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Sexual Prejudice

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Social psychologists have been conducting research on racial, ethnic, and religious prejudices for nearly a century. By contrast, prejudice related to sexual orientation has only recently received systematic scientific scrutiny. Sexual prejudice manifests many of the same social psychological characteristics as other forms of prejudice with more extensive research pedigrees, as this chapter makes clear. Nevertheless, its relatively recent recognition by scientists and society is indicative of some of its distinctive features, notably that it is based on a concealable status and that it is not universally condemned. Indeed, it remains widespread in contemporary society.

This chapter considers these commonalities and differences in providing an overview of current theory and research on sexual prejudice, especially as it is manifested in the United States. The chapter is guided by a conceptual framework that integrates the constructs of stigma and prejudice, and provides a unified account of how they are experienced by sexual minorities and heterosexuals. After describing that framework, the chapter considers issues relevant to the definition of sexual prejudice as an attitude; its cognitive, affective, and behavioral sources; some of its key correlates; and its underlying motivations. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of how cultural and psychological factors have combined to foster a reduction in sexual prejudice in recent years.

SEXUAL STIGMA AND PREJUDICE: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Although this chapter is about sexual prejudice, it is grounded in a conceptual framework that begins with the construct of stigma (earlier versions of this framework can be found in Herek, 2004, 2007; Herek, Chopp, & Strohl, 2007). As used here, stigma refers to the negative regard, inferior status, and relative powerlessness that society collectively accords to people who possess a particular characteristic or belong to a particular group or category. Inherent in this definition is the fact that stigma constitutes shared knowledge about which attributes and categories are valued by society, which ones are denigrated, and how these valuations vary across situations. Whereas lay definitions of stigma tend to focus on the condition or attribute that discredits the individuals who manifest it—marking them as diverging in an undesirable way from society’s understanding of normalcy—social psychological accounts have emphasized the social processes through which a stigmatized condition acquires its meaning in different situations (Goffman, 1963; see also Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Jones et al., 1984). These culturally constructed meanings are grounded in society’s power relations so that individuals who inhabit a stigmatized role enjoy less access to valued resources, less influence over others, and less control over their own fate than the nonstigmatized (Link & Phelan, 2001).

Sexual stigma is the stigma attached to any nonheterosexual behavior, identity, relationship, or community. It constitutes socially shared knowledge about homosexuality’s devalued status in society—that is, its denigration and discrediting relative to heterosexuality (for other discussions of sexual stigma, see Herek, 2004, 2007; Herek et al., 2007). Like other stigmas, sexual stigma creates roles and expectations for conduct that are shared and understood by the members of society. Regardless of their own sexual orientation or personal attitudes, people in the United States (and many other countries) know that homosexual desires and behaviors are widely regarded in negative terms relative to heterosexuality. They are also aware of the malevolent stereotypes that
are routinely attached to individuals whose personal identities are based on same-sex attractions, behaviors, relationships, or membership in a sexual minority community.

Although same-sex and different-sex behaviors are ubiquitous in human societies and other species, notions of “the homosexual” and “the heterosexual”—and the idea that individuals can be defined in terms of their sexual attractions and behaviors—emerged in medical discourse relatively recently (e.g., Chauncey, 1982–1983). The stigmatization process was apparent in the very construction of these categories during the 19th century. The modern term homosexuality (Homosexualität), appears to have been first used in 1869 by Karl Maria Benkert in a German-language pamphlet (Feray & Herzer, 1990; Herzer, 1985).1 It was not the only term in use at that time to refer to the phenomenon of same-sex attraction and love, but it represented an attempt to cast them in more positive terms. Nevertheless, homosexuality’s inferior status is evident in the fact that Benkert contrasted it with “normal sexuality” (Normalsexualität). Heterosexuality (Heterosexualität) came into usage as the counterpart to homosexuality only later (see also J. N. Katz, 1995). Thus, the stigmatization of homosexuality has historically been inherent in the differentiation of sexual behaviors and desires in Western thought.

As with other social groupings that create majority and minority statuses, sexual orientation is a socially constructed category. Our contemporary understanding of it as a binary heterosexual–homosexual system (with the status of bisexuality often ambiguous) is historically recent. Thus, sexual stigma is a product of cultural forces, although the various social categories linked to homosexuality over the past century (including categories related to disease, predation, and immorality) may resonate with cultural universals of stigma (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Kurzban & Leary, 2001). As sexual stigma becomes increasingly delegitimized, homosexuality may cease to be associated with these categories.

Stigma-derived differentials in status and power are legitimated and perpetuated by society’s institutions and ideological systems in the form of institutional or structural stigma (e.g., Link & Phelan, 2001). As a product of sociopolitical forces, structural stigma “represents the policies of private and governmental institutions that restrict the opportunities of stigmatized groups” (Corrigan et al., 2005, p. 557). Structural sexual stigma is referred to here as heterosexism. Adapting Link and Phelan’s (2001) definition of institutional racism, heterosexism can be understood as a cultural ideology that is embodied in institutional practices that work to the disadvantage of sexual minority groups even in the absence of individual prejudice or discrimination. It comprises the organizing rules that enforce and perpetuate sexual stigma in society’s institutions. As with institutional and individual racism, distinguishing between heterosexism and individual sexual prejudice facilitates the analysis of structural policies and individual attitudes as separate albeit interrelated phenomena.

By embedding sexual stigma in society’s institutions, including religion, the law, and medicine, heterosexism has historically justified the differential status of sexual minorities relative to heterosexuals. It is noteworthy, however, that as lesbian, gay, and bisexual people have increasingly come to be recognized as a minority group whose members deserve recognition not simply as human beings but also as well-functioning members of society who are entitled to full citizenship and equal rights, discriminatory practices and policies against them have begun to lose their claims to moral righteousness. In other words, heterosexism’s legitimacy in the United States and elsewhere is increasingly contested (e.g., Kelman, 2001). In some arenas, such as the mental health professions and behavioral sciences, heterosexism is now completely delegitimized, as signaled by the American Psychiatric Association’s removal of homosexuality from its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1973, and the American Psychological Association’s subsequent commitment to “take the lead in removing the stigma of mental illness that has long been associated with homosexual orientations” (Conger, 1975, p. 633).

1 It has been argued that Homosexualität should be translated as “homosexual” rather than “homosexuality” (Bech, 1998).
Nevertheless, heterosexism remains strong in many societal institutions, notably in most religious denominations and in much of the U.S. legal system (Herek et al., 2007). In these domains, it legitimizes and perpetuates power differentials between heterosexuals and sexual minority individuals through at least two general processes. First, it promotes a heterosexual assumption (i.e., all people are presumed to be heterosexual) and thereby renders gay, lesbian, and bisexual people invisible in most social situations. Second, when people with a nonheterosexual orientation become visible, heterosexism problematizes them. Nonheterosexuals, homosexual behavior, and same-sex relationships are presumed to be abnormal and unnatural and, therefore, are regarded as inferior, as requiring explanation, and as appropriate targets for hostility, differential treatment, and even aggression. By contrast, heterosexuals are regarded as prototypical members of the category people, and heterosexual behavior and different-sex relationships are presumed to be normal and natural (Hegarty & Pratto, 2004; for a more detailed discussion of institutional stigma and specific aspects of heterosexism, see Herek et al., 2007).

**INDIVIDUAL MANIFESTATIONS OF SEXUAL STIGMA**

Heterosexism provides the institutional context for individual manifestations of sexual stigma, including sexual prejudice. As elaborated later, sexual prejudice is conceived here as the internalization and acceptance of sexual stigma. Before addressing it, two other individual manifestations of stigma—enacted stigma and felt stigma—are briefly discussed.

