The Political is Personal: Political Orientation and the Expression of Prejudice

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Diversity

Thursday, June 4, 2015

Abstract 2015-008 8:55 AM 20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (Richelieu)

Prejudice, or the “unfavorable attitude toward another group, involving both negative feelings and beliefs” (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000, p. 15) negatively affects sport and sport participants. People who experience prejudice have poor participation experiences (Hylton, 2009), face discrimination in the hiring process (Cunningham et al., 2010), and are treated badly in the workplace (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008). There is also evidence that the expression of prejudice negatively affects one’s health, shortening the biased individual’s life by three years, relative to less prejudiced individuals (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014).

Given these effects, researchers have devoted considerable attention to understanding the antecedents of prejudice and ways to reduce it (see Paluck & Green, 2009). One potential antecedent that is conspicuously absent within the sport domain is the influence of political orientation. To be sure, others have noted the influence of political orientation when it comes to activism in sport (Kauffman & Wolff, 2010), the manner in which sport is reflective of political ideology (Hoberman, 1984), and how the delivery of sport is shaped, at least in part, by political ideology (Sage, 2010). Despite these advances, examination of how political orientation is related to various forms of prejudice has gone largely unexamined.

Jost et al. (2009) offered an integrated theoretical model to explain why political orientation might relate to prejudice. They suggested that the degree to which one expresses openness to change and rejection of inequality influences subsequent conservative or progressive political attitudes. In turn, these attitudes influence how people critique systems, view issues, and express prejudice. Germane to this analysis, Jost et al. suggest progressives are likely to question systems of injustice and have low levels of prejudice. Building from this perspective, I hypothesized: conservative political orientation will be positively associated with prejudice (H1).

In addition, it is possible political orientation holds a stronger association with some forms of prejudice than with others. In this analysis, I compare two prevalent forms of prejudice: racism and sexual prejudice. Cunningham et al. (2009) observed that fans had sharper rebukes for racist remarks than for sexist ones, supporting the notion that overt forms of racism are socially taboo (Campbell, 1947). On the other hand, Florida (2012) argued that sexual prejudice (negative attitudes toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals) is among the more socially acceptable forms of prejudice. This is also observed among various sport stakeholders (Krane & Barner, 2005; Melton & Cunningham, 2012). In line with this possibility, I hypothesized: the relationship between conservative political orientation and sexual prejudice will be significantly stronger than the relationship between conservative political orientation and racism (H2).

Finally, Allport (1954) suggested contact with people different from the self can help reduce prejudice, and Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) demonstrated these robust effects in their meta-analysis of over 500 studies. Building from this theory, it is possible that, even among people with a conservative political ideology, having out-group friends will reduce prejudice. Thus, I hypothesized: out-group friends will moderate the relationship between conservative political ideology and sexual prejudice (H3).

Methods

This study reflects the findings from three studies, with the samples all coming from a large, public university in the US. The sample in Study 1 included 199 students enrolled in physical activity classes. The sample was 77% White and included 51% women. Sample 2 included 299 staff members, 53% of whom were women, 75% were White, and the mean age was 44 years. Study 3 included 121 students enrolled in physical activity classes, with 42% women, 67% White, and a mean age of 21 years.

In each study, participants completed a questionnaire in which they provided their demographics and responded to
items measuring their political orientation (7 point scale from very liberal to very conservative) and the Feelings Thermometer (Essess et al., 1993). This is an instrument measuring how warmly or coolly people feel toward various groups and has been used extensively as a measure of prejudice. In Study 3, participants also completed a contact questionnaire (Binder et al., 2009).

**Results**

Study 1. Results from Study 1 offer partial support for H1, as conservative political orientation was positively associated with sexual prejudice ($r = .48, p < .001$), but not racism ($r = .06, ns$). Consistent with H2, the relationship between conservative political orientation and sexual prejudice was significantly stronger than the corresponding relationship with racism, $t (198) = 5.37, p < .001$.

Study 2. A similar pattern emerged in Study 2, where a conservative political orientation was positively associated with sexual prejudice ($r = .44, p < .001$), but not racism ($r = .04, ns$), and the magnitude of the differences was significantly different, $t = 5.48, p < .001$.

Study 3. Given the findings from Studies 1 and 2, the focus of Study 3 was on examining the potentially moderating effects of contact. Conservative political orientation was positive associated with prejudice toward lesbian ($r = .45, p < .001$) and gay ($r = .32, p < .001$) athletes. The magnitude of the differences was significant, $t = 2.6, p < .05$. Moderated regression following Cohen et al.’s (2003) guidelines indicated this was the case for prejudice toward lesbian athletes, but not gay athletes. Conservatives with lesbian friends had less prejudice toward lesbian athletes than those who did not.

**Meta-Analytic Findings.** Given the multiple studies, I computed a meta-analysis using Copper’s (2010) guidelines. This is a method that statistically aggregates results across studies and is appropriate for as few as two datasets. Results show conservative political orientation was positively related to prejudice across the studies (weighted $r = .28$, CI low: .23, CI high: .34). There was a significant Q statistic, ($Q = 50.88, df = 4, p < .001$), suggesting the presence of a moderator. The type of prejudice emerged as a significant moderator ($Q_b = 50.52, df = 1, p < .001$). Conservative political orientation was significantly associated with sexual prejudice (weighted $r = .49$, CI low: .41, CI high: .57), but not racism (weighted $r = .05$, CI low: -.04, CI high: .14).

**Discussion**

Results of the three studies offer insights into the nature of prejudice. Specifically, political orientation reliably predicted prejudice against LGBT individuals but not against racial minorities. The association computed from the meta-analysis (.49) was large (Cohen, 1988). Despite these effects, the prejudice can be reduced through friendship, at when considering prejudice toward lesbian athletes. The findings suggest sport managers should focus on ensuring intergroup contact and the development of friendships among people of various sexual orientations. In addition, In drawing from Yost et al.’s (2010) theoretical framework, managers can demonstrate the efficacy of questioning systemic arrangements that subjugate others and encourage an openness to experience as ways of facilitating more equitable attitudes toward dissimilar others.