Heterosexual evaluations of hypothetical friendship behavior based on sex and sexual orientation

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ABSTRACT

Heterosexual college students' assessments of friendship behavior are compared based on the sex and sexual orientation of the friend in a series of hypothetical vignettes. Respondents evaluated the appropriateness of a friend's behavior both qualitatively and quantitatively. The quantitative results support the hypothesis that the sex of the respondent, as well as the sex and sexual orientation of the friend, result in differential evaluations of friendship behavior. Specifically, heterosexual male respondents evaluate the behaviors more favorably when the friend is a straight, rather than gay, male. Straight females evaluate the behavior of straight females more positively than friends from other identity categories. Qualitative comments provide evidence that heterosexism and sexism inform the respondents' evaluations. In open-ended accounts, respondents apply conventional beliefs about sex and sexual orientation to friendship behaviors, employ identity work as a means of distancing themselves from the gay or lesbian friend, and question the friend's gay or lesbian identity. Qualitative results also provide evidence that friendship is a context in which heterosexism is resisted.

KEY WORDS: friendship • sex • sexual orientation

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Friendship is a context in which social inequalities stemming from sexism and heterosexism – defined by Weston (1991) as a systemic and interactional means of oppressing gay men and lesbians – can be both resisted and conserved (Collins, 1990; Johnson, 1996; Tillmann-Healy, 2001). Social psychological studies of friendship suggest that interactions between significant friends reinforce social identities and inequalities (Swain, 1992). Hence, when people from different social positions come together, as is the case in friendships that cross categories of sexual orientation and sex, one might expect that these identities will impact the tone of and interaction within the friendship.

Two existing theoretical perspectives within social psychology can be applied to the preservation of social inequalities within the friendship context: symbolic interaction and the contact hypothesis. Studies of symbolic interaction suggest that stigmatizing identities such as same-sex orientation affects interactions that cross identity categories. According to Goffman, (1963), a stigma shapes the nature of all social interaction, which extends to those enacted within the bonds of friendship. In cross-sexuality friendships, for example, gay men and lesbians bring the stigma of homosexuality into their interactions with heterosexuals, who also carry their own set of cultural assumptions and biases. Hence, sexual orientation is expected to influence the internal dynamics of such friendship dyads.

Another social psychological perspective addressing the link between interpersonal contact and prejudicial attitudes is the contact hypothesis of prejudice, first described by Allport (1954). According to the contact hypothesis, 'prejudice may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals' (Allport, 1954, p. 281). Given Allport's contact hypothesis, friendship is a context in which heterosexuals' prejudice against sexual minority groups can be lessened. Indeed, previous research finds that those heterosexuals having interpersonal contact with gay men or lesbians report more favorable attitudes toward same-sex oriented individuals than those without any contact (Herek & Capitanio, 1996).

Situated at an intersection of these theoretical perspectives, this study examines heterosexuals' attitudes of sexual prejudice through their assessments of friendship behavior. Examining the effect of a friend's sex and sexual orientation on heterosexuals' evaluations of behavior described in a series of vignettes, this study investigates differential assessments of behaviors, with both quantitative and qualitative measures.

Sex, sexual orientation, and friendship

Within the context of friendship, sex and sexual orientation shape norms and expectations of behavior. Prior research suggests that young adults assess the appropriateness of friendship behavior according to the sex of their friend. Felmlee (1999) finds normative expectations in same-sex friendships can differ from those in cross-sex friendships. Women are more approving of friends exhibiting crying and hugging behaviors than men, findings that suggest a greater degree of intimacy within the same-sex

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friendship contexts of females (Felmlee, 1999; L. B. Rubin, 1985). By contrast, men can be less demanding in their friendships with other men, a finding which may support the idea that men are less emotionally invested in their friendships (Felmlee, 1999). Hence, the sex of the members of a friendship dyad may affect evaluations of friendship behavior.

Cross-sex friendships are also guided by social norms. Given the strong ideology of compulsory heterosexuality which, according to Rich (1980), is the principle that women are innately sexually oriented toward men, and men to women, cross-sex platonic friendships are often thought anomalous in U.S. society. Pairings between men and women are typically interpreted as being romantic or having romantic potential. Yet, 100% of single male undergraduates and 73% of single female undergraduates report having platonic cross-sex friendships (Rose, 1985). Such friendships are most common among college-aged individuals and in white collar, professional workplace interactions (Wright, 1999). Cross-sex friendships challenge both compulsory heterosexuality and the assumption that men and women can sustain a connection only within the bounds of a romantic relationship (Werking, 1997). While cross-sex friendships provide many benefits, they also face challenges, including a lack of social support, the presumption by others of sexual involvement, a lack of cultural models, and social inequalities (O'Meara, 1989; West, Anderson, & Duck, 1996).

Friendships that cross sexual orientation categories also face many challenges. However, few studies examine the inner-workings of such dyads (see Fee, 1996; Nardi, 1999; J. Price, 1999; Stanley, 1996; Tillmann-Healy, 2001; Werking, 1997 for exceptions). One explanation for this omission is the rarity of such friendships; most gay men and lesbians' close social networks are comprised of other gays and lesbians but include straight people in more general friendship networks (Weinstock, 1998). However, given that homosexuality is a subordinated social position, most gay- or lesbian-identified individuals have extensive, unavoidable interactions with straight society that often result in the forging of meaningful bonds (Weston, 1991).

