The Effects of Imagined Inter-Group Contact on Reducing Sexual Prejudice among Korean University Students

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Sexual prejudice is a term applied to all negative attitudes and stereotypes assigned toward an individual on the basis of her or his sexual orientation (Herek, 2010). Due to how sexuality is organized socially by modern society, this type of prejudice is almost always directed at people who engage in homosexual behavior or whom label themselves lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT). Unfortunately, most adults in the United States harbor negative feelings and attitudes toward homosexual behavior, viewing it as wrong and unnatural (Herek & Capitanio, 1996). The sport industry is no exception to this generalization. It is abundantly clear that LGBT individuals have encountered considerable sexual prejudice and discrimination (Cunningham, 2010; Griffin, 1998).

While much of the sexual prejudice in sport research has been conducted in North America, the problem is applicable in other countries, too. There is no single culture, race, ethnic group, or gender that has a monopoly on prejudice (Brewer, 1979; Brown, 1995; Fowers & Richardson, 1996; Triandis, 1994). Just as it can be shown in many other nations, researchers have found that there is prevalent sexual prejudice in Korea (Kim & Hahn, 2006; Kimmel, 2004; Douglas, 2009). Consider, for instance, that there are no laws prohibiting discrimination against LGBT individuals in Korea, largely because homosexuality is considered too unnatural to be mentionable in the context (Kim & Hahn, 2006). Furthermore, conservative religious teachings are widespread and strongly oppose homosexuality (LeVay & Nonas, 1995). Unfortunately, sexual minorities who have disclosed their sexual orientation have dismissed from work and most transgender people are deprived of their right to work due to extreme discrimination (Douglas, 2009). Therefore, most Korean LGBT individuals keep their sexual orientation a secret from their extended family, work colleagues, and friends (Douglas, 2009).

The contact hypothesis, formalized by Allport (1954), states that contact among people who are different will reduce prejudice and discrimination (see also Pettigrew, 1998). The premise is based on the idea that contact among different group members reduces negative intergroup attitudes (Wright et al., 1997). Thus, when contact occurs, people learn about each other and see potential similarities they share. As a result, bias and discrimination against the out-group are reduced. Later, Pettigrew (1998) added to the contact hypothesis in suggesting friendship plays an important part in the reduction of prejudice. Pettigrew (1998) highlighted the anxiety-reducing role of intergroup contact. That is, intergroup anxiety has repeatedly been shown to be a major mediator of the effects of contact on attitudes. Intergroup anxiety refers to feelings of apprehension and awkwardness when being in a contact situation with out-group members. However, since LGBT individuals may not want to be exposed, it is difficult to have a contact with LGBT persons. This makes contact situations difficult.

Methods to reducing intergroup prejudice focus on ways to improve the quantity or quality of intergroup contact (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002), but for some out-groups, contact can be difficult to arrange, or contains some risks (Corrigan et al., 2002; Schulze & Angermeyer, 2003). New research has suggested that actual contact may not be necessary to reduce intergroup prejudice; Turner, Crisp, and Lambert (2007) argued for imagined inter-group contact as a means of reducing intergroup bias, suggesting that is easier and more practical than actual contact. In other words, indirect contact has emerged as a way of accessing the psychological benefits of contact when actual face-to-face contact is not possible (Turner, Hewstone, Voci, Paolini, & Christ, 2007). In this manner, sexual prejudice and intergroup anxiety can be reduced through having imagined contact. This study is aimed to examine whether a new type of indirect contact, imagined intergroup contact, could contribute to reducing sexual bias towards LGBT persons working in sport organizations.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the degree to which imagined intergroup contact with LGBT individuals working in sport reduces sexual prejudice and intergroup anxiety. A secondary aim is to examine potential differences across cultures by comparing the responses of Korean and US participants.

Female and male students from Korea (n = 100) and the United States (n = 100) will participate in the study.
Participants will be randomly allocated to one of two groups. One group will be assigned to the imagined contact condition to take 5 minutes to imagine meeting, for the first time, a gay or lesbian stranger. The other group, the control condition group, will be asked to take 5 minutes to imagine a hiking trip (Turner et al., 2007; Experiment 2). Following this manipulation, participants will be asked to complete a set of questionnaires. The ATLG (Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men) developed by Herek (1984) will be used to examine the participants’ level of sexual prejudice. Also, intergroup anxiety scale developed by Stephan and Stephan (1985) will be used to measure the level of intergroup anxiety with LGBT individuals. Then, participants will be asked what they think about the experiment. Finally, they will provide their demographic information.

After receiving the completed questionnaires, the data will be analyzed using SPSS. First, items will be analyzed for reverse coding, and descriptive statistics for the study variables will be performed. Means, standard deviations, and variance will be included with the statistics, to show the participants’ levels of sexual prejudice and intergroup anxiety. Then, the influence of one’s level of imagined contact on sexual prejudice will be accessed through regression analysis.

Consistent with our hypothesis, we expect that imagined intergroup contact reduces sexual prejudice and intergroup anxiety. This study has some significant implications, including (a) providing and testing a new way to reduce sexual prejudice, (b) examination of cross-cultural differences in sexual prejudice, and (c) suggesting that intergroup anxiety should be positively correlated with sexual prejudice. In addition, should the imagined inter-group contact method prove successful, it is hoped that this method could be applied to reduce sexual prejudice and discrimination in the sport industry.