**ENACTED SEXUAL STIGMA**

*Enacted sexual stigma* refers to the overt behavioral expression of sexual stigma through actions such as the use of antigay epithets, shunning and ostracism of sexual minority individuals, and explicit discrimination and violence against them. Sexual minority adults and adolescents routinely encounter such enactments (Badgett, Lau, Sears, & Ho, 2007; D’Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006; Herek, in press). For example, criminal victimization of sexual minorities is widespread (e.g., Berrill, 1992; Herek & Sims, 2008). A study reporting data from a national probability sample of self-identified lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults found that 21% of the respondents had experienced violence or a property crime based on their sexual orientation at least once during their adult life (Herek, in press). Using data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), an ongoing national survey with a large population-based sample, the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics estimated that more than 37,800 hate crime victimizations motivated by the victim’s sexual orientation occurred in the United States between July 2000 and December 2003 (Harlow, 2005). Most of them (about 58%) were not reported to police authorities (Harlow, 2005; Herek & Sims, 2008; see also Herek, Cogan, & Gillis, 2002). In addition to physical harm, suffering violence because of one’s sexual orientation appears to inflict greater psychological trauma on victims than other kinds of violent crime (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999; see also Mills et al., 2004; Szymanski, 2005).

Although enactments of sexual stigma typically target sexual minority individuals, they also are directed at heterosexuals. The close associates of sexual minorities—friends, family members, and “allies” (heterosexuals who take a public stand against sexual stigma)—are at risk for such enactments through what Goffman (1963) called a *courtesy stigma* (Neuberg, Smith, Hoffman, & Russell, 1994; Sigelman, Howell, Cornell, Cutright, & Dewey, 1991). Moreover, by virtue of sexual orientation’s concealable nature, any heterosexual can be mistakenly labeled homosexual or bisexual and is thus potentially vulnerable to enactments of sexual stigma. This fact has important implications for understanding another facet of sexual stigma, namely, felt stigma.
**Felt Sexual Stigma**

People need not be the targets of enacted stigma for it to affect their lives. Indeed, the knowledge that enacted stigma is likely to occur under certain circumstances often motivates people to modify their behavior to avoid being a victim. This is the essence of *felt stigma*, an individual’s expectations about the probability that stigma will be enacted in different situations and under various circumstances (Scambler & Hopkins, 1986). Felt stigma derives from individuals’ awareness of the existence of sexual stigma and their beliefs about how and when society condones expressions of it. Because virtually anyone, regardless of his or her sexual orientation, can be a target for enactments of sexual stigma, and because people generally wish to avoid being such a target, felt stigma often affects behavior.

Among stigmatized individuals, felt stigma can be manifested as a high level of *stigma consciousness*; that is, a stigmatized individual’s chronic self-consciousness of her or his own stigmatized status and expectations of being stereotyped by others because of it (Pinel, 1999). It also can appear in more subtle ways, as when *stereotype threat* impairs a lesbian, gay, or bisexual individual’s performance in situations where negative stereotypes about sexual minorities become salient (Bosson, Haymovitz, & Pinel, 2004).

Felt stigma also motivates stigmatized individuals to engage in preemptive, protective coping behaviors to avoid situations in which stigma enactments are possible (Scambler & Hopkins, 1986). Such behaviors include, for example, attempting to pass as a member of the nonstigmatized majority and isolating oneself from that majority. Although these coping strategies can reduce one’s risks for discrimination and attack, they can also significantly disrupt a stigmatized individual’s life, restrict her or his options, and heighten her or his psychological distress (Herek, 1996; R. J. Lewis, Derlega, Griffin, & Krowinski, 2003). For example, chronically concealing one’s sexual orientation utilizes cognitive resources in a way that can negatively affect well-being (Pachankis, 2007; Smart & Wegner, 2000; see also R. J. Lewis, Derlega, Clarke, & Kuang, 2006) and often reduces opportunities for social support (Herek, 1996). These factors help to explain why concealment of one’s gay identity has been linked to psychological distress and health problems, whereas being out of the closet has been found to correlate with positive psychological and physical states (Cole, 2006; Morris, Waldo, & Rothblum, 2001; Strachan, Bennett, Russo, & Roy-Byrne, 2007; Ullrich, Lutgendorf, & Stapleton, 2003; but see Frable, Wortman, & Joseph, 1997). Thus, although concealing one’s sexual orientation can protect an individual from enacted stigma, it also creates stress and may have deleterious effects on psychological and physical well-being.

Like sexual minority individuals, most heterosexuals learn about the negative consequences of being labeled a homosexual during childhood and adolescence (Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003; Poteat, Espelage, & Green, 2007; G. W. Smith, 1998). However, sexual stigma tends not to be salient to heterosexuals unless sexual orientation becomes personally relevant, as occurs when they knowingly encounter a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person, or in situations where their own sexual orientation might be questioned. On those occasions, felt stigma can motivate them to ensure that their nonstigmatized status is readily evident to others, thereby avoiding the possibility that they will be inaccurately perceived as stigmatized (and thus become a target of enacted stigma). Self-presentation strategies are especially important for males, who are continually called on to affirm their heterosexual masculinity by avoiding stereotypically feminine behaviors (Bosson, Prewitt-Freilino, & Taylor, 2005; Bosson, Taylor, & Prewitt-Freilino, 2006) and, sometimes, by enacting sexual stigma against others to prove to their peers that they are “real men” (Herek, 1986b; Kimmel, 1997).

**Internalized Sexual Stigma**

Internalization is the process whereby individuals adopt a social value, belief, regulation, or prescription for conduct as their own and experience it as a part of themselves (e.g., Kelman, 1961; Ryan & Connell, 1989). When someone internalizes stigma, she or he embraces society’s denigration and
discrediting of the stigmatized group. Thus, internalized stigma refers to an individual’s personal acceptance of stigma as a part of her or his own value system and self-concept.

Stigma can be internalized by minority and majority group members alike. A stigmatized individual’s internalization of stigma, whereby her or his self-concept is congruent with the stigmatizing responses of society, is referred to here as self-stigma (Corrigan & Watson, 2002; Jones et al., 1984). For sexual minorities, self-stigma involves accepting society’s negative evaluation of homosexuality as warranted, and consequently harboring negative attitudes toward oneself and one’s own homosexual desires. Such attitudes may be manifested as a wish to deny or renounce one’s homosexuality and become heterosexual (e.g., Herek, Cogan, Gillis, & Glunt, 1998). Self-stigma among sexual minorities has been labeled internalized homophobia (Shidlo, 1994; Weinberg, 1972), internalized heterosexism (Szymanski & Chung, 2003), and internalized homonegativity (Mayfield, 2001). It often has important negative consequences for physical and psychological well-being (Herek & Garnets, 2007; Meyer, 2003).

Whereas the internalization of stigma is manifested among the stigmatized in the form of negative attitudes toward the self, it is manifested among members of the nonstigmatized majority as negative attitudes toward the stigmatized, that is, prejudice. Thus, sexual prejudice is internalized sexual stigma that results in attitudes toward sexual minorities that are congruent with the stigmatizing responses of society. The remainder of the chapter focuses mainly on sexual prejudice.

SEXUAL PREJUDICE: DEFINITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS AND DISTINCTIONS

Sexual prejudice is conceptualized here as an attitude; that is, a category-based evaluative tendency to respond to groups or to individuals on the basis of their group membership (Albarracin, Zanna, Johnson, & Kumkale, 2005; Duckitt, 1992; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). As psychological phenomena, attitudes can be highly idiosyncratic and may be harbored toward anyone and anything. Thus, in a strictly psychological sense, anyone can manifest prejudice against another person because of the latter’s sexual orientation. For example, sexual minority individuals can be prejudiced against heterosexuals, just as heterosexuals can be prejudiced against lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. Although both manifestations of negative attitudes can appropriately be labeled prejudice, the conceptual framework described earlier helps to clarify why they are not equivalent.

As the internalization of sexual stigma, prejudice against sexual minorities is part of a larger cultural complex. It represents an individual’s endorsement of an ideological system that disempowers sexual minorities, creates institutional barriers to their full participation in society, and fosters enactments of stigma against them, including extreme violence. By contrast, heterosexuals do not constitute a socially devalued and disempowered minority group whose members routinely encounter discrimination, hostility, and bias because of their sexual orientation. Lacking institutional and societal support, prejudice against heterosexuals is simply an expression of individual attitudes.

This is not to suggest that sexual minority individuals cannot harbor prejudice that represents the internalization of sexual stigma. Self-stigma among sexual minorities is inner-directed sexual prejudice. It may be manifested not only as negative feelings toward oneself, but also as negative feelings toward others who share one’s stigma. Moreover, individuals in one segment of the sexual minority population can manifest prejudice against those in other segments, as when gay men or lesbians express prejudice against bisexuals, or when sexual minority individuals of one gender express negative attitudes toward their counterparts of the other gender (e.g., Kristiansen, 1990; Mohr & Rochlen, 1999; Rust, 1993). Such attitudes may combine self-stigma with other intergroup attitudes (e.g., gender-based prejudice). Although they represent an understudied and interesting topic, this chapter focuses on sexual prejudice as a heterosexual person’s negative attitude toward sexual minority individuals or toward homosexuality.
DISTINGUISHING SEXUAL PREJUDICE FROM OTHER
SEXUAL ORIENTATION ATTITUDES

Although a variety of attitudes implicate sexual orientation, it is useful to distinguish sexual prejudice from two related types of attitude. First, sexual prejudice is distinct from attitudes toward policies that enforce or implement sexual stigma; that is, attitudes toward heterosexism. Examples of such policies include the U.S. government’s exclusion of open sexual minorities from military service (Herek, 1993) and laws prohibiting marriage equality for same-sex couples (Herek, 2006). Although researchers have often treated positive attitudes toward such policies as direct expressions of sexual prejudice (Herek, 2008), empirical research highlights the potential utility of considering them separately from heterosexuals’ attitudes toward sexual minorities as a group.

One example that demonstrates the value of this distinction is the consistent finding that much of the U.S. public condemns homosexual behavior as immoral while simultaneously endorsing civil liberties for homosexuals (Loftus, 2001). Indeed, some public opinion survey questions about basic rights for homosexuals and other stigmatized minorities were originally conceived as measures of tolerance for unpopular groups. Underlying the notion of tolerance is the idea that one can support basic civil rights for groups that one personally dislikes (Jackman, 1977; Stouffer, 1955). Further support for a distinction between prejudice and policy attitudes can be found in empirical research showing that feelings toward sexual minorities played a decreasingly important role in determining public opinion about gay rights over the course of the 1990s while egalitarian values became more important (P. R. Brewer, 2003), and in studies indicating that heterosexuals’ attitudes toward gay men and lesbians do not fully account for the variation in their attitudes toward policies implicating sexual minorities (Strand, 1998; see also Wood & Bartkowski, 2004). For example, in a 2005 national telephone survey, with sexual prejudice statistically controlled, heterosexuals’ antigay policy attitudes were predicted significantly by their egalitarian values, moral traditionalism, and political conservatism (Herek, 2008).

Thus, although sexual prejudice is an important predictor of policy attitudes, the latter are also shaped by political and moral attitudes and values that are conceptually distinct from the internalization of sexual stigma. This suggests that policy attitudes may be amenable to change even in the absence of a widespread reduction in the heterosexual public’s sexual prejudice. If these structural manifestations of stigma are perceived as intolerant and antiegalitarian, for example, public support for them might erode independently of changes in individual heterosexuals’ prejudice.

A second distinction is between sexual prejudice and attitudes that, although ostensibly directed at another attitude object, are fueled largely by sexual prejudice. A prime example of such symbolic expressions of prejudice can be found in public attitudes toward people with HIV/AIDS and AIDS-related policies. In the United States and many other countries, the HIV epidemic has had a devastating impact on gay and bisexual men, and AIDS was often equated with homosexuality in the early years of the epidemic. Even though the epidemiology of HIV changed in the 1990s, with gay and bisexual men constituting a shrinking portion of U.S. AIDS cases, much of the American public continues to equate AIDS with homosexuality (Herek & Capitanio, 1999a; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2006). Because of this association, AIDS has served as a vehicle for many heterosexuals to express sexual prejudice (Herek, 1997; Herek & Capitanio, 1999a; Herek & Glunt, 1991; Pryor, Reeder, & Landau, 1999; Pryor, Reeder, Vinacco, & Kott, 1989). Thus, a better understanding of sexual prejudice can also assist in understanding public attitudes toward groups and issues that are symbolically linked with homosexuality. Nevertheless, the latter are not synonymous with the former. Attitudes toward people with HIV/AIDS can also be based on concerns about risks of infection for oneself or loved ones (e.g., Herek, 2000b; Pryor, Reeder, & McManus, 1991) or on attitudes toward other stigmatized groups, such as injecting drug users (Capitanio & Herek, 1999).
Sexual prejudice has much in common with racial, ethnic, religious, and other prejudices. All are understood as attitudes that are founded on the target’s group membership. As attitudes, they are all based on information that individuals derive from their beliefs, affective responses, and past behaviors. In each case, the attitude object is a socially devalued minority group whose members routinely encounter discrimination, hostility, and bias. Each type of prejudice can be operationally defined and measured with similar explicit and implicit techniques. And, as discussed later, many of the same variables predict all of these forms of prejudice.

As noted at the outset of the chapter, however, sexual prejudice differs from many other forms of prejudice in at least two noteworthy respects (see also Fiske & Taylor, 2007). One difference results from the previously noted fact that an individual’s sexual orientation is not usually apparent during social interactions. Indeed, sexual minority individuals themselves only recognize, discover, or construct an identity based on their sexual orientation over the course of development, sometimes not until they are adults. From the minority individual’s perspective, this means that one is likely to grow up in a heterosexual environment with an expectation of being heterosexual as an adult. He or she must develop an awareness or recognition of her or his homosexual orientation and then disclose it to others, often without guidance from a sympathetic adult or a sexual minority role model. Sexual minority individuals are also likely to have internalized sexual stigma before first recognizing their nonheterosexual orientation.

The concealability of sexual orientation also has important implications for heterosexuals. As discussed earlier, because anyone can be labeled as nonheterosexual, enacted stigma and felt stigma can be experienced by heterosexuals as well as by sexual minorities. This fact motivates many heterosexuals to assert their sexual orientation in social settings, sometimes even by enacting sexual stigma against others. In addition, the concealability of sexual orientation means that heterosexuals can unknowingly interact with lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. As discussed later, this has important implications for the effects of intergroup contact on sexual prejudice.

A second important difference between sexual prejudice and many other forms of contemporary prejudice is the extent to which the former is considered acceptable by much of society. Although the legitimacy of sexual stigma (and, therefore, sexual prejudice) is increasingly contested, contemporary social norms do not uniformly condemn discrimination, bias, and hostility against sexual minorities. Indeed, as previously noted, many societal institutions favor differential treatment of sexual minorities and negative attitudes toward homosexuality remain widespread. In response to a General Social Survey question about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex, for example, a majority (57% in 2004) has consistently regarded homosexual behavior as “always wrong.” In the American National Election Studies (ANES), the average feeling thermometer ratings for “gays and lesbians” have remained below the neutral score of 50 (the mean score was 49 in 2004) and, compared to the public’s feelings toward other groups, feeling thermometer scores for “gays and lesbians” have ranked near the bottom of the list. It is also noteworthy that the number of respondents assigning gays and lesbians a zero—the coldest possible score—tends to be larger than for other groups (Sherrill & Yang, 2000). Other national surveys have consistently shown that substantial numbers of heterosexuals regard gay men and lesbians as disgusting and consider homosexuality to be wrong and unnatural (e.g., Herek, 1994; Herek, 2002a).

Despite the persistence of sexual prejudice, U.S. public opinion data reveal trends toward less condemnation and dislike. The size of the majority considering homosexual relations to be always wrong, for example, has declined since the 1970s and 1980s, when it was as high as 75% (Yang, 1997). The mean ANES thermometer ratings for “gays and lesbians” have increased from 39 in

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2 My discussion of polling data relies on my own examination of the data in publicly available archives (especially the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut), as well as the published sources cited here.
In Gallup polls, a majority of respondents (57% in 2007) now consider homosexuality an acceptable lifestyle, compared to 34% in 1982 (Saad, 2007). The willingness of much of the U.S. public to express negative attitudes toward gay people is in sharp contrast to racial and ethnic prejudice, which are socially proscribed in most settings. Indeed, the latter fact has fostered the development of theories and methods to explain and assess subtle, hidden, and ambivalent manifestations of prejudice (e.g., Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005b; I. Katz, 1981; McConahay, 1986). The need for similar approaches to sexual prejudice has been less apparent, especially outside of tolerant social settings such as many college campuses (e.g., Morrison & Morrison, 2002). Important insights can nevertheless be gained from approaches such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT; e.g., Banse, Seise, & Zerbes, 2001; Dasgupta & Rivera, 2006; Jellison, McConnell, & Gabriel, 2004; Steffens, 2005; Steffens & Buchner, 2003; Tsang & Rowatt, 2007), but their role in the study of sexual prejudice has not yet been developed to the same extent as for other forms of prejudice.

COGNITIVE, AFFECTIVE, AND BEHAVIORAL SOURCES OF SEXUAL PREJUDICE

In contemporary social psychology, attitudes are understood as entities based on cognitive, affective, and behavioral information. Attitudes can both influence and be inferred from those three sources, but are nevertheless distinguishable from them (e.g., Albarracin et al., 2005; Fabrigar, MacDonald, & Wegener, 2005; Haddock, Zanna, & Esses, 1993). In this chapter’s conceptual framework, for example, heterosexuals’ internalization of sexual stigma (i.e., sexual prejudice) is distinguished from stigma enactment (i.e., negative behaviors toward sexual minority individuals). Stigma enactments are often motivated by prejudice (e.g., Bernat, Calhoun, Adams, & Zeichner, 2001; Franklin, 2000; Parrott & Zeichner, 2005; San Miguel & Millham, 1976) but this is not always the case. For example, some heterosexuals who perpetrate antigay hate crimes nevertheless express favorable attitudes toward gay people as a group (Franklin, 1998). As in other domains (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005), patterns of antigay behavior are likely to be correlated with sexual prejudice, but only moderately so. Across several empirical studies, correlations between measures of sexual prejudice and self-reported negative behaviors toward sexual minorities have ranged from $r = .25$ to $r = .40$ (Franklin, 2000; Herek, 2008; Patel, Long, McCammon, & Wuensch, 1995; Roderick, McCammon, Long, & Allred, 1998).

SEXUAL PREJUDICE AND BELIEFS ABOUT SEXUAL MINORITIES

Research on the cognitive sources of sexual prejudice has focused mainly on three types of beliefs: stereotypes, beliefs about values, and essentialist beliefs. Each is discussed briefly here.

Whereas psychological stereotyping is a product of normal cognitive categorization processes and can be relatively benign, it usually derives its content from cultural stereotypes of sexual minorities. Those stereotypes, grounded as they are in sexual stigma, generally portray sexual minorities in negative terms as outsiders. Like stereotypes of other historically stigmatized groups, they are often malevolent and dehumanizing—characterizing group members as predatory, animalistic, hypersexual, overvisible, heretical, conspiratorial, and diseased (Adam, 1978; Gilman, 1985; Herek, 1991). Belief in such stereotypes both fuels sexual prejudice and provides a justification for antipathy toward sexual minorities. For example, the stereotype that gay men (and, to a lesser extent, lesbians) prey on children has been widespread in the United States at least since the World War II era (Chauncey, 1993; Freedman, 1989). Although most heterosexual Americans today recognize that this stereotype is baseless (Herek, 2002a), it continues to be invoked in antigay discourse as a strategy for promoting and justifying hostility toward sexual minorities and discrimination against them (e.g., Family Research Institute, 2006).

Perhaps because these inflammatory stereotypes of sexual minorities are not widely believed in settings such as college campuses, much of the social psychological research on this topic (which
Sexual prejudice can potentiate the negative effects of stereotypes about sexual minorities by, for example, impairing heterosexuals’ ability to suppress stereotypical thoughts (Monteith, Spicer, & Tooman, 1998) or differentiate among sexual minority individuals (Walker & Antaki, 1986). It also can bias heterosexuals’ perceptions of sexual minority individuals and influence their assimilation of new information, which can perpetuate their stereotypical beliefs (e.g., Munro & Ditto, 1997; Sherman, Stroessner, Conrey, & Azam, 2005). Even when heterosexuals perceive intragroup variability among sexual minorities, they may assimilate this information by recategorizing the latter into stereotype-consistent subgroups. For example, Clausell and Fiske (2005) found that heterosexual undergraduates cognitively organized subgroups of gay men according to the latter’s ostensible conformity to traditional gender roles. Moreover, none of the subtypes were regarded as both competent and warm—attributes that typically are associated with one’s ingroup or valued reference groups and are linked to positive emotions (Clausell & Fiske, 2005).

In addition to stereotypes, prejudiced heterosexuals may harbor the belief that sexual minorities support or embody values that conflict with their own (Esses, Haddock, & Zanna, 1993; Haddock & Zanna, 1998; Haddock et al., 1993; Jackson & Esses, 1997). Such beliefs have become especially salient in the United States since the advent of the so-called “culture wars” in the 1980s, when sexual minorities came to be widely portrayed as embodying values that are antithetical to conservative Christianity (Herman, 1997). Strong associations have been observed between measures of sexual prejudice and traditionalist values concerning sexuality, gender roles, and family structure in both correlational studies and laboratory experiments (e.g., Herek, 1988; Kite & Whitley, 1998; Vescio & Biernat, 2003). Moreover, policy issues in which sexual orientation and family structure intersect (e.g., marriage equality for same-sex couples, adoption and parenting by sexual minority adults) are viewed by many Americans mainly in terms of conservative religious values (P. R. Brewer, 2003; P. R. Brewer & Wilcox, 2005; Price, Nir, & Cappella, 2005).

A third type of belief that is relevant to understanding sexual prejudice relates to essentialism. Allport (1954) proposed that a “belief in essence” (p. 174) develops as a consequence of the principle of least effort in cognitions about social groups, and is often associated with prejudice. In the domain of sexual prejudice, the role played by subjective essentialism is complex. Some components of essentialist beliefs—especially the notions that sexual orientations are discrete categories and that gay and lesbian people are fundamentally different from heterosexual men and women—are reliably associated with sexual prejudice. Other components, however, such as beliefs that sexual orientation is immutable and a universal characteristic of human beings, are associated with lower levels of prejudice, at least in the United States (Haslam & Levy, 2006; Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2002; Hegarty, 2002; Hegarty & Pratto, 2001).