Prejudicial attitudes in interpersonal contacts

Previous research finds that interactions between significant friends reinforce social identities and inequalities (Swain, 1992). Hence, heterosexism can shape interactions between cross-sexuality friends (Weston, 1991). In examining the role of sexual orientation in friendship contexts, it is important to consider the impact of heterosexism in potentially reinforcing traditional expectations of gender and sexual orientation.

Because friendship is a voluntary bond, heterosexuals are not required to enter or sustain such ties with gay men or lesbians (Wiseman, 1986). However, friendships that cross sexual orientation categories (e.g., friendship between gay and straight men or between lesbians and straight women) provide many benefits. In resisting the characterization of each other as fundamentally different from one another, many lesbians and straight women develop strong friendships (O'Boyle & Thomas, 1996).

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Similarly, in studies of gay/straight male friendships, straight males' active willingness to challenge their internalized homophobia in friendships with gay men allows for a more emotionally intimate bond than other types of male friendships (Fee, 1996). However, close relationships are also contexts in which aspects of heterosexism can be enacted. For example, J. Price's (1999) study of gay/straight male friendships exposes a double-standard; the straight men in the dyads were comfortable in the friendship so long as the gay friends do not discuss their same-sex partnerships or dating life, whereas the straight men freely discuss their relationships with women.

Complementary to research about actual friendship dyads, studies of heterosexuals' attitudes find that sex affects feelings toward gay men and lesbians. Men report the most negative evaluations of gay men and women express feeling comfortable around both gay men and lesbians (Herek, 1988). However, both men and women are less comfortable around a same-sex oriented person of their same sex (Herek, 2000). According to Herek (2000), such findings suggest that heterosexual attitudes toward sexual minorities are expressions of both sexual prejudice and sexual and gender identity. And consistent with Allport's contact hypothesis, Herek and Capitanio (1996) find that contact with gay men and lesbians seems to mitigate the effects of heterosexuals' sexual prejudice; those heterosexuals having interpersonal contact with sexual minority friends are more likely to express more favorable general attitudes toward both gay men and lesbians. Thus, although heterosexism persists at the systemic level, it is mitigated at the interpersonal level.

Contact between sexual orientation groups also fosters a broader understanding of sexuality. Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen (1999) assert that homosexuality is increasingly becoming normalized in personal interactions, thus causing a shift in perceptions of normative heterosexuality from concrete to fluid identity categories. This being the case, it is important to examine how biases within friendship prohibit or promote changing definitions of sexual orientation. To that end, this study investigates the heterosexism present in the assessment of friendship behaviors.

Goals of the present study

This study adds to the literature about articulations of prejudice within close relationships by focusing on the attitudes of heterosexuals in assessing the behavior of gay, lesbian, and straight friends. Existing studies find that gender norms differ for men and women with regard to cross-sex friendship (e.g., Felmlee, 1999) and that increased interpersonal contact positively affects heterosexual attitudes toward gay men and lesbians (Herek & Capitanio, 1996). Given these findings, this study examines heterosexual men and women's evaluations of a friend's behavior, as mediated by the sex and sexual orientation of the friend, in order to assess how sexual prejudice operates in voluntary interpersonal relationships.

In accordance with Felmlee's (1999) findings that males are less demanding on friends, this researcher hypothesized that male respondents in the

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present study would report significantly different responses from female respondents. Male respondents were predicted to assess heterosexual male and female behavior more favorably than women, and to evaluate gay males more harshly than would female respondents. Thus, the male respondents were expected to rate all friends' behaviors more favorably than female respondents, except in cases where the actions reflected a high degree of intimacy, as in the cases of hugging and crying (Felmlee, 1999; L. B. Rubin, 1985). These measurements were expected to also differ according to the sex and sexual orientation of the friend. Consistent with previous research (Herek, 2000), heterosexual respondents were predicted to evaluate a same-sex gay or lesbian friend's actions more harshly than those of a same-sex straight friend.

Another goal of the study was to understand why the respondents evaluated a friend's behavior as they did. Given the prediction that heterosexual respondents would evaluate behavior differently based on a friend's sex and sexual orientation, the justifications respondents provided for their evaluations of a friend's behavior were expected to differ according to the sex and sexual orientation of a friend.

In sum, the expected results were that voluntary personal contact between dominant and oppressed groups does not necessarily quell homophobic and sexist attitudes. Rather, heterosexuals were expected to express degrees of heterosexism in their quantitative and qualitative evaluations.

Method

Participants

Friendships traversing sex and sexuality categories are most common for college-aged adults (Wright, 1999). As such, this study focuses on friendship norms and expectations of university undergraduates, examining their attitudes using both quantitative and qualitative measures. The research participants consist of 299 heterosexual undergraduate students in six different undergraduate social sciences and humanities courses at a west coast public research university. The participants were students enrolled in core curriculum courses randomly selected from all university course offerings enrolling over 50 students, whose instructors agreed to take 15 minutes from their lecture time to allow for the researcher to conduct the survey. The students were advised that their participation was voluntary and that their answers would be anonymous. The sample was 70% female and 30% male, with an average age of 20.3 years old. This compares with the overall student population demographics of the west coast university: out of 22,750 undergraduate students, 55% is female and 45% is male, and the average student age is 21 years old. Data about the sample's racial background were not collected; according to university data the racial background of the student population is 41% White, 35.4% Asian, 9.9% Chicano/Latino, 2.8% African American, 1% Native American, and 2.4% other.

