The Effects of Homosexual Orientation on Perception of Character Quality

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The Effects of Homosexual Orientation on Perception of Character Quality

Kyle Rubini

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Abstract

It is currently hypothesized that individuals may perceive fictional characters as more or less likeable as a function of whether they are described as homosexual or not. Participants were presented with one of two possible versions of the same story – one version where all characters presented were described as homosexual and another version were no such reference was made. Participants rated their perceptions of how likable the fictional characters were and these results were used as the dependent variable. The Riddle Scale was used to divide participants into two groups of low or high levels of negative attitudes toward gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) individuals. A two way, between-subjects analysis of variance produced insignificant results. Future research could alter the research design in the hopes of producing significant results or focus on similar but different research focuses.

An implicit bias is any automatic affective or cognitive association between an individual’s concept of a stigmatized group and any arbitrary negative property or stereotypic trait (Holroyd, 2012). Such implicit biases - by definition - have the ability to influence one’s judgment and/or behaviour without the conscious awareness of the individual (Holroyd). Three main traits are necessary to classify a person as having an implicit bias. First, the implicit aspect of such a bias is the association(s) one possesses (Holroyd). The second characteristic is the clear distinction between possession of the bias and its influence on a person’s behaviour and judgment (Holroyd). Though the two are obviously interlinked, they are not one in the same. The final necessary characteristic of an implicit bias is the automatic nature of such possessed associations (Holroyd). Implicit biases are not consciously thought out or rationalized. It has
been found that individuals often view groups they are a member of as more positive and a group they are not a member of – often the stigmatized minority – as more negative (Crisp, Hall & Suen, 2009). Thus, individuals that are part of the minority group are less likely to possess an implicit bias and their attitudes have not historically been the major focus of such research.

When investigating implicit biases, the two most common methods used are the Implicit Association Test (IAT) and the evaluative priming measurement. Typically, the IAT is used to investigate implicit biases in regards to attitudes toward black-skinned individuals. Using the IAT involves using a computer to measure the amount of time it takes a participant to identify pairs of a term – which possesses either a negative or a positive quality or definition – and a face – which belongs to either a white-skinned individual or a black-skinned individual (Holroyd). However, instead of a face, sometimes the terms are paired with names that are deemed stereotypically white or stereotypically black (Holroyd).

An evaluative priming measure involves priming individuals with a particular concept – the stigmatized group in question - and then measuring the speed at which they can recognize and categorize a variety of positive and negative terms (Holroyd). The initial priming component is thought to trigger the participants’ implicit associations if they truly possessed them (Holroyd). It has been argued that evaluative priming measures are a better tool than the IAT as it allows for a more specific investigation of negative associations, not being limited to the study of only stigmatized ethnic groups (Holroyd).

Studies of implicit bias have been successful in demonstrating that individuals identified as explicitly equalitarian can and often do possess such proposed biases (Holroyd). Such results are often regarded as supportive of the idea that implicit biases may partly explain discriminatory
practices carried out in the areas of hiring recommendations or situations where police officers need to determine whether a person’s holding a gun (Holroyd).

The possible types of implicit bias that can be measured using the evaluative priming measure seem to be able to pertain to any stigmatized group. As homosexuality is increasingly embraced as a valid and acceptable part of life, the range of negative attitudes held by some toward homosexuality has become an increasingly interesting topic of consideration. Casual observation of current and past Western culture makes it clear that social progression has brought with it an obvious decline in widespread explicit discriminatory attitudes toward lesbian and gay individuals. It is currently questioned whether individuals hold implicit discriminatory attitudes in a manner analogous to the findings that many participants in past studies holding equalitarian views toward ethnic minorities still held implicit biases, as discussed previously. However, no research could be located that investigated implicit bias as it pertains to lesbian or gay individuals.