Beliefs about whether or not sexual orientation is immutable and whether or not it is freely chosen have played a prominent role in public debate about policies related to sexual minorities in the United States. A growing number of American adults—in some recent polls, a plurality—now believe that homosexuality is “something a person is born with” (Saad, 2007). Compared to such individuals, those who believe that homosexuality is chosen tend to manifest higher levels of sexual prejudice (Herek & Capitanio, 1995; Jayaratne et al., 2006; Saad, 2007; Schneider & Lewis, 1984).3

3 The fact that most discussion in this area centers on the origins of homosexuality but not heterosexuality illustrates how the former is routinely problematized whereas the latter is assumed to be natural and not requiring explanation.
This pattern has often been explained with reference to attribution theory (e.g., Whitley, 1990). From this perspective, the belief that a person is responsible for acquiring a stigmatized characteristic such as homosexuality leads to more negative attitudes toward the person, less sympathy, and less desire to assist the individual (Weiner, 1993). Conversely, it is assumed that heterosexuals will become less prejudiced if they become convinced that being gay is not a choice.

Because of the correlational nature of the data about choice beliefs and sexual prejudice, however, a causal relationship cannot be assumed. Hegarty (2002; Hegarty & Golden, 2008) argued that expressing the belief that homosexuality is chosen may be a consequence of sexual prejudice rather than a cause. He contended that in a society like the United States, where assertions as to whether or not homosexuality is a choice have become symbolic expressions of prejudice, heterosexuals may construct their beliefs about choice “to fit their sexual politics rather than the reverse” (Hegarty, 2002, p. 163). In support of this argument, he found that choice beliefs were correlated with prejudice only among those respondents who also perceived that tolerant attitudes toward sexual minorities are signified by statements that homosexuality is unchangeable and not chosen (Hegarty, 2002).

It is also possible that the choice–prejudice correlation may result from the causal influence of a third factor, such as heterosexuals’ personal contact with sexual minority people. In one survey with a national U.S. sample, Whites (but not Blacks) harbored less sexual prejudice and were less likely to regard homosexuality as a choice if they personally knew one or more gay people. Those relationships may have reduced their prejudice while also affording them an opportunity to learn their friend or relative’s ideas about the origins of her or his own sexual orientation.

Thus, although the link between immutability beliefs and sexual prejudice has been reliably observed in the U.S. public, the underlying reasons for this association are not well understood. Immutability beliefs may reflect attributions of responsibility and thus cause heightened prejudice, or they may be justifications for the expression of preexisting prejudice. Alternatively, immutability beliefs and prejudice may both result from interpersonal contact or some other variable.

**Affective Sources of Sexual Prejudice**

As with beliefs, sexual prejudice is related to but distinct from negative affect toward sexual minorities. Nevertheless, it is clear that emotions play an important role in sexual prejudice, as well as in enactments of extreme forms of sexual stigma, such as hate crimes. For example, substantial proportions of national probability samples—in many cases majorities—have expressed disgust at male or female homosexuality in telephone interviews (e.g., Herek, 2002a; Herek & Capitanio, 1999b; Herek & Glunt, 1993). Other research has shown that anger can form the basis for attitudes in some cases, and may mediate the relationship between sexual prejudice and enactments of stigma (e.g., Parrott & Zeichner, 2005; Parrott, Zeichner, & Hoover, 2006). Indeed, emotional factors may contribute more strongly to sexual prejudice than do stereotyping and other cognitive influences (Fiske & Taylor, 2007).

The first conceptualization of sexual prejudice to achieve widespread attention focused on affect. Weinberg (1972) coined the word *homophobia* and defined it as “the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals” (p. 4; see Herek, 2004, for an extended discussion of Weinberg’s work). By labeling these attitudes a phobia, Weinberg suggested they were based on irrational fears. Although this assumption is theoretically problematic and lacks empirical support (Herek, 2004), homophobia has attained widespread usage. Thus, fear is popularly presumed to be at the heart of antigay prejudice.

Different authors, however, have identified different targets for that fear. Whereas Weinberg’s definition seems to clearly link heterosexuals’ fears to gay people themselves, two activist colleagues of Weinberg characterized homophobia in a 1969 article as heterosexuals’ fear that others will think they are homosexual (Nichols & Clarke, 1969, cited in Herek, 2004). Kimmel (1997) extended this analysis, arguing that
Homophobia is more than the irrational fear of gay men, more than the fear that we might be perceived as gay. . . . Homophobia is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men. (p. 233)

The actual role played by fear in sexual prejudice has been difficult to assess, especially in light of the different objects proposed for that fear, and empirical data on the importance of fear versus other emotions is mixed. Shields and Harriman (1984) assessed the heart rates of heterosexual male undergraduates as they viewed slides of male–female, male–male, and female–female sexual activity. Of the men who had scored high on a self-administered measure of sexual prejudice, only some displayed a physiological response consistent with fear (heart-rate acceleration to the male–male slides; Shields & Harriman, 1984). Bernat and his colleagues found that heterosexual male undergraduates who scored high on a measure of sexual prejudice also reported more negative affect, anxiety, and anger after viewing a video depicting male–male sexual acts, compared to their low-scoring counterparts (Bernat et al., 2001). Although fear was included in their measure of negative affect, so were shame, guilt, hostility, and other feelings. Thus, their findings do not permit conclusions about the role of fear in sexual prejudice.

Mahaffey and her colleagues found that undergraduate men’s self-reported discomfort around gay men was significantly associated with levels of startle eye-blink responses in conjunction with viewing photographs of nude and seminude male couples (Mahaffey, Bryan, & Hutchison, 2005a; see also Mahaffey, Bryan, & Hutchison, 2005b). Meier and his colleagues compared heterosexual male undergraduates on the basis of their scores on measures of discomfort with gay men and defensive self-enhancement. Compared to other participants, those who scored high on both measures (whom the researchers labeled defensive homophobics) spent less time viewing computer screen images of kissing or embracing male couples than of similarly engaged heterosexual couples (Meier, Robinson, Gaither, & Heinert, 2006). The same group also manifested more negative associations with gay men on an implicit attitude measure. The findings of both research groups suggest that negative affect is present among heterosexual males who express discomfort about social contact with gay men, but do not indicate whether that affect consists of fear, disgust, anger, or some other negative emotion.

All of the studies just described focused on heterosexual males’ responses to images of two men (often at least partially unclothed) engaged in affectionate or explicit sexual activity. Thus, they assessed reactions to a rather narrowly defined stimulus, and may reveal more about heterosexual men’s responses to male–male sexual activity than their attitudes toward gay men in routine social situations. To the extent that heterosexuals tend to think of gay people largely or entirely in sexual terms, however, these reactions may be highly relevant to understanding sexual prejudice.

A somewhat different approach was used by Bosson and her colleagues. They focused on the aspect of “homophobia” discussed by Kimmel (1997) and others, namely, heterosexuals’ fears of being incorrectly labeled homosexual. They found that engaging in tasks that might cause them to be perceived as gay evoked discomfort among heterosexuals; this discomfort was alleviated, however, when the research participants were given the opportunity to assert their heterosexuality (Bosson et al., 2005; Bosson et al., 2006). Within this chapter’s conceptual framework, the heterosexuals’ discomfort can be understood as the product of felt stigma.

KEY CORRELATES OF SEXUAL PREJUDICE

Empirical research has identified a group of demographic, psychological, and social variables that are reliably correlated with heterosexuals’ attitudes toward gay men and lesbians, and many of these correlates are also common to racial, ethnic, religious, and other prejudices (Duckitt, 1992). Heterosexuals with high levels of sexual prejudice are more likely than their nonprejudiced counterparts to be older, less well-educated, and residing in geographic areas where negative attitudes are the norm (e.g., rural areas of the midwestern or southern United States). They are also more likely to
be men, a fact that is discussed later. In terms of social attitudes, they are less likely to be sexually permissive (e.g., unlikely to condone sexual activity outside a heterosexual marriage) and they generally express traditional attitudes concerning gender roles. They are more likely to be highly religious, to hold orthodox or fundamentalist religious beliefs, and to identify themselves as politically conservative rather than liberal or moderate. They tend to display higher levels of psychological authoritarianism, dogmatism, and intolerance for ambiguity. They are also more likely to believe that a homosexual orientation is freely chosen and are less likely to have had close personal friends or family members who are openly lesbian or gay (for reviews, see Herek, 1984, 1994; Loftus, 2001; Simon, 1998; Whitley & Lee, 2000; see also Ellison & Musick, 1993; Hauberle, 1999; Herek & Capitanio, 1995, 1996; Herek & Glunt, 1993; G. B. Lewis & Rogers, 1999). Although research on heterosexuals’ attitudes toward bisexual men and women is fairly limited, many of the same variables have been shown to be correlated with those attitudes as well (Herek, 2002b; Mohr & Rochlen, 1999). Of these many correlates, three types of variables have proved to be especially important for understanding sexual prejudice. Each of them is discussed briefly in the next sections.

**Gender**

Some of the earliest available data on heterosexuals’ attitudes toward sexual minorities revealed a gender gap, with men manifesting more negative attitudes than women toward gay people. In the mid-20th century, for example, Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues found that White college-educated females were less likely to disapprove of homosexual sex than were their male counterparts; the former’s attitudes were also less disapproving than those of college-educated Blacks of both genders as well as White respondents with no college (Gebhard & Johnson, 1979). In what was perhaps the first national survey to assess attitudes toward homosexuality, a 1965 Harris poll found that 82% of male respondents believed that homosexuals were “more harmful than helpful to American life,” compared to 58% of female respondents (Harris, 1965).

Since these early studies, empirical research conducted in the United States has found that heterosexual men and women differ reliably in their attitudes toward homosexuality and gay people, and these gender differences display three principal patterns. First, women tend to express more favorable and less condemning attitudes than men toward gay people. Second, in the aggregate, attitudes toward gay men tend to be more hostile than attitudes toward lesbians. Third, the most negative attitudes are those expressed by heterosexual men toward gay men (e.g., Herek, 2002a; Kite, 1994; Kite & Whitley, 1996, 1998). Across studies, the magnitude of the gender gap in attitudes toward homosexuality varies depending on whose attitudes are being measured and which attitude domain is being assessed. In some domains the differences are strikingly large, whereas some issues related to policies affecting sexual minorities have not elicited gender differences in attitudes (Kite & Whitley, 1996). Most of the relevant data are derived mainly from non-Hispanic White samples of U.S. adults, but the limited available evidence suggests that gender gaps may also occur in some facets of the attitudes of African American (Herek & Capitanio, 1995; G. B. Lewis, 2003) and U.S. Hispanic adults (Herek & González-Rivera, 2006; Sherrod & Nardi, 1998).

Research also suggests that heterosexual men tend to respond to sexual minorities in terms of gender, whereas heterosexual women tend to respond in terms of orientation group. In a U.S. national telephone survey in which respondents provided separate feeling thermometer ratings for gay men, lesbians, bisexual men, and bisexual women, the heterosexual female respondents rated bisexuals significantly less favorably than they rated homosexuals, regardless of gender. By contrast, heterosexual men rated sexual minority males less favorably than sexual minority females,

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4 The sample did not include a sufficient number of Blacks with less than a college education to permit their inclusion in the comparison.
regardless of whether the target was bisexual or homosexual (Herek, 2000a). A similar pattern has been observed in Germany (Steffens & Wagner, 2004).

In addition to revealing attitudinal differences between men and women, empirical research has consistently yielded a significant correlation between attitudes toward homosexuality and gender-related attitudes. Negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians have been reliably associated with support for traditional gender roles and heightened concern about gender-role conformity, especially among males (Herek, 1994; Jellison et al., 2004; Kilianski, 2003; Kite & Whitley, 1998; Parrott, Adams, & Zeichner, 2002).

Gender differences have also been observed in the cognitive dynamics underlying attitudes toward homosexuality. In national surveys with probability samples of English-speaking U.S. adults, heterosexual men’s self-reported attitudes toward gay people—especially lesbians—were dramatically affected by the order in which the questions were asked, whereas women’s responses largely were not (Herek, 2002a; Herek & Capitanio, 1999b). These surveys used the three-item parallel versions of the Attitudes Toward Gay Men (ATG) and Attitudes Toward Lesbians (ATL) scales, which are reliable measures of sexual prejudice (Herek, 1994). When the ATL questions followed the identically phrased ATG items in a 1997 survey, for example, 54% of the men agreed with the ATL item “I think female homosexuals are disgusting.” By contrast, of the men who were randomly assigned to answer the ATL items first, only 36% agreed with the same statement, a difference of 18 points (Herek & Capitanio, 1999b). Similarly, in a 1999 survey, for the ATL item, “Sex between two women is just plain wrong,” the difference was 17 points: When it was administered after the ATG items, 59% agreed with this statement, but only 42% agreed when ATL items came first (Herek, 2002a; see Steffens, 2005, for discussion of a similar context effect with an implicit measure of sexual prejudice in a German student sample). In addition, in the 1999 survey, response latencies for the first attitude item in the lesbian and gay male series (“Sex between two women [men] is just plain wrong”) differed significantly between men who were low in sexual prejudice and those who were high in it. Highly prejudiced men had significantly longer response latencies for the lesbian version than the gay male version regardless of the order in which items were presented. By contrast, men with lower levels of sexual prejudice took longer to answer whichever item version came first, a pattern that probably reflects a normal practice effect (Herek, 2002a).

These patterns indicate that heterosexual men’s attitudes toward lesbians are strongly influenced by contextual cues. They are substantially more negative when a respondent is primed to think about lesbians in relation to gay men than when the context encourages him to think about lesbians independently (i.e., if the lesbian questions are asked first in the sequence). By contrast, heterosexual women’s survey responses generally have shown only minimal effects of item order, or none at all. Thus, not only do quantitative gaps exist between heterosexual men’s and women’s attitudes toward lesbians and gay men, but heterosexual men’s attitudes toward gay men also may be more accessible and fully formed than their attitudes toward lesbians.

**Religious Beliefs and Affiliations**

Public opinion data and laboratory research show that antigay prejudice is strongly correlated with multiple indicators of religiosity. More frequent attendance at religious services is associated with higher levels of antigay attitudes, especially among members of more fundamentalist denominations, and heterosexuals tend to be more prejudiced against sexual minorities to the extent that they say their religion is an important source of guidance in their daily lives (Fisher, Derison, Polley, & Cadman, 1994; Herek, 1984, 1994; Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Loftus, 2001; Scott, 1998).

This pattern is reminiscent of findings in early studies of racial and ethnic prejudice. Although religiosity would seem to be antithetical to such prejudice, researchers observed that they were often correlated (e.g., Duckitt, 1992; Stark & Glock, 1973). This led Allport (1954, 1966) to propose that an individual’s way of being religious determined her or his propensity for prejudice. Those for whom religion served primarily as a means to obtaining social status and personal security (which
Allport termed an *extrinsic* religious orientation) were likely to be prejudiced, whereas those for whom religion serves as an end in itself (an *intrinsic* orientation) were likely to be unprejudiced. Because intrinsics use religious teachings to inform their everyday interactions with others, Allport believed, for them “there is no place for rejection, contempt, or condescension” toward other human beings (Allport & Ross, 1967, p. 441). The extrinsically motivated, by contrast, are religious mainly so they can enjoy social acceptance and integration. Religion provides them with “security, comfort, status, or social support” (Allport & Ross, 1967, p. 441). Because prejudice often provides similar benefits (as was especially the case in mid-20th-century America), extrinsics were often prejudiced (Allport, 1966).

Research on racial and ethnic prejudice among U.S. Christians tended to support Allport’s hypothesis that individuals with an extrinsic orientation would tend to score higher on self-report measures of prejudice (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993). However, this pattern was not observed in studies that employed indirect measures (Batson, Naifeh, & Pate, 1978; see generally Batson & Stocks, 2005).

Studies of prejudice and religious orientation generally focused on forms of prejudice that are proscribed by religious denominations, such as racism. As noted earlier, sexual prejudice is strongly endorsed by some religious denominations. Research that has examined the link between Christians’ religious orientation and sexual prejudice has shown that an intrinsic orientation is correlated with prejudice against lesbians and gay men (Burris & Jackson, 1999; Duck & Hunsberger, 1999; Griffiths, Dixon, Stanley, & Weiland, 2001; Herek, 1987b; McFarland, 1989; Tsang & Rowatt, 2007). This association is typically reduced to a nonsignificant level when religious fundamentalism is statistically controlled. Similarly, Hunsberger and his colleagues found fundamentalism was significantly correlated with sexual prejudice among Christians and non-Christians in Canada and Ghana (Hunsberger, 1996; Hunsberger, Owusu, & Duck, 1999). Jackson and Esses (1997) found that higher levels of fundamentalism were correlated with more negative judgments of homosexuals among Canadian college students, and this relationship was mediated by students’ perception that gay people threatened their values.5 A third type of religious orientation, *quest* (an open-ended, questioning approach to religion; Batson et al., 1993), has generally been found to be negatively correlated with various forms of prejudice, including sexual prejudice (Fisher et al., 1994; Kirkpatrick, 1993; McFarland, 1989, 1998).

Some religious believers separate their attitudes toward acts and toward actors, as expressed in the maxim, “Love the sinner but hate the sin.” Applied to homosexuality, this distinction suggests that the individual holds positive regard for the gay or lesbian individual even while condemning her or his sexual behavior. However, social psychological research has failed to produce evidence for it. Fulton, Gorsuch, and Maynard (1999) found that fundamentalists rejected people who were described as homosexual even if the latter were characterized as celibate. Moreover, their rejection of noncelibate homosexuals tended to be greater than their rejection of heterosexuals who engage in sex outside of marriage (Fulton et al., 1999). In a laboratory experiment, Batson and his colleagues led religious undergraduate students to believe their actions would help or hinder another student of the same sex in winning a raffle. The other student was described variously as a lesbian who wanted to use the raffle money to finance a trip to a gay pride rally, a lesbian or gay man who would use the money to visit grandparents, or a presumed heterosexual (sexual orientation not stated) who would use the raffle prize to visit grandparents. The researchers hypothesized that a philosophy of “loving the sinner but hating the sin” would be expressed in not helping the student who wanted to attend a gay rally (because that would constitute “promoting” homosexuality) but helping the student who wanted to visit grandparents, regardless of the student’s sexual orientation. This pattern was observed for students who scored low on intrinsic religious orientation; however, those scoring

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5 Presumably, most of the students were heterosexual. However, the published paper does not report information about the participants’ sexual orientation.
high on intrinsic orientation were less likely to help the lesbian or gay student, regardless of how she or he planned to spend the money (Batson, Floyd, Meyer, & Winner, 1999).6

**PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND RELATIONSHIPS**

Heterosexuals who report personally knowing gay men or lesbians reliably express significantly more favorable attitudes toward gay people as a group than do heterosexuals who lack such contact (Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Herek & Glunt, 1993; G. B. Lewis, 2006; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Contact appears to be most likely to reduce sexual prejudice when heterosexuals know multiple sexual minority individuals, when those contacts include emotionally close relationships, and when the relationships include open discussion of what it means to be a sexual minority (Herek, 2008; Herek & Capitanio, 1996).

Although the correlation between contact and prejudice can be partly explained by the fact that gay people are more likely to disclose their sexual orientation to heterosexuals whom they expect to be supportive, there are both empirical and theoretical indications that contact reduces prejudice. Longitudinal data indicate that heterosexuals’ contact experiences predict subsequent prejudice reduction to a greater extent than initially low levels of prejudice predict having subsequent contact experiences (Herek & Capitanio, 1996). In addition, when heterosexuals are matched on other relevant characteristics, those reporting personal contact have significantly lower levels of sexual prejudice and are more supportive of policies benefiting sexual minorities than those without contact (G. B. Lewis, 2007).

At a theoretical level, the contact hypothesis predicts that prejudice will be reduced by contact between majority and minority group members in the pursuit of common goals (Allport, 1954). Allport (1954) noted that contact’s beneficial effects are enhanced to the extent that it is “sanctioned by institutional supports” and “leads to the perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups” (p. 281). A large body of empirical research supports the contact hypothesis and indicates that, although the four conditions specified by Allport (equal group status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, institutional support) are not essential for contact to decrease intergroup hostility, their presence typically leads to even greater prejudice reduction (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Pettigrew (1998) suggested that contact situations fostering the development of friendship between group members are the most likely to reduce prejudice, in part because intergroup friendship potentially invokes all four of the facilitative factors identified by Allport (Pettigrew, 1998). Applied to heterosexuals’ experiences with sexual minorities, such contact is likely to increase the former’s knowledge, foster greater empathy, and reduce anxieties about interacting with the latter group, all of which are likely to be associated with decreases in prejudice (Pettigrew, 1998; Stephan & Finlay, 1999; Stephan & Stephan, 1985; Vonofakou, Hewstone, & Voci, 2007). These beneficial effects of contact should be even greater to the extent that heterosexuals have multiple lesbian or gay friends or relatives. Knowing multiple members of a stigmatized group is also more likely to foster recognition of that group’s variability than is knowing only one group member (Wilder, 1978) and may reduce the likelihood that nonstereotypical behavior is discounted as atypical (Rothbart & John, 1985).

The concealable nature of sexual orientation creates different dynamics for interactions between majority and minority group members than is the case with, for example, race and ethnicity. Whereas the participants’ respective category memberships are usually immediately salient in contact between people of different racial or ethnic groups, heterosexuals often have contact with

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6 Another experiment used a similar design to assess whether individuals scoring high on quest would distinguish between an individual and his or her behavior. In that study, the student peer was characterized as intolerant of gay people. In one condition, participants believed she would use the raffle winnings to promote intolerance, but not in the other condition. High-quest participants were less likely to help the peer only when doing so would promote intolerance (Batson, Eidelman, Higley, & Russel, 2001).
sexual minority individuals without being aware of it. Such contact even includes long-standing friendships and family relationships that predate the sexual minority individual’s recognition of her or his own orientation.

Thus, instead of involving strangers whose respective group memberships constitute some of the first information available, contact between heterosexual people and sexual minority individuals often involves revelation of the latter’s status within the context of an already established relationship. When heterosexuals learn about a friend or relative’s homosexuality or bisexuality, an intergroup relationship is imposed on the preexisting interpersonal relationship. To the extent that the qualities of that personal relationship—including positive affect, individuation, 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 and gay men as a group (M. B. Brewer & Miller, 1984; Brown & Hewstone, 2005).

This dynamic is perhaps most likely to occur in the case of close friendships (Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Pettigrew, 1998; Vonofakou et al., 2007). Having a close lesbian or gay friend may lead a heterosexual person to reconceptualize her or his most important group affiliations, such that she or he feels a common group membership with sexual minorities (e.g., Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005a). In this process of recategorization, the ingroup may become more broadly defined so that it now includes nonheterosexuals. It is important that the heterosexual person not perceive the new information about her or his friend’s sexual orientation as calling into question all of her or his prior knowledge about and impressions of the friend, which could lead to a negative recategorization of the individual (e.g., Fiske, Lin, & Neuberg, 1999) rather than a positive recategorization of the outgroup. This outcome is less likely to occur when the heterosexual and the sexual minority person openly discuss the latter’s experiences (Herek, 2008).

**MOTIVATIONS FOR SEXUAL PREJUDICE**

The fact that sexual prejudice is reliably correlated with a range of other variables is consistent with the notion that it has multiple underlying motivations. One framework for understanding how these different motivations operate is the functional approach to attitudes, which has been applied to a variety of attitude domains (D. Katz, 1960; Maio & Olson, 2000; Pratkanis, Breckler, & Greenwald, 1989; M. B. Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956), including heterosexuals’ attitudes (positive and negative) toward sexual minorities and homosexuality (Herek, 1986a, 1987a). It has also been used to understand the motivations underlying behavioral enactments of sexual stigma (Franklin, 2000; Herek, 1992). The functional approach posits that attitudes are formed and maintained because they serve a psychological need for the individual, and that the function served by an attitude differs among individuals and, within any individual, can vary across situations and attitude objects. Thus, according to the functional approach, heterosexuals’ attitudes toward lesbians and gay men are shaped by a combination of personal needs, situational factors, and perceptions of the cultural meanings attached to sexual minorities and to homosexuality.

Although no definitive list of attitude functions has been compiled, four functions have received the most attention in regard to heterosexuals’ attitudes toward sexual minorities and homosexuality. First, such attitudes can mediate one’s interpersonal relations and strengthen bonds with valued groups (commonly labeled a social adjustment or social expressive function). Examples of this function (discussed earlier) include expressions of sexual prejudice by heterosexual men as a means of gaining (or avoiding the loss of) acceptance by heterosexual peers (e.g., Herek, 1986b; Kimmel, 1997) and expressions of prejudice by extrinsically religious individuals as a way of cementing their social relationships with fellow religionists (Griffiths et al., 2001; Herek, 1987b). This function is also evident in attitudes that derive from ongoing concerns about self-presentation and acceptance by others (Herek, 1987a).
Second, heterosexuals’ attitudes can provide a vehicle for expressing values important to their self-concept. The operation of this value-expressive function is evident in expressions of attitudes that derive from an intrinsic religious orientation or from fundamentalist religious beliefs (Griffiths et al., 2001; Herek, 1987a, 1987b). Such attitudes provide the heterosexual individual with a means for affirming her or his self-concept as a religious and moral person. In addition, as noted earlier, many attitudes toward policies affecting sexual minorities appear to fit this function in that they are based mainly on political or religious values such as egalitarianism or moral traditionalism (e.g., P. R. Brewer, 2003; Herek, 2008; Price et al., 2005).

Third, heterosexuals’ attitudes can be a strategy for warding off or coping with perceived threats to self-esteem (a defensive function). Such threats can derive from a variety of sources, including anxieties about one’s ability to meet cultural or personal standards associated with one’s gender role (Glick, Gangl, Gibb, Klumpner, & Weinberg, 2007; Herek, 1986b, 1987a; Lippa & Arad, 1999), concerns about one’s own heterosexuality (Adams, Wright, & Lohr, 1996),7 concerns about one’s own heterosexuality (Haslam & Levy, 2006), and poor performance on tasks unrelated to sexuality or gender (Fein & Spencer, 1997; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001). A defensive function can also be associated with stable personality characteristics, such as general externalizing or self-enhancing tendencies (Herek, 1987a; Meier et al., 2006).

Finally, heterosexuals’ attitudes can assist them in making sense of their past experiences with sexual minority individuals (an object-appraisal or schematic function). This function is especially likely to be associated with attitudes that are based on one’s personal relationships with sexual minority individuals (e.g., Herek, 1987a; Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

In theory, an attitude’s function is independent of its valence. However, the social construction of stigma and the groups it targets are likely to affect how attitude functions are actually manifested (Herek, 2000b). In the case of heterosexuals’ attitudes toward sexual minorities, it appears that defensive attitudes are generally negative, whereas attitudes based on personal relationships with sexual minority individuals (object appraisal or schematic attitudes) tend to be positive. Within the category of value-expressive attitudes, those that derive from religious beliefs tend to be associated with sexual prejudice, whereas those that are based on political values related to egalitarianism tend to be associated with positive attitudes toward sexual minorities.

**CONCLUSION**

As noted throughout this chapter, the foundations of sexual stigma in the United States have come to be increasingly contested, a development that can be traced to a variety of societal changes during the latter half of the 20th century. These include a more highly educated populace, growing sensitivities to minority groups of all kinds as a result of the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s, changes in popular views of gender and sexuality as a consequence of the feminist movement and advances in contraceptive technologies, and greater endorsement of the belief that sexual privacy is a basic right. Against this backdrop, a political movement emerged that ultimately established gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals as a quasi-ethnic minority group capable of challenging society’s hostility. Responding to these changes, the mental health profession reversed its longstanding position that homosexuality constituted a psychopathology, and pledged itself to helping to eradicate the stigma associated with sexual minority status. Sexual minority rights came to be seen as a legitimate political issue, and gay, lesbian, and bisexual people increasingly came out to their heterosexual friends and family. These historical events have many important implications for

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7 Adams et al. (1996) found that high-prejudice males evidenced greater penile tumescence than low-prejudice males while viewing a videotape of explicit male–male sexual activity. Although the researchers proposed that this response pattern indicated repressed homosexual desires among the high-prejudice men, it may also have been a product of anxiety (e.g., Barlow, Sakheim, & Beck, 1983) due to other factors, such as concerns about the experimenters’ judgments about the participant’s sexuality. In this conceptual framework, such concerns are understood as a manifestation of felt stigma.
understanding the current status of sexual prejudice in the United States, two of which are noted here (see Herek, 2008, for a more extensive discussion).

First, social norms concerning homosexuality and sexual minorities have changed. Many heterosexuals now perceive sexual prejudice to be incompatible with their personal value systems, and thus are subject to feelings of discomfort and guilt when they detect prejudice in their own thoughts or actions (Devine, Monteith, Zuwerink, & Elliot, 1991). Yet, because well-learned aspects of stigma are manifested as immediate, reflexive responses to the stigmatized group (e.g., Pryor, Reeder, Yeadon, & Hesson-McInnis, 2004), overcoming the entrenched habits of prejudiced thinking is often a difficult task (e.g., Devine, 1989, 2005; Monteith, Sherman, & Devine, 1998). Individuals can learn how to be unprejudiced, however, provided they have sufficient motivation to do so (Dunton & Fazio, 1997; Plant & Devine, 1998; Ratcliff, Lassiter, Markman, & Snyder, 2006).

Whereas shifts in social norms might lead a heterosexual person to feel compunction about sexual prejudice, they may not be enough to motivate that individual to engage in the long-term cognitive work necessary to change her or his fundamental patterns of thinking about sexual minorities. What might push heterosexuals to exert the effort required to disavow their sexual prejudice?

This question highlights a second important consequence of recent historical developments. Heterosexuals’ opportunities for having a close personal relationship with an openly lesbian, gay, or bisexual friend or family member have expanded significantly in the past few decades. As noted earlier, having such relationships is negatively correlated with sexual prejudice. It seems likely that the emotional bonds associated with them can motivate heterosexuals to reexamine their preexisting prejudices and change their ways of thinking about sexual minorities, much as sexual minority individuals are themselves motivated to challenge their own internalized sexual stigma when they first acknowledge or recognize their sexual orientation.

This discussion illustrates the complex interrelationships that exist between sexual stigma and prejudice. It also highlights the importance of considering sexual prejudice not only in terms of its commonalities with other forms of prejudice, but also with an appreciation for its distinctive social history and its roots in societal institutions. The framework described in this chapter facilitates such an approach by conceptualizing sexual prejudice and stigma from a cultural as well as a psychological perspective. By attending to both perspectives, social scientists will enhance our prospects for gaining new theoretical insights into the nature of sexual prejudice and generating effective strategies for eliminating it.

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