

RUNNING HEAD: **BLACK HETEROSEXUALS' ATTITUDES**

**Black Heterosexuals' Attitudes Toward  
Lesbians and Gay Men in the United States**

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## Abstract

*Although the direction and intensity of Black heterosexuals' attitudes toward homosexuality have been topics for considerable speculation, empirical data from representative samples previously have not been available. The current article reports findings from a two-wave telephone survey with a national probability sample of 391 Black heterosexual adults. Results indicated that negative attitudes toward homosexuality are widespread, but do not appear to be more prevalent among Blacks than among Whites. Gender differences in Black heterosexuals' attitudes (men's attitudes toward gay men were more negative than their attitudes toward lesbians or women's attitudes toward gay men) appeared to result primarily from men's greater tendency to regard male homosexuality as unnatural. The single most important predictor of attitudes was the attribution of choice to sexual orientation: Respondents who believed that homosexuality is beyond an individual's control expressed significantly more favorable attitudes toward gay men and lesbians than did respondents who regarded homosexuality as a choice. Consistent with previous research in predominantly White samples, respondents were more likely to express favorable attitudes if they were highly educated, unmarried, politically liberal, registered to vote, not religious, and if they included Blacks in their concept of gay men. In addition, respondents reported more favorable attitudes if they had experienced personal contact with gay men or lesbians, but this was not a significant predictor of attitudes when other variables were statistically controlled. Possible differences between Blacks' and Whites' social constructions of sexual orientation are discussed.*

Although various authors have commented on the existence of negative attitudes toward homosexuality in African American communities (e.g., Clarke, 1983; Dalton, 1989; Icard, 1985; Peterson, 1992), quantitative data describing Black heterosexuals' attitudes toward homosexuality are scant. Empirical comparisons of Black and White heterosexuals' attitudes are similarly scarce in the research literature.<sup>1</sup>

Knowledge about Black heterosexuals' attitudes is important for a variety of reasons. As a significant proportion of the U.S. public, African Americans' opinions are important for shaping public policy. Furthermore, the Black population of the United States has experienced extensive stigma and discrimination. Black heterosexuals' attitudes toward gay people are theoretically interesting, therefore, because they represent the reactions of one societal outgroup toward members of another, although the historical circumstances of the two groups have differed markedly. In addition, Black gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals often simultaneously face racial prejudice in the predominantly white gay community and sexual prejudice in the predominantly heterosexual African American community (Loiacano, 1989; Peterson, 1992). Knowledge about the attitudes of heterosexual Blacks is important, therefore, for understanding an important part of the cultural milieu of Black

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<sup>1</sup> We recognize that consensus does not currently exist for the best terminology to use in characterizing race and ethnicity. Survey data indicate that a plurality of Black Americans prefers the term "Black" to describe themselves, but a growing proportion prefers "African American" (Smith, 1992; see also Martin, 1991). In the present paper, we use "Black" to characterize the respondents to our survey. This label is appropriate because, consistent with most survey research (Smith, 1992), our respondents indicated their racial background (e.g., White, Black). Consequently, we do not know how many of the Black respondents identified as African American, Caribbean American, or otherwise. We use "African American," when appropriate to refer to the communities and culture of Blacks in the United States.

gay and bisexual people. Finally, data are needed about negative attitudes toward homosexuality because such attitudes may interfere with AIDS prevention efforts in the Black community (Dalton, 1989; Peterson, 1992; Peterson & Márin, 1988).

The limited data available do not clearly indicate whether Black heterosexuals' attitudes toward homosexuality are similar to those of White heterosexuals, are more tolerant, or are more negative. Klassen, Williams, and Levitt (1989) reported that Black respondents to a 1970 national survey were less likely than Whites to hold strongly antihomosexual attitudes, which the researchers operationalized as a combination of feelings of fear and disgust toward homosexuals and willingness to deny them authoritative jobs and social freedoms. In contrast, no racial differences in attitudes were observed in a 1973 national survey (Irwin & Thompson, 1977, comparing Whites versus non-whites) or in national surveys aggregated across 1973, 1974, and 1976 (Glenn & Weaver, 1979, comparing Whites and Blacks). A 1988 national survey of adolescent males revealed no significant differences between Black and non-Black males in expressions of disgust at male-male sex (Marsiglio, 1993). In that survey, however, Black adolescent males were somewhat less likely than Hispanics or Whites to indicate that they could be friends with a gay person. In a 1985 Field Institute survey of Californians, Blacks were slightly more likely than Whites or Hispanics to support civil rights for gay people, but they also had slightly more negative personal feelings toward male homosexuals; neither difference, however, was statistically significant (Alcalay, Sniderman, Mitchell, & Griffin, 1989).

One study suggested that racial differences exist in attitudes and that they result from an underlying gender difference. In a survey with a large convenience sample of Tennessee state employees, Ernst, Francis, Nevels, and Lemeh (1991) found that Blacks were more likely than Whites to agree that "AIDS will help society by reducing the number of homosexuals (gay people)" (p. 581). This racial difference resulted

largely from a difference between Black and White females. Because Ernst et al. (1991) focused their analyses on interracial differences rather than within-race differences, it is not clear whether Black males and females differed significantly from each other in their responses. The histograms in the Ernst et al. (1991) paper suggest the possibility that White males, Black males, and Black females did not substantially differ in their responses, whereas White females were less likely to agree with the item than were any of the other three groups. In other words, the racial difference observed by Ernst et al. (1991) may indicate extremely gay-supportive attitudes among White females rather than extremely anti-gay attitudes among Black females.

Apart from these few studies, most empirical research on heterosexuals' attitudes has been conducted with samples that were primarily or entirely White. Consequently, a need exists for data from Black samples, preferably from samples that are representative of the Black U.S. population. Such data will permit an understanding of Black heterosexuals' attitudes in their own right, as well as offering a basis for comparison between Blacks and other racial and ethnic groups.

In the current article, we report data from a national telephone survey conducted with a probability sample of Blacks. The survey's principal focus was U.S. adults' attitudes concerning AIDS. Because AIDS has often been equated with male homosexuality in the United States (e.g., Herek, 1990), the survey included several items to assess respondents' attