

## The Relation Between Gender and Negative Attitudes Toward Gay Men and Lesbians: Do Gender Role Attitudes Mediate This Relation?<sup>1</sup>

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*This study examined whether traditional gender role attitudes mediated the relation between gender and negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. One hundred and fifty-five heterosexual college students (59% female; 97% Caucasian) completed questionnaires that assessed their attitudes toward gay men and lesbians and their gender role attitudes. Although males reported more negative attitudes toward gay men than females, there were no gender differences in attitudes toward lesbians. Traditional gender role attitudes mediated the relation between gender and attitudes toward gay men. These findings suggest that attitudes toward gay men are more strongly related to gender role attitudes than to gender.*

Negative attitudes toward homosexuals, sometimes referred to as homophobia, refer to antihomosexual sentiments, prejudices, and stereotypes. Such attitudes are presumed to underlie hate crimes against gay men and lesbians (Herek, 1989). Because the majority of such assaults are committed by juveniles or young adults (1989), we were interested in the negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians held by heterosexual young adults.

Although previous research has identified several personality and attitudinal variables that correlate with heterosexual young adults' negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians (for reviews, see Herek, 1984, 1991, 1994), this study focused on another variable—gender—that has consis-

<sup>1</sup>The authors express their appreciation to Larry Kurdek and Gregory Herek for their helpful input in the early stages of this study and to Larry Kurdek for reviewing an earlier draft of this article.

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tently been found to be associated with negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. Because men commit the vast majority of assaults against gay men and lesbians (Herek, 1989), understanding factors associated with gender differences in negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians may yield insights into why these hate crimes are committed.

Previous studies have generally found that men have more negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians than women (Kite, 1984; McDevitt, Sheehan, Lennon, & Ambrosio, 1990; Herek, 1991, 1994). The strongest gender difference has been in attitudes toward gay men, with all known studies having found this effect (see Kite, 1984, 1994; Herek, 1994). Findings pertaining to gender differences in attitudes toward lesbians are somewhat less consistent and may depend on the instrument used to assess these attitudes (Herek, 1994). Although most studies that have used Herek's (1988) Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men Scale (ATLG) have found that men have more negative attitudes toward lesbians than women (Herek, 1994), the gender differences have been relatively small (Kite, 1984) and a few studies that did not use the ATGL found that men held *more* favorable attitudes toward lesbians than women (Whitley, 1987, 1988).

The first purpose of this study was to replicate earlier findings that heterosexual men held more negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians than heterosexual women. Because the ATLG has well-established reliability and validity (Herek, 1994), it was used in the present study to assess negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. Based on previous studies, we hypothesized that men would have more negative attitudes toward both gay men and lesbians than would women, although we expected a smaller gender differences in negative attitudes toward lesbians.

Although numerous studies cited earlier have documented gender differences in negative attitudes toward gay men and women, previous research has not addressed possible explanations for this effect. The second purpose of this study was to attempt to identify a mechanisms involved in the relation between gender and negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians.

Our attempt to identify a plausible mechanism involved in the relation between gender and negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians was guided by a gender role socialization model. According to this model, children and adolescents develop their gender role attitudes from socialization experiences with their parents and/or other influential individuals. From these early experiences, individuals develop their attitudes about appropriate roles for men and women. These gender role attitudes can range from traditional (e.g., family labor is primarily assigned on the basis of gender; men should provide financially for their families, women should care for their children and their homes) to nontraditional (e.g., family labor is as-

signed on the basis of nongender-related factors, including the needs, abilities, and schedules of family members; depending on circumstances, it is appropriate for men to care for children and for women to work outside of the home).

Attitudes toward gay men and lesbians constitute integral components of gender role attitudes (Kite, 1994). Because gay men and lesbians deviate from cultural expectations for the roles that men and women should perform in their lives (Kite, 1994; Whitley, 1987), one would expect that heterosexual individuals who are more accepting of those who deviate from traditional gender roles would have more positive attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. Because greater acceptance of variations from traditional roles for males and females is characteristic of nontraditional gender role attitudes, one would expect that individuals with nontraditional gender role attitudes would have more positive attitudes toward gay men and lesbians than would those who have traditional gender role attitudes (Kite, 1994; Whitley, 1987).

The final tenet of the gender role socialization model is that males and females differ in their gender role attitudes. Our model suggests that heterosexual males are likely to hold more traditional gender role attitudes than women for three reasons. First, males receive stronger gender role socialization than females (Huston, 1984). Second, traditional gender roles sustain the greater privilege and power held by men relative to women. Finally, heterosexual males perceive rejection of homosexuals, particularly gay men, as more integral to conforming to their gender role than do heterosexual females (Herek, 1991, 1992; Mishkind, Rodin, Silbertein, & Striegel-Moore, 1986).

Based on the gender role socialization model, we assessed whether gender role attitudes were a mechanism involved in the relation between gender and negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. To empirically demonstrate that gender role attitudes have such a mediating influence, three conditions need to be met (Baron & Kenny, 1986): (a) traditional gender role attitudes must be associated with negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians, a relation that has been consistently found in previous studies (Herek, 1984b, 1988; Lieblich & Friedman, 1985; Kurdek, 1988; Stark, 1991; Whitley, 1987); (b) gender must be related to gender role attitudes (with males having more traditional attitudes than females), a relation that has also been regularly found in past studies (Kurdek, 1988; Stark, 1991; Whitley, 1987); and (c) the relation between gender and negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians must be present before considering gender role attitudes, with this relation not being present after taking gender role attitudes into consideration.

Because this final condition has not been examined in previous studies, our testing of this final condition represents the major contribution of the present study. If all three conditions are met, then it can be concluded that gender role attitudes may be an underlying mechanism that partially explains the relation between gender and negative attitudes toward gay men and women. If this is found, this would suggest that differences between heterosexual males and females in negative attitudes toward gay men and women may not be due to their gender per se, but rather to differences between males and females in gender role attitudes.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

Participants were 155 students in an introductory psychology class at a medium-sized, midwestern, private, Catholic university. Participants in the study received research credit toward the completion of course requirements. The majority of the participants were female (59%), Caucasian (97%), and in their first two years of college (84%). Participants had a mean age of 18.91 years ( $SD = .98$ ). Although socioeconomic status and religious preference were not assessed, most students that attend this university are from middle to upper middle income Catholic families. Because the focus of this study was on negative attitudes toward homosexuals held by heterosexual individuals, only participants who indicated that they were heterosexual were included.

### *Instruments*

Three self-report measures were administered to participants. These assessed demographic information, negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians, and gender role attitudes. Several other measures were also administered, but because they assessed constructs not relevant to this article, they are not considered further.

*Demographic Information.* Participants were asked to provide information regarding their age, gender, race, year in school, and sexual orientation (1: *heterosexual*; 2: *bisexual*; 3: *homosexual*).

*Negative Attitudes Toward Gay Men and Lesbians.* To measure the extent of negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians, Herek's (1988, 1994) ATLG was administered. This measure consists of 20 items—10 pertaining to lesbians (e.g., "Lesbians are sick") and 10 pertaining to gay men

(e.g., "Male homosexuals should not be allowed to teach school"). Subjects indicated their level of endorsement of each item on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1: *strongly disagree*; 5: *strongly agree*). Items were coded so that high scores reflected negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. Separate composite scores were computed for negative attitudes toward gay men and for negative attitudes toward lesbians. Cronbach's alphas for these summed composite scores were .94 and .92, respectively.

*Gender Role Attitudes.* To measure gender role attitudes, Kurdek's (1988) Traditional Attitudes Toward Men, Women, and the Equality Between Men and Women Scale was used. The questionnaire contains 62 items—18 pertaining to the traditional female gender role (e.g., "A woman should always have marriage proposed to her, and never do the proposing herself"), 26 pertaining to the traditional male role (e.g., "A man should expect his wife to change her last name after marriage"), and 18 questions concerning traditional attitudes toward the equality of men and women (e.g., "Boys and girls should be raised by different standards"). Subjects responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1: *strongly disagree*; 5: *strongly agree*), with high scores indicating more traditional attitudes. A single composite score was computed and had a Cronbach's alpha of .92.

#### *Procedure*

Participants were informed that the study was designed to examine attitudes toward men, women, and relationships. They were tested in university classrooms in small groups. The measures were completed in the following order: gender role attitudes, attitudes toward gay men and lesbians, and the demographic information sheet. Participants were debriefed upon completion.

## RESULTS

### *Gender Difference in Negative Attitudes Toward Gay Men and Lesbians*

To determine whether there were gender differences in negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians, a 2 (gender of respondent)  $\times$  2 (gender of target: gay man vs. lesbian) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was computed. Gender of target was a within-subjects factor. Means and standard deviations from this analysis are presented in Table I. There was a significant Gender of Respondent  $\times$  Gender of Target interaction,  $F(1, 153) = 18.18, p < .001$ . To determine the source of the significant interaction,

two sets of analyses were conducted. First, one-way (gender of respondent) ANOVAs were computed separately for negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. For negative attitudes toward gay men, there was a significant effect for gender of respondent,  $F(1, 153) = 12.90, p < .001$ . As shown in Table I, male respondents had more negative attitudes toward gay men than did female respondents. In contrast, for negative attitudes toward lesbians, the gender of respondent effect was nonsignificant. Thus, the expected gender difference was found in negative attitudes toward gay men, but not toward lesbians.

For the second set of analyses, one-way (gender of target) ANOVAs were computed separately for male and female respondents. There were significant gender of target effects for both male,  $F(1, 60) = 72.76, p < .001$ , and female,  $F(1, 91) = 64.64, p < .001$ , respondents. As shown in Table I, both male and female respondents had more negative attitudes toward gay men than toward lesbians.

*Do Gender Role Attitudes Mediate the Relation Between Gender and Negative Attitudes Toward Gay Men?*

To demonstrate that gender role attitudes mediate the relation between gender of respondent and negative attitudes toward gay men (because there were no gender differences in negative attitudes toward lesbians, this variable could not be examined for possible mediating effects), three conditions needed to be met (Baron & Kenny, 1986): (a) there must be a significant gender difference in gender role attitudes, (b) gender role attitude scores must be significantly correlated with negative attitudes toward gay men, and (c) there must be a significant gender difference in attitudes toward gay men before considering gender role attitudes and no significant gender difference after considering gender role attitudes.

To test whether condition (a) was met, an independent groups *t*-test was computed on the gender role attitudes score. As shown in Table I, as expected, males had higher scores than females on the traditional gender

Table I. Means and Standard Deviations on Variables in the Study by Gender

Variable	Males		Females	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Negative attitudes toward gay men	35.84	10.26	30.42	8.43
Negative attitudes toward lesbians	29.34	9.59	27.27	7.96
Traditional gender role attitudes	132.86	19.49	106.90	14.83
<i>n</i>	62		93	

role attitudes scale,  $t(153) = 9.19, p < .001$ . Thus, condition (a) was satisfied.

To test whether condition (b) was met, a Pearson correlation was computed between the gender role attitudes score and the negative attitudes toward gay men score. This correlation was significant ( $r = .57, p < .001$ ) and indicated that traditional gender role attitudes were related to negative attitudes toward gay men. Therefore, condition (b) was satisfied. For descriptive purposes, the intercorrelations among all of the measures used in this study are presented in Table II.

To determine whether condition (c) was met, a two-step hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted. Negative attitudes toward gay men was the dependent variable. At Step 1, gender was entered into the equation. At Step 2, the gender role attitudes score was entered into the equation. Table III presents the results.

The mediating hypothesis would be supported if the beta weight for gender was significant at Step 1 before the addition of traditional gender role attitudes and was no longer significant after this variable was entered at Step 2. As shown in Table III, the effect for gender was significant at Step 1, but was not at Step 2, after the gender role attitudes variable was entered

**Table II.** Intercorrelations Between Negative Attitudes Toward Gay Men and Lesbians Scales and Gender Role Attitudes

	1	2	3
1. Traditional gender role attitudes	—	.57 <sup>a</sup>	.43 <sup>a</sup>
2. Negative attitudes toward gay men		—	.85 <sup>a</sup>
3. Negative attitudes toward lesbians			—

<sup>a</sup> $p < .001$ .

**Table III.** Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis on Negative Attitudes Toward Gay Men Scale

	$R^2$	$R^2$ change	Beta after Step	
			1	2
Step 1				
Gender			-.29 <sup>a</sup>	.08
Summary of Step 1	.085 <sup>a</sup>	.085 <sup>a</sup>		
Step 2				
Traditional gender role attitudes				.62 <sup>a</sup>
Summary of Step 2	.328 <sup>a</sup>	.243 <sup>a</sup>		

<sup>a</sup> $p < .001$ .

into the equation. Traditional gender role attitudes contributed 24.3% incremental variance in the negative attitudes toward gay men scale. Thus, condition (c) was satisfied and the mediating hypothesis was supported.

## DISCUSSION

Although previous studies have generally found that men hold more negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians than women (Kite, 1984; McDevitt et al., 1990; Herek, 1991, 1994), previous researchers have not addressed the underlying mechanisms responsible for this relation. In this study, within the context of a gender role socialization model, we replicated earlier work that has examined gender differences in negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians and tested whether gender role attitudes mediated the relation between gender and negative attitudes toward gay men.

### *Gender Difference in Negative Attitudes Toward Homosexuals*

Consistent with previous research (Kite, 1984, 1994; McDevitt et al., 1990; Herek, 1994) heterosexual males had more negative attitudes toward gay men than did heterosexual females. However, although males had more negative attitudes toward lesbians than did females, this difference was not significant. This general pattern was consistent with previous research indicating that gender differences are greater in negative attitudes toward gay men than in attitudes toward lesbians (Herek, 1994; Kite, 1984, 1994). Further, although not a primary focus of our study, we also found that both male and female participants had more negative attitudes toward gay men than toward lesbians, with this difference being greatest for male respondents.

Collectively, these findings suggest that an aversion to *male* homosexuality may be a more central component of heterosexual males' traditional gender roles than is an aversion to homosexuality *in general* (Herek, 1992; Mishkind et al., 1986). Violations from traditional gender roles may be particularly aversive to heterosexual males because these breaches are perceived as a threat to their social privilege and power. Within the context of attitudes toward homosexual individuals, gay men are apparently perceived by heterosexual men as deviating more from traditional gender roles than lesbians.

*Do Gender Role Attitudes Mediate the Relation Between Gender and Negative Attitudes Toward Gay Men?*

In an attempt to identify a mechanism involved in the relation between gender and negative attitudes toward gay men, we adopted a gender role socialization model. Based on this model we expected that gender role attitudes would mediate the relation between gender and negative attitudes toward gay men.

Indeed, the most important and novel contribution of this study was the demonstration that traditional gender role attitudes mediated the relation between gender and negative attitudes toward gay men. When the traditional attitudes toward gender roles variable was entered into the regression equation, gender was no longer significantly related to negative attitudes toward gay men (i.e., males and females no longer differed in negative attitudes toward gay men). This finding lends support to our notion that a difference between heterosexual males and females in their adherence to traditional gender role attitudes may be a mechanism that is partly responsible for the gender difference in negative attitudes toward gay men.

In addition, several tenets of our gender role socialization model were supported. Specifically, consistent with previous studies, heterosexual males endorsed more traditional gender roles than did heterosexual females (Kurdek, 1988; Stark, 1991) and negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians were positively related to traditional gender role attitudes (Kurdek, 1988; Stark, 1991).

What is the significance of our demonstration that gender role attitudes mediated the relation between gender and negative attitudes toward gay men? At the most basic level, our findings suggest that individuals' attitudes toward gay men (and lesbians, although the mediational hypothesis pertaining to lesbians could not be tested because there was not a significant difference between male and female participants in negative attitudes toward lesbians) appear to be based less on their biological sex (i.e., male or female) than on their gender role attitudes. How do these attitudes develop? Consistent with our gender role socialization model, Butler (1990) has argued that individuals actively construct their gender identity within the contexts in which they live (e.g., racial, socioeconomic, geographic). Further, gender identity construction occurs within existing male-dominant power relations. An implication of these arguments is that gender role attitudes are formed from the experiences that individuals encounter as they develop in their particular circumstances. Because males receive stronger gender role socialization than females (Huston, 1984) and because traditional gender roles sustain the greater privilege and power

held by men relative to women, males develop more traditional gender role attitudes than do females.

However, although males have different socialization experiences than females, these results indicate that it is not biological sex per se but rather the nature of these experiences themselves that most strongly influence the development of these gender role attitudes. Some experiences (e.g., labor in their family of origin is performed on the basis of the needs and abilities, rather than the gender, of the family members) support the development of nontraditional gender role attitudes, whereas others (e.g., household labor in their family of origin was always performed by the mother) foster the development of traditional gender role attitudes.

We posit that both males and females who have experiences that support the development of nontraditional gender role attitudes are more accepting of individuals who deviate from social norms and who have little power and privilege. As a result, these individuals are likely to hold more positive attitudes toward gay men than those with experiences promoting traditional gender role attitudes. Those with traditional gender role attitudes hold negative attitudes toward gay men because these negative attitudes are integral components of traditional gender roles (Herek, 1992; Mishkind et al., 1986). Here (1991) has suggested that some violence against homosexuals reinforces traditional gender roles and denigrates feminine attributes in other men. The results of this study—that endorsement of traditional gender roles is related to negative attitudes toward gay men—are supportive of this position.

Clearly, results from the present study cannot confirm that traditional gender role attitudes are causally related to negative attitudes toward gay men. It is also possible, for example, that those who have positive attitudes toward gay men and lesbians develop nontraditional gender role attitudes. However, should future studies indicate that the present findings are reliable, one implication that emerges from this study is that it is possible that one could effect positive changes in attitudes toward gay men by changing gender role attitudes. Whereas one's biological sex is unchangeable and not amenable to intervention, one's gender role attitudes are amenable to change. Herek (1989) has recommended that schools and colleges teach individuals to respect diversity, to be sensitive to issues facing gay men and lesbians, and to oppose antihomosexual bias and victimization. In addition to these topics, the present findings suggest that positive changes in negative attitudes toward gay men could be realized by teaching individuals about the possible benefits of nontraditional gender roles.

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