of LGBT people $r(174) = -.159, p < .05$. Conservatism and religiosity were correlated as well $r(174) = .341, p < .001$.

A multiple regression analysis showed that agreement with same-sex marriage was negatively predicted by conservatism and religiosity when controlling for age, sex, race, and sexual orientation, $R^2 = .369, F(6, 169) = 16.46, p < .001$. When intergroup contact was added to the model, agreement with same-sex marriage was predicted by conservatism and religiosity, but not intergroup contact, $R^2 = .378, F(9, 169) = 11.42, p < .001$. There was no statistical difference between models, $F(3, 169) = .804, p = .493$.

A multiple regression analysis demonstrated that LGBT favorability was negatively predicted by conservatism, but not religiosity, when controlling for age, sex, race, and sexual orientation, $R^2 = .233, F(6, 169) = 8.549, p < .001$. When intergroup contact with an LGBT person was added to the model, the relationship between conservatism and LGBT favorability was weakened, $R^2 = .294, F(9, 169) = 7.823, p < .001$. These models were statistically significant indicating that intergroup contact moderated the relationship between conservatism and LGBT favorability $F(3, 169) = 4.908, p < .01$.

Discussion

The Pearson's R analyses provided insight into the static relationship between conservatism, religiosity, and feelings about LGBT people. The multiple regression model examining the relationship between agreement with same-sex marriage and conservatism and

religiosity was statistically significant, but intergroup contact did not provide a significant difference between models. The multiple regression model examining the relationship between LGBT favorability and conservatism and religiosity was significant, but only for conservatism. Intergroup contact moderated this relationship, suggesting that heterophily in social networks improves favorability ratings of LGBT group members.

Social psychological literature has investigated the mechanisms behind conservatives' and religious persons' prejudice against LGBT individuals. However, the literature has done an insufficient job of discussing interventions to reduce prejudice. While research shows that discourse about LGBT rights has a durable outcome in reducing LGBT prejudice, our data suggests that intergroup contact can reduce negative attitudes about LGBT people held by conservatives and religious people. However, we have evidence that suggests that intergroup contact does not improve support for same-sex policy, indicating a potential *de jure–de facto* conflict. This may also explain why homosexuality was previously a tolerated act prior to the legalization of same-sex marriage in the U.S. following *Obergefell v. Hodges*. The same pattern is expected for transgender people, where these identities will be tolerated by conservatives and religious people before policy implementation.