Of the total sample of 317 respondents, 299 reported their last romantic partner was of another sex (94.3%) – the remaining 18 respondents who indicated a same-sex partner or did not indicate the sex of their partner were excluded from the study because they did not comprise a sufficient sample to

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be significant in the findings. Although not a conventional measure of sexual identity, the percentage of people excluded from this study is comparable with the estimated 5–10% of the population that is same-sex attracted. Nevertheless, relying on romantic history as a proxy for sexual orientation is theoretically problematic as such a measure falsely conflates same-sex behavior with same-sex identity and assumes a static sexual identity over time. The implication of using this measure as an indicator of sexual orientation is that those participants who do not necessarily identify as heterosexual could be erroneously included in the straight sample, thus affecting the overall accuracy of the results.

Procedure

The participants in this study read six vignettes involving a person described as their friend and were asked to quantitatively and qualitatively rate the appropriateness of the friend's behavior. The friend's sexual orientation and sex were varied in each scenario; however, all respondents evaluated identical scenarios. Each respondent evaluated the behavior of only one type of friendship dyad. The respondents were given one of four different surveys, which were collated as followed: (i) one-quarter of the participants were asked to evaluate the behavior of a heterosexual male friend; (ii) one-quarter evaluated the behavior of a gay male friend; (iii) one-quarter rated the behavior of a heterosexual female friend; and (iv) one-quarter assessed the behavior of a lesbian female friend. To attempt random distribution, surveys were handed out in the above order, which repeated with every fifth person.

Measurement

The surveys were constructed to hold the contexts of the vignettes constant and to assess variations according to the sex of the respondent and sex and sexual orientation of the hypothetical friend. The scenarios test common friendship norms, which are influenced by differing sex compositions in dyads (Felmlee, 1999). These scenarios also suggest situations wherein an individual's sexual orientation may invoke different norms of behavior within or between members of friendship dyads. The vignette design is a useful method to study how sex and sexual orientation affect a friend's behavior for two reasons. First, it provides situational contexts between friends that may not have been previously experienced by the respondent, or which may be unusual in a friendship situation. According to Felmlee (1999), judgments of unexpected behavior can expose unspoken rules of conduct and suggest normative boundaries that may not be as easily articulated using other instruments. Second, the vignette design is useful in proposing that the respondent think about a hypothetical friend, rather than a specific one. This allows the heterosexual respondent who may not have a gay male or lesbian friend to imagine how they might evaluate the behavior of such a friend.

In the questionnaire, the respondents were given the following instructions: 'Here are several questions involving friends. For each scenario, you are asked to give your opinion concerning the appropriateness of the behavior of your friend.' Six vignettes followed:

> *Scenario 1*: Suppose you haven't seen your friend Michael, for a long time. You run into him and his partner, Carl, one day and Michael gives you a big hug.
>
> *Scenario 2*: Your friend, Donna, is having her apartment painted while her partner, Paula, is away on vacation. Donna asks if she can sleep at your place for a couple of nights.

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Scenario 3: Your friend, Ralph, calls you on the phone and is crying because Stephanie just broke up with him. You go over to his house and talk with him for an hour.

Scenario 4: You and your friend, Jane, have had long-standing plans to attend a movie premiere. The night before the premiere, Jane calls you to cancel, saying that she has plans to go out with this hot new guy.

Scenario 5: Kathy, your friend, has been dating Mary for several months. You are involved in an exclusive relationship with someone also. Kathy invites you to attend a family function with her.

Scenario 6: Your friend, John, is dating Clarence. You haven't seen John for a long time. John brings you a surprise, expensive gift.

Similar procedures were used by R. H. Price and Bouffard (1974) and Felmlee (1999) in their studies measuring evaluations of behavior according to its appropriateness, via situation-specific studies.

To manipulate the sex and sexual orientation of the 'friend,' the sex of the friend was varied using a common female or male name and pronoun (e.g., Donna instead of Donald, he instead of she) and the sexual orientation of the friend was also varied (e.g., partner named Paula instead of Paul). The sexual orientation of the friend was indicated by identifying the friend's romantic interest as their 'partner' within the context of the vignette. Although this strategy allows for the possibility that some respondents would not understand that 'partner' means romantic interest and therefore not recognize an implicit reference to sexual orientation, the majority of subjects provided evidence that they perceived same-sex identified friends as gay or lesbian in their qualitative responses.

Following each vignette, the respondents were asked to rate the appropriateness of the friend's behavior, according to a seven-point Likert scale, with the following question, 'How appropriate was this behavior, as best you can tell? (circle the number).' The given responses ranged from 1 = *extremely appropriate* to 7 = *extremely inappropriate*. The qualitative data were collected by asking the open-ended question 'Why?' immediately following the vignette and the Likert scale measure.

The effects of sex and a friend's sexual orientation were measured for each respondent using a 2 (respondent's sex) $\times$ 2 (friend's sex) $\times$ 2 (friend's sexual orientation) factorial analysis (ANOVA) for each scenario. The results are listed in Table 1. The quantitative findings show a friend's sexual orientation significantly affects the evaluation of behavior in five of the six scenarios.

The qualitative comments were intended to be illustrative of explanations for the quantitative findings. As such, the qualitative data were used as a means to develop and elaborate upon analyses of the quantitative data, consistent with Rossman and Wilson's (1985) approach, rather than to provide a representative sampling of all qualitative comments. In evaluating the qualitative responses to the open-ended question, 'Why [was the behavior deemed appropriate or inappropriate]?' which followed each scenario, the researcher independently developed a coding system by identifying the themes that best shed light on the qualitative comments for each scenario. Thus, there was no measure of inter-coder reliability.

Applying Strauss's (1987) process of coding of data from field notes to the participants' open-ended comments, the researcher also examined respondent statements for language usage that could aid in the interpretation of

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TABLE 1
Means for appropriateness of friend's behavior, by sex of the respondent (S), sex of the friend (F) and sexual orientation of the friend (So)

	Respondent's sex								
	Female		Male						
	Friend's sex		Friend's sex		*F*-ratios				
Scenario	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**	**S**	**F**	**So**	**(S × F)**	**(S × F × So)**
Big Hug									
Het friend	1.94	2.11	2.44	2.68	19.20**	6.70**	.17	4.27*	3.33[a]
G/L friend[a]	1.91	1.88	2.05	3.10					
Overnight									
Het friend	1.80	2.96	3.24	2.63	5.01*	1.02	1.20	5.65*	8.12**
G/L friend	2.37	2.36	2.50	2.65					
Break-up									
Het friend	1.42	1.78	1.96	2.12	16.35**	1.93	5.05*	.66	2.80[†]
G/L friend	1.95	1.72	2.15	2.50					
Cancel Plans									
Het friend	5.32	5.26	5.80	4.32	.25	5.34*	2.31	5.82*	2.14
G/L friend	5.38	5.48	5.60	5.35					
Family Invite									
Het friend	2.33	3.11	3.28	2.64	.31	.39	.14	5.76*	3.54[a]
G/L friend	2.82	3.04	2.85	2.90					
Surprise Gift									
Het friend	4.18	4.06	4.00	4.48	.00	6.44*	3.52	4.03*	.04
G/L friend	3.85	4.18	3.35	4.40					
Sample size	**105**	**104**	**45**	**45**					

Note. The two-way interaction (F × So) was significant only for the 'Cancel Plans' scenario at $p \leq .10$. The remaining two-way interaction (S × F) was not significant for any scenario.

[a] G/L Friend: gay or lesbian friend.

[†]$p \leq .10$; *$p \leq .05$; **$p \leq .01$.

quantitative findings. Specifically, the comments were analyzed for the use of qualifiers (e.g., 'as long as') in assessing the friend's behaviors.

Results

Quantitative results

The hypotheses that male respondents' attitudes would differ significantly from female respondents,' and respondents' attitudes would be significantly different when evaluating straight friends and gay male/lesbian friends were supported. The quantitative results suggest sex and sexual orientation matter in the evaluation of a friend's behavior. Male respondents judge a hypothetical straight male friend's actions more favorably when they uphold conventional masculine behaviors such as seeking out sexual partners and are more critical of gay male friends displaying emotional or affectionate behaviors. Overall, females are more accepting of heterosexual female friends' behavior than any other category of friend, particularly in cases implying intimacy or integration into various aspects of their life, such as a request to stay overnight or an invitation to attend a family function.

Scenario One: Suppose you haven't seen your friend Michael, for a long time. You run into him and his partner, Carl, one day and Michael gives you a big hug. In this scenario, the presence of marginally significant three-way interaction effects ($F(1,297) = 3.33$, $p < .10$) suggests a complex relationship between respondent's sex, friend's sex, and friend's sexual orientation. There is also a significant two-way interaction between sex and friend's sex ($F(1,297) = 4.27$, $p < .05$), as well as significant main effects of respondent's sex ($F(1,297) = 19.20$, $p < .01$) and friend's sex ($F(1,297) = 6.70$, $p < .01$) (Table 1). Post-hoc Scheffe tests show when an old friend reportedly greets the respondent with a big hug in front of the friend's partner, the condition of a male respondent with a gay male friend differs from all of the female respondents. Men judge the behavior of a gay male friend who gives him a big hug as significantly more inappropriate than women judge a friend of either sex or sexual orientation in the same situation. All remaining categories of friendships are not statistically significant in the post-hoc contrast tests.

Scenario Two: Your friend, Donna, is having her apartment painted while her partner, Paula, is away on vacation. Donna asks if she can sleep at your place for a couple of nights. This scenario has significant three-way interaction effects of respondent's sex, friend's sex, and friend's sexual orientation ($F(1,295) = 8.12$, $p < .01$) (Table 1). Post-hoc contrasts show female respondents with a heterosexual female friend differ significantly from male respondents with a female heterosexual friend and female respondents with a male heterosexual friend. None of the remaining types of friendship combinations is statistically significant, according to the post-hoc contrasts. Additionally, there are significant interaction effects between respondent's sex and friend's sex ($F(1,295) = 5.65$, $p < .05$), as well as significant main effects for respondent's sex ($F(1,295) = 5.01$, $p < .05$). Given these results, it appears that women judge the behavior of a heterosexual female friend who requests an overnight stay as more appropriate than do women with a male heterosexual friend and men with a female heterosexual friend. Additionally, the expected outcome of a same-sex lesbian friend's behavior being more harshly evaluated than a same-sex heterosexual friend was supported in the case of female respondents.

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Scenario Three: Your friend, Ralph, calls you on the phone and is crying because Stephanie just broke up with him. You go over to his house and talk with him for an hour. There are marginally significant three-way interaction effects for sex, friend's sex, and friend's sexual orientation in this scenario ($F(1,298) = 2.80, p < .10$) (Table 1). Post-hoc Scheffe tests show males responding about a friendship with a gay male judge their friend's behavior as significantly less appropriate than other friendship combinations. None of the remaining friendship combinations are statistically significant in the post-hoc contrasts. Main effects of sex and a friend's sexual orientation have explanatory value in interpreting the interaction effects. According to the results listed in Table 1, males assess a male friend's crying over a break-up as significantly less appropriate than female respondents, regardless of the friend's sex ($F(1,298) = 16.35, p < .01$). Additionally, the results show a main effect of friend's sexual orientation ($F(1,298) = 5.05, p < .05$). Crying over a break-up is evaluated as more appropriate when the friend is female and heterosexual.

Scenario Four: You and your friend, Jane, have had long-standing plans to attend a movie premiere. The night before the premiere, Jane calls you to cancel, saying that she has plans to go out with this hot new guy. Here, there is a significant two-way interaction effect between a friend's sex and a friend's sexual orientation ($F(1,298) = 5.82, p < .05$). Additionally, there is a marginally significant two-way interaction effect between a respondent's sex and a friend's sex ($F(1,298) = 3.60, p < .10$) and a significant main effect of friend's sex ($F(1,298) = 5.34, p < .05$). See Table 1 for the listing of the main effect by friend's sex; the marginally significant two-way effect is not listed in the table. These effects suggest male respondents are more likely to judge a male friend's cancellation of plans as more appropriate than a female friend's, and a heterosexual friend's cancellation of plans as more appropriate than the same action by a gay male or lesbian.

Scenario Five: Kathy, your friend, has been dating Mary for several months. You are involved in an exclusive relationship with someone also. Kathy invites you to attend a family function with her. The relationship between respondent's sex, friend's sex, and friend's sexual orientation is complicated in this case. Post-hoc contrasts fail to identify the marginally significant interaction ($F(1,295) = 3.54, p < .10$) (Table 1). However, the combined two-way effects of respondent's and friend's sex are significant ($F(1,298) = 5.76, p < .05$). Female respondents rate an invitation to a family function as most appropriate from a straight female friend and least appropriate from a straight male friend. Male respondents rate an invitation to a family function from a heterosexual female friend to be least appropriate and view the same behavior from a heterosexual male friend to be most appropriate.

Scenario Six: Your friend, John, is dating Clarence. You haven't seen John for a long time. John brings you a surprise, expensive gift. There is a significant interaction effect between respondent's sex and friend's sex in this scenario ($F(1,298) = 4.03, p < .05$). Post-hoc Scheffe contrasts do not indicate which variable relationship is different from the others. Also, there is a significant main effect of friend's sex ($F(1,298) = 6.44\ p < .05$). Given these results, it appears that it is more appropriate for a female to bring a gift to a friend than it is for a male friend, regardless of the respondent's sexual orientation, a finding which does not support the hypotheses.

Summarizing all findings, the hypotheses were either fully or partially supported in five of six scenarios. As predicted, male respondents evaluate gay male friends' actions significantly more negatively when compared with female

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respondents in the big hug and crying after a break-up scenarios. In the canceling plans scenario, male respondents also gave other straight male friends leeway and judged a female friend's canceling plans as more inappropriate. Additionally, male respondents rated gay male behaviors more harshly than other types of friends in the break-up scenario. It should be noted that the sample's composition by sex, which was 70% female, 30% male, may have affected the overall outcomes of the results.

While the sex of the respondent, and the sex and sexual orientation of a friend affect the evaluated appropriateness of a given behavior, the differences are moderate in size. Although many quantitative results are statistically significant, the differences in how males and females rate behaviors ranges from '*extremely appropriate*' to '*somewhat appropriate*' in some scenarios. Therefore, actions rated as generally appropriate vary in the *level* of appropriateness. In other vignettes, the evaluation of behavior by male and female respondents differs in *degrees* of inappropriateness. This is consistent with previous findings showing males and females to be more alike than different in their assessments of a friend's behavior (Felmlee, 1999).

The quantitative findings suggest that the assessment of a friend's behavior abides by traditional norms of sex and sexual orientation. Applying such differential evaluations of a friend's behavior reinforces social inequalities by employing traditional norms of gendered and sexualized behavior. For example, in cases implying an increasing interdependence or intimacy, female respondents are likely to give more leeway to heterosexual female friends' behavior. Male respondents place a high value on a male friend who acts in conventionally masculine ways, while being critical of gay male friends who display sensitive or affectionate behaviors.

Qualitative results

Like the quantitative results, the qualitative data suggest that conventional norms of gender and sexuality are upheld within friendship contexts. The respondents' qualitative comments clarify the quantitative findings and provide insight about why and under what circumstances a particular behavior is deemed appropriate. For example, the responses sometimes suggest a behavior judged '*extremely appropriate*' on the scaled items, is actually appropriate only under particular circumstances. While this inconsistency could be troubling, it suggests individuals' views about sexuality and sex norms in friendship are complex and difficult to assess given only one method of measurement. In analyzing the qualitative data for themes that illuminate the quantitative results, four themes emerge: conditional appropriateness, identity work, questioned homosexuality, and challenging heterosexism.

Conditional appropriateness. Throughout the open-ended comments, respondents repeatedly identify behaviors as appropriate only under the conditions they specify, as indicated through the use of phrases such as 'as long as' and 'only if.' For example, in the family function scenario, many respondents report they would go to the function only if it were made clear they were heterosexual and not in a relationship with the friend. One female respondent says of her lesbian friend's actions: 'It is okay – as long as they don't think you are a couple.' In the open-ended comments about the overnight scenario the appropriateness of the friend's intentions are again questioned. Many respondents note an overnight stay is appropriate only if the friend understands the relationship to be platonic.

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Identity work. One of the most marked findings in this research is the identity work used by the heterosexual respondents to differentiate themselves from their reported gay and lesbian friends. The term 'identity work' refers to the construction and negotiation of a personal identity, the meaning given to the self by the actor (Snow & Anderson, 1987). The qualitative comments often provide such examples. One male respondent, for example, clarifies the appropriateness of actions in this way: 'I am a heterosexual male so I don't find anything inappropriate about this [invitation from a gay male friend to attend a family function].' Many female respondents also state their sexual orientation in the open-ended comments: 'Seems kind of odd if she's dating someone else to get me a gift, but I'm also not homosexual so I suppose I wouldn't be a threat to their relationship.' These respondents' naming of their own sexual orientation clarifies their quantitative evaluations, while simultaneously identifying them as heterosexual. This is relevant because comments that locate the respondent as heterosexual were primarily present in comments about gay male and lesbian friends.

Another means of invoking one's sexual identity comes in the form of qualifying statements differentiating the respondent from his or her friend. For example, a female respondent notes, 'Just because I don't relate specifically to his problem (in that I am not homosexual and not involved [in a relationship]) doesn't mean I can't befriend him. I can.' While the respondent shows support for her gay male friend, she does so by reinforcing her own sexual orientation as straight. This is particularly interesting because the vignette does not seem to call the respondent's sexual orientation into question. Merely associating a scenario with someone identified as gay or lesbian apparently instigates the need for some respondents to reaffirm their heterosexuality. Similar sentiments are present in comments from male respondents. By stating, 'I have never had such an experience dating another guy,' one male participant clarifies he is unlike the gay friend. In effect, the respondent distances himself from gayness: he ensured he would not be categorized as gay, even in an anonymous survey. The pressure to assert a heterosexual identity and therefore not be socially deviant seemingly reflects the heterosexism present in U.S. society.

Similar comments also arise in addressing same-sex relationships. Both males and females question their own ability to deal with a same-sex break-up situation because it differs from heterosexual life. For example, one female notes of her friendship with a gay male: 'As a friend, I would be open to helping him deal with the break-up, but as a person in a different type of relationship I might feel uncomfortable.' This suggests that while some respondents view gay and lesbian romantic relationships as fundamentally different from heterosexual relationships, they would assist their friend to the best of his or her ability.

Questioned gay and lesbian identity. One additional finding to emerge from the qualitative data is how sexual orientation is viewed as flexible, or changeable, in most cases except for that of straight males. In many open-ended responses, male and female respondents question the 'true' sexual orientation of their gay male, straight female, or lesbian friend. This occurs in every designation of friend, except for the heterosexual male. For example, in assessing his lesbian friend's request to stay overnight, one male comments, 'She could be hitting on you and want sex, or she just needs a place to stay.' What is particularly interesting about this trend is the lack of second-guessing about straight males'

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sexual orientation; none of the heterosexual males' actions are questioned as being other than their inferred sexual orientation.

The most common questioning of a friend's sexual orientation occurs in the female respondents' comments about a gay male friend. In each scenario, female respondents note the possibility that their gay male friend may have sexual interest in them. In the overnight scenario, for example, one female respondent notes of her gay male friend: 'If he needs a place to sleep then it's fine as long as I myself am confident that his feelings for me are completely non-sexual.' Another evaluates the request to stay overnight as appropriate 'as long as nothing inappropriate happens.' In the family function scenario, a female respondent comments on the appropriateness of the request: 'depends on if there are other intentions by Mark than just a "friendly" dinner.' Note in each of these examples, the respondents invokes phrases such as 'as long as' or 'depends' in order to signal the behavior is provisionally acceptable, so long as the friendship boundary is not crossed by the gay male friend.

In effect, some respondents question whether it is possible to have a consistent gay male or lesbian identity, a finding implying a heterosexist perspective. Given that heterosexism is woven into U.S. culture, heterosexual relationships are normalized and same-sex partnerships are not socially or legally sanctioned. Therefore, same-sex relationships are not always recognized as viable and legitimate. Accordingly, many female respondents seem unable to reconcile a male friend's sexual attraction to and desire to have an intimate relationship with another man, and instead perceive the friend's actions as a sexual attraction to her. Similarly, there are many male respondents who questioned their lesbian friend's actions as being sexual overtures.

Challenging heterosexism. While the majority of qualitative comments reinforce social norms about sexual orientation, many challenge conventional ideas in nuanced ways. For example, in expressing reservations about the big hug scenario, one male respondent comments on a hug from a gay male friend: 'I would think it is odd, but I wouldn't feel surprised.' This response expresses both reservation and acceptance. Many female respondents also reinforce acceptance of their lesbian friend by explicitly acknowledging their own or their friend's sexual orientation: 'I always hug my friends. As my friend, Michelle would know that I was hetero and we would both know the hug was platonic.' Hence, the respondents differentiate their sexual orientation from their friends' by deeming the hug appropriate in spite of the sexual orientation of the friend.