Though identifying the possession of an implicit bias is important, it may be argued that how such implicit biases influence judgment and behaviour is of greater importance. Instead of attempting to identify the possession of implicit biases, the research focus may be shifted to the arguably more relevant aspect of whether such a bias affects individuals’ judgment – given that if significant results are produced it would be clear evidence that some level of implicit biases must be present. As lesbian and gay individuals are currently represented in the media more than ever before, it is an optimal time to attempt to understand how the general public perceives such representation.
In understanding how media representations of gay and lesbian characters are perceived, it may be inferred how the increased exposure effects the way individuals view such stigmatized individuals. Obviously, if one possesses an implicit bias against lesbian and gay individuals, it is implied that they would automatically regard such a character in a negative way. The current study questions the degree to which a character would be perceived in a more or less positive or negative way if presented as homosexual or not – while the two presentations are otherwise identical. The first independent variable of the present research design is the version of a story presented to participants. As previously explained, the content of the story and the characters was identical, despite one sentence that makes a reference to the fact that all characters presented are homosexual. The level of positive or negative regard toward the characters may then be recorded and analyzed to determine the degree to which the minor one sentence detail affects the participants’ perception of the presented characters.

It would be natural to assume that individuals in possession of explicit negative attitudes toward gay and lesbian individuals would also carry an unconscious, implicit set of negative attitudes. In turn, the explicit attitudes or the theorized implicit attitudes would cause such individuals to regard a character in a vastly different way than another character that is identical in every way other than being identified as having a homosexual orientation. Thus, individuals identified as having explicit negative attitudes toward homosexual people may be used as a type of control group to verify whether two forms of media differing only in the identification of characters being homosexual results in significantly different perceptions of the characters’ quality. The second independent variable of participants’ levels of explicit attitudes toward gay and lesbian populations could be compared to the dependent variable of character quality perception in an attempt to understand the relationship between explicit and implicit attitudes. Of
particular interest would be whether the finding described previously carries into the discussion of attitudes toward homosexual populations – that individuals may hold explicit attitudes that embrace equalitarian approaches to homosexual individuals but still hold implicit negative attitudes toward the same stigmatized group. The current research study hypothesized that individuals possessing varying levels of positive or negative regard toward homosexual populations would perceive a set of characters’ degree of positive or negative qualities in a significantly different way when the only difference between two representations of said characters is a reference revealing that they have a homosexual orientation.

Method

Participants

The participants included two groups. The first group comprised of 14 undergraduate students registered in a first-year psychology course at a small liberal arts college affiliated with a much larger comprehensive university. These participants were generally of high intelligence as it was required upon admission to the college that students had a high school average around 80% and above. No formal data was collected regarding the ages of the student participants, but the age range of 17-19 years of age is reasonable given that they were registered in a first-year university course. The second group of participants was comprised of 36 people that were reached through any of the experimenter’s pre-existing relationships. These participants vary in age and occupation though there is a disproportionately high amount of students aged 16-22. In total, 40 participants were involved in the study, ranging in age from 16-70. There were 9 male participants and 31 female participants. The participants were randomly assigned via random number generator to either condition 1 or condition 2. The 20 participants assigned to condition 1
had to read the version of the story where all characters were described as openly homosexual while the other 20 participants in condition 2 had to read the version of the story where no reference was made to the characters’ sexual orientation. All data collected was used for analysis.

**Materials**

The typed stories were presented in paper form. Both stories were written by the experimenter and described a situation where six friends gathered to socialize play a casual game of “truth or dare”. The only difference between the versions of the story presented to participants in either condition one or two was a sentence in the first paragraph that described the characters as a group of homosexuals in condition one and neglected to make any reference to any characters’ sexual orientation in the condition two version. Though the remaining story content was identical, the story was written with the intention of incorporating the characters’ sexual orientation in a subtle way that would only be recognizable in the condition one version. The condition one version had a word count of 510; the condition two version had a word count of 511.

A 1-7 Likert-style scale was used by participants to record their “likability ratings” of the story’s characters. The lower the score value indicated a lower likability rating while a higher score value indicated a higher likability rating.

The Riddle Scale was used to determine participants’ levels of explicit homophobia. The Riddle Scale is a psychometric scale intended to measure the degree to which one is or is not homophobic. It was created by psychologist Dorothy Riddle in 1973 with the intention to illustrate a continuum of possible attitudes individuals may hold toward individuals that are
homosexual while also assessing the current and the desired institutional culture of an organization or workplace (Peterkin, 2003). The psychometric properties of the scale are unknown as no published studies could be located despite various researchers’ efforts (Tucker, 2006). However, the Riddle Scale has been deemed to have acceptable face validity in previous research (Bandele, 2003). A participant’s Riddle Scale results were calculated by adding up the actual numbered answer to items one, two, three, four and seven. The remaining items’ responses had their numbers reversed in the opposite order and also added to the score. The higher a score the more negative a participant’s attitude toward GLBT individuals.

**Procedure**

Participants took part in this experiment in various locations at various times of day. The first independent variable being manipulated in this experiment was the version of the story read, which was determined via a random number generator. The second independent variable was each participant’s level of homophobia, which was determined by the Riddle Scale and a media split was used to divide the participants into two levels of either low homophobia scores or high homophobia scores.

Participants were given their randomly assigned version of the story to read. Afterward they determined how “likable” they found each of the six characters presented in the story. Participants were told to make these evaluations in any way they see fit and were allowed to refer to the story.

Lastly, the Riddle Scale was presented and participants were told to complete it as honestly as possible, with reassurance that their results were to remain anonymous and confidential.
Results

See attached raw data in the appendices. Both the raw data and Graph 1 depict the participants’ average likability ratings in blocks of ranked levels of negative attitudes toward GLBT individuals. Each block contains the average of every score – under each individual condition – that fell between a five unit consecutive range of possible levels of negative attitudes as determined by the Riddle Scale. Graph 1 demonstrates the great overlap between the two conditions and how all scores remain close to the neutral likability ratings of four, though condition two’s results were slightly higher as hypothesized. Both the raw data and the graph excluded the highest score as it was a slight outlier and had no other scores to combine to make an average with, which could possibly skew the data. However, that score was still used in the analysis of variance. A two-way, between-subjects analysis of variance (N=40) revealed that there was an insignificant effect of story version, $F(1,36) = 0.54, p >0.05$. Participants that read the story where the characters were described as having a homosexual orientation ($M=4.33$, $SD=0.70$) did not report likability ratings significantly different from those that read the story without a reference to the characters’ sexual orientation ($M=4.51$, $SD=0.79$). The level of participants’ explicit homophobia was also revealed to have an insignificant main effect, $F(1,36) = 0.02, p >0.05$. Participants with lower levels of homophobia as determined by the Riddle Scale ($M=4.40$, $SD=0.73$) also did not report likability ratings that were significantly different than participants that had higher levels of homophobia as determined by the Riddle Scale ($M=4.43$, $SD=0.78$). Lastly, there was an insignificant interaction between story version and level of homophobia, $F(1,36) = 1.95, p >0.05$.

Discussion
The results of this study were statistically insignificant and therefore do not support the research hypothesis. Upon closer examination, the experiment was not found to be scientifically adequate for various reasons. First, the sample was not ideal and may have limited the scientific adequacy. A total of 40 participants greatly limited the scientific adequacy of the results,
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Graph 1.

**Figure 1.** Raw data.

<table>
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<th>Condition</th>
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<th>2</th>
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<td>Block 1 - Average of all Likability Scores that have levels of homophobia from 23-27</td>
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<td>Block 2 - Average of all Likability Scores that have levels of homophobia from 28-32</td>
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<td>5.06</td>
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<td>Block 3 - Average of all Likability Scores that have levels of homophobia from 33-37</td>
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<td>4.60</td>
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<td>Block 4 - Average of all Likability Scores that have levels of homophobia from 38-42</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>4.22</td>
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</table>
reaching a greater number of participants may increase the validity of this experiment. Furthermore, there was a disproportionately high amount of students and a disproportionate gender distribution in our sample. As no specific population was being investigated – other than human beings in general – the sample should have been as close to a random selection of participants as possible, meaning a sample with great variety within participants.

The greatest issue with the participants was the lack of high scores of explicit attitudes – which can partly be attributed to the fact that the majority of participants were friends and family of the experimenter.

A median split was used to place half the scores with the highest explicit levels of negative attitudes toward homosexuals into one level of the independent variable and the other half in another level. However, the range of scores produced by the Riddle Scale was not as extreme as it should have been as the absolute minimum possible score was 16 and the potential maximum score possible was 80, with a median of 48. The sample at hand produced a minimum score of 23 and a maximum score of 45 – which is lower than the hypothetical median possible, clearly demonstrating a lack of truly high levels of explicit negative attitudes toward lesbian and gay individuals.

The control of variables was not ideal. Almost every participant was tested in a different place at a different time of day, with varying experimenters. Depending on the time of day one may be more or less able to focus and concentrate their attention. Also, the different environments participants were tested in may have influenced their attentional and perceptual processes as some places may be louder and more distracting than others. The time of day and the type of environment may seem like trivial issues but the level of distraction may alter a
participant’s experience and possibly cause an individual to respond in a manner that does not actually reflect their opinion. With a sample so small the uniformity of participants’ experience is of pivotal importance.

There were issues with the experimental design that may have limited the study’s ability to produce significant results. To begin with, the story was too short considering the amount of characters portrayed as participants frequently reported feeling unsure how to rate their likability based on so little knowledge of each individual, causing participants to sometimes rate characters as neutral. In doing so, participants are not actively evaluating the characters and are simply reporting a neutral answer, which may possibly inhibit even implicit attitudes to affect participants’ decisions. Future replications of this study could portray fewer characters in a story of the same approximate length. In fact, using as many as six characters in my story was completely extraneous as the likability rating of each character was averaged for each participant.

Another structural problem was made evident when participants occasionally reported to have not noticed the reference to homosexuality. It would be natural to assume that if one failed to notice the reference, then their automatic associations could not be activated even if they possessed them. This could be solved by making other references throughout the story, in doing so however the risk is run that such reference may make the purpose of the study obvious and skew the results due to social desirability – the tendency for people to claim to have politically correct views even if they personally disagree with them. On the other hand, the one reference to the characters’ homosexuality could just be made in a more elaborate manner, though this solution also runs the risk of making the study’s purpose obvious. However, the issue at hand may not actually have contributed to the insignificance of the study’s results, in fact it may not
be a design issue at all. It may be argued that it is possible for the detail of the characters’ sexual orientation to trigger a person’s automatic associations and have them affect one’s judgment without one even remembering reading that detail – after all the implicit nature of the biases is of the study’s greatest interest. In this view, it may be a positive occurrence as it demonstrates that the reference was subtle and relevant enough to the story that it did not tip participants off to the study’s purpose.

In regards to keeping the nature of the study hidden from participants, this was enabled by strategically deciding to give participants the Riddle Scale to complete at the end of data collecting sessions. The effort was successful as casually observed by the participants’ surprised reactions when the study’s intention was revealed after completing a research session.

Though the riddle scale is frequently used, cited and regarded highly, it was found to be quite problematic. Many statements were extremely ambiguous, presenting two conflicting ideas and people were not entirely sure what they were being asked to agree or disagree with. For example one item stated “We should have compassion for GLBT people. They can’t be blamed for how they were born”. The first sentence would demonstrate a positive regard for GLBT (a commonly used acronym to refer to Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender populations) people if one agreed with it. However the second sentence implies that if GLBT were not born that way and had chosen to be a member of the GLBT community - that would be a decision worthy of scrutiny and blame. There are a number of items similar to the one discussed, which made calculating the results of the Riddle Scale quite difficult as there was no clear formula or method to utilize. It may be that the ambiguous nature of the scale may have been purposeful, the statements may have been written to make a person believe they are stating one opinion when they are actually revealing a different opinion that was not consciously thought through but still
made evident by the way the participant responded. In fact, the Riddle Scale may possibly be a better tool to measure implicit attitudes toward GLBT populations than explicit attitudes.

The calculation of participants’ Riddle Scale was devised by the experimenter. An alternative method to calculating would involve scoring the first eight items as affirmative of negative attitudes if a participant agreed with them while the last eight items would be the opposite. The current study evaluated the fifth, sixth, and eighth items as affirmative of positive attitudes had a participant agreed with them. This decision was based on the items’ link to attitudes of tolerance and acceptance, as outlined by the Riddle Scale itself (Riddle). However, research has argued that attitudes of tolerance and acceptance actually represent negative attitudes toward GLBT people as they function to mask underlying fear or hatred (Bandele). Calculating the results by viewing the first half of the Riddle Scale’s items as affirmative of negative attitudes and the second half of the items as affirmative of positive attitudes may have produced results more representative of participants’ true attitudes.

Furthermore, the Riddle Scale’s validity has only been assumed by other researchers and has never undergone any controlled scientific testing for validity or reliability. Even if the Riddle Scale were hypothetically a perfect measure of explicit attitudes toward GLBT individuals, validity would always be compromised due to the risk of social desirability, which cannot be avoided and is in fact the entire purpose of investigating implicit biases. The various problems with the Riddle Scale had the potential to greatly impact the collected data and its validity.

This research is extremely relevant to contemporary culture as in regards to current social attitudes, discriminatory practices and the danger negative attitudes poses to GLBT individuals.
Furthermore, efforts to increase anti-discriminatory policies and laws are useless if individuals possess implicit biases and act on them without any action to prevent such biases from occurring.

Though the results of the study were revealed to be insignificant, they were in the hypothesized direction – however small that was. Implementing various alterations to a replication of this study may possibly produce significant results. Such alterations include utilizing a larger and much more representative sample, ensuring better control over extraneous variables, and ensuring the measure of explicit attitudes is reliable and valid.

There are a variety of other possibilities for future research. First, it may have been problematic for this study to attempt to identify if an implicit bias – that may or may not actually exist – effects judgment of fictional characters. Research should focus on measuring whether implicit biases regarding sexual orientation exist at all. Utilizing the evaluative priming measure discussed previously would be a great way to investigate this hypothetical implicit bias.

Following the investigation and possible support for the existence of implicit negative attitudes toward gay and lesbian individuals, research could focus on eliminating such biases or at least preventing implicit biases from effecting judgment or behaviour. For example, Crisp, Hall and Suen (2009) examined the effectiveness of having participants generate traits that overlap between a stigmatized group and a non-stigmatized group – a procedure referred to as blurring intergroup boundaries – in reducing implicit biases, as measured by results on the IAT. The results supported the idea that blurring intergroup boundaries does in fact reduce implicit biases (2009). Research of this nature could be applied to negative attitudes toward homosexual individuals.
Also, future studies could finally test the Riddle Scale for scientific adequacy in terms of validity and reliability. It could also be investigated whether the Riddle Scale is best suited to evaluate implicit or explicit attitudes.

Lastly, the scarce amount of research examining stigma surrounding LGBT populations almost exclusively focuses on heterosexuals’ attitudes toward lesbian and gay individuals. Instead, studies could focus on heterosexuals’ attitudes toward bisexual and/or transgender individuals, or LGBT individuals’ attitudes toward heterosexual populations, or even LGBT individuals’ attitudes toward other LGBT individuals and the phenomenon of internalized homophobia – implicit negative attitudes toward LGBT populations that a member of the population may hold themselves.
References


### Appendice 1. Summary table.

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