The finding that gay and lesbian identity is questioned can be read in disparate ways suggesting either a traditional or subversive view, depending on the interpretation. The traditional interpretation of the questioned gay or lesbian identity is that respondents employ a stereotypical read of a friend's behavior, inferring same-sex oriented individuals are hypersexual and indiscriminant about their choice of sexual partners. Such a perspective reflects homosexuality's being defined as a mental disorder by medical and psychological professionals up until the 1980s, a practice which served to conflate non-heterosexual orientations with mental illness and moral inferiority (G. S. Rubin, 1984). As such, same-sex oriented individuals have often been stereotyped as sexual deviants who are capable of varying sexual indiscretions. The questioning of gay male and lesbian friends' intentions as sexual may contain lingering elements of such a stereotypical view.

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A more optimistic view of this finding is that homosexuality is becoming routinized and normalized in U.S. society. According to Seidman et al. (1999), the increasing trend toward normalization of homosexuality in personal interactions is causing a shift in the understanding of normative heterosexuality in American society. With an increasing acceptance of homosexuality also comes an understanding of sexual fluidity. The findings, then, may reflect an enlightened understanding and acceptance of the fluid nature of sexuality in their friends.

The most plausible explanation for the respondents' questioning of gay male and lesbian identity combines the traditional and subversive interpretations. Indeed, the findings suggest a degree of acceptance of gay men and lesbians on the interpersonal level, however, the participants simultaneously engage in identity work to distance themselves from homosexuality. Furthermore, the differential norms and expectations applied to behavior imply that stereotypes about gay men and lesbians persist. The best interpretation is one that acknowledges both lingering stereotypes and broadening acceptance of gay men and lesbians by straight society.

Discussion

According to the quantitative and qualitative findings, a friend's sexual orientation and sex affects the assessment of friendship behavior. In five of the six scenarios there is a significant statistical effect of the friend's sexual orientation in evaluating the appropriateness of the friend's behavior. Sex also has statistically significant effects in all six scenarios. Additionally, the respondent's sex and the friend's sex influence the assessment of a friend's behavior. These findings imply norms and expectations of cross-sexuality and cross-sex friendships often differ from those of same-sex, same-sexuality friends.

The quantitative and qualitative findings create an interesting picture of how the sexual orientation and sex of a friend may influence an individual's perception of his/her behavior. Respondents interpret the scenarios according to the norms and expectations they assigned them – norms and expectations shaped by social definitions of acceptable behavior in a friendship. For example, because heterosexual relations between men and women are socially sanctioned to be romantic or intimate pairings, the behavior of cross-sex friends is interpreted differently from that of same-sex bonds. Respondents sometimes view the behavior of straight friends as different from gay and lesbian friends, particularly in assessing some actions by same-sex gay and lesbian friends and cross-sex heterosexual friends as sexual overtures. Likewise, both male and female respondents are more likely to question the intentions of their cross-sex friends and interpret their actions to be a romantic or sexual overture.

Overall, the most favorably evaluated scenarios are those involving straight female friends. In the big hug, overnight, break-up, and family function scenarios, straight females' behaviors are rated as most appropriate, according to female respondents. Women's expectation of intimacy within female–female friendships may account for this result (L. B. Rubin,

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1985). However, in the overnight, break-up, and family function scenarios female respondents rate the behavior of a lesbian friend as less appropriate than that of a straight female friend. Such responses indicate the sexual orientation of a female friend may change the assessment of behavioral norms and expectations. A friend's sexual orientation and sex also affects male respondents' perception of the appropriateness of a given action. The result of male respondents' evaluating gay male friends' actions more negatively when compared with those of female respondents is consistent with Herek's (2000) findings that straight men have more hostile attitudes about gay men than in their attitudes toward lesbians, or heterosexual women's attitudes toward homosexuals of either sex.

Heterosexist attitudes can influence friendship; however, the context of friendship may be one where social norms and expectations can also be challenged (Nardi, 1999). The friendship bond is a voluntary one and as such, both members of the dyad willingly enter the relationship (Wiseman, 1986). Living within the larger heterosexually dominated society, most gay men and lesbians interact and create bonds with heterosexuals (Nardi, 1999). However, a straight individual who is truly homophobic is not necessarily compelled to instigate or continue a friendship with someone who identifies as gay or lesbian. Hence, individuals who maintain cross-sexuality friendships may be more willing to challenge social norms than those whose social networks are more homogenous.

Despite respondents' use of qualifiers in commenting on the appropriateness of homosexual friends' behavior, very few indicate a refusal to interact with a hypothetical gay male or lesbian friend. In many cases, the expectations of friendship appear to trump attitudes of prejudice, as evidenced in the statement from one female respondent: 'I am extremely homophobic, but if it was my good friend, I'd be there for her.' Additionally, both male and female respondents indicate a significant degree of acceptance of homosexuality in their comments. For example, even in the statement 'as long as Donald and I are cool then that is fine,' this male respondent does not entirely object to his gay male friend staying overnight, rather he sets the parameters for the interaction. Additionally, although some respondents differentiate their own sexual orientation from their gay male or lesbian friends', they also indicate a clear desire to help a friend in need, regardless of sexual orientation. One female respondent comments on the overnight scenario involving a lesbian friend, 'It wouldn't matter that she is a lesbian. She's my friend and I'll help her out.' In these instances, the respondents show friendship may indeed be a place of tolerance between groups.

Strengths and limitations of the present study

The findings of this study are limited in several ways. First, using a population of university students provides a more homogenous sample than a random sampling of the population. Being young and educated, the sample may be more open to friendships crossing boundaries of sex and sexual orientation than the general population (Wright, 1999). Surveying a population more

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representative of the larger U.S. society could bring different results. Because this research examines sex and sexual orientation in friendships, however, university students are an informative sample, as they are a group likely to have cross-sex friends (L. B. Rubin, 1985).

Another potential limitation of this study is the use of past romantic history as a proxy for heterosexual identity. Using this measure falsely conflates same-sex behavior with same-sex identity and assumes a static sexual identity over time, which could affect the overall accuracy of the results by erroneously incorporating individuals who do not necessarily identify as straight into this sample, which is understood to be heterosexual.

The hypothetical nature of this research is also a limitation. This finding may be related to the hypothetical nature of the study; the scenarios discussed here are about supposed friends rather than actual relationships. Although the vignettes provide insight on hypothetical behavior, they may not reflect what people do, think, or feel in real life. Heterosexuals' prejudicial attitudes toward sexual minorities should not be conflated with behavioral outcomes. In his classic study of the inconsistencies between prejudicial attitudes and behaviors, Lapiere (1934) found that when interacting with someone toward whom an individual might otherwise harbor prejudicial attitudes, most people did not act differentially to members of that group. Hence, while symbolic situations like the vignettes used in the study can reveal subtle attitudes of sexual prejudice, such measures should not be assumed to measure behavioral outcomes.

On a related note, the respondents' ratings on the vignettes may lack a degree of external validity, such that they do not account for the complex constellation of factors that comprise attitudes about friends and the scenarios presented. For example, we cannot assume that when faced with a real-life gay male friend, a straight male respondent would feel his friend's crying over a break-up would be inappropriate, because that situation emerges from a very specific context. The measures employed in this study cannot address the number or nature of interpersonal contacts a respondent has had with gay men or lesbians, which, according to Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, could mediate feelings of sexual prejudice. However, this study does allow for an examination of attitudes that are representative of a sample of heterosexual young adults, who likely have had a variety of experiences with gay men and lesbians.

Although there are limitations to the present study, they are outweighed by the overall contribution it makes. Although the study may lack a degree of external validity, the vignette design allows for a measurement of attitudes that is not reliant on the respondents' actual behaviors. As Lapiere (1934) shows, attitudes are not synonymous with behaviors and cannot be easily measured by observing an individual's actions. Thus, in using the current research design, attitudes can be separated from behavior. It is precisely because a constellation of experiences and beliefs influences friendship interaction that it is necessary to isolate sexual orientation and sex as variables in order to understand how attitudes of sexual prejudice operate in close interpersonal contexts.

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The use of both quantitative and qualitative methods in this study design is another particular strength of this research in that it allows inconsistencies in attitudes to be exposed. The respondents' qualitative comments clarify the quantitative findings and provide insight about why and under what circumstances a particular behavior is deemed appropriate. For example, the responses sometimes suggest a behavior judged '*extremely appropriate*' on the scaled items, is actually appropriate only under particular circumstances. While this inconsistency could be troubling, it suggests individuals' views about sexuality and sex norms in friendship are complex and difficult to assess given only one method of measurement. The respondents' comments, which explain why they evaluated a friend's behavior as they did, illustrate a subtlety in the expression of sexual prejudice that likely could not be captured using other methods.

Directions for future research

This research would be enhanced by including a substantial sample of gay male and lesbian respondents in order to compare their responses with the responses of the heterosexual sample. It is important to discover whether gay men and lesbians evaluate the behavior of both homosexuals and heterosexuals differently from heterosexuals in friendships. Because results from this study suggest heterosexuals' evaluation of a friend's behavior varies according to the friend's sexual orientation, it is important to see if gay men and lesbians also employ this double standard. Expanding the study to include gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender interactions could also help increase our understanding of social relationships.

Moreover, in order to understand how prejudicial attitudes are mediated by interpersonal contact, additional research is necessary to examine how the number of actual gay male and lesbian friends a person has affects his or her evaluation of behavior. Given Herek and Capitanio's (1996) findings that heterosexuals having close interpersonal contacts with gay men and lesbians have more favorable attitudes toward gay men and lesbians as a group, future research examining the causality between friendship and sexual prejudicial attitudes would broaden our understandings of this connection.

Conclusion

This research serves to broaden the scope of friendship inquiry to examine friendships crossing both sex and sexual orientation boundaries and to expand the discussion of social inequality to the micro-level of analysis. Both quantitative and qualitative results indicate a friend's sexual orientation and sex matter in the evaluation of friendship behavior, suggesting there are norms and expectations specific to sex and sexual orientation guiding these relationships. In particular, the identity work and assumptions about homosexuality inherent in the respondent comments reflects the persistence of heterosexism and homophobia in contemporary U.S. society. The respondents' need to identify their own sexual orientation as straight and the repeated differentiation of aspects of their lives from gay male or

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lesbian friends suggests that within the friendship context, heterosexism remains intact.

Complicating these findings, however, is that none of the respondents note an outright refusal to maintain a friendship with a gay male or lesbian friend. Rather, the bond of friendship appears to supersede heterosexist attitudes in being willing to offer support and assistance to a friend in need. Results also suggest that categories of sexual orientation and sex impact the evaluations of friendship behaviors primarily in degrees of appropriateness, rather than categorically, suggesting that beliefs about the importance of friendship can moderate heterosexist attitudes. Ultimately, the findings of this study provide evidence of individuals both reinforcing and resisting attitudes of sexual prejudice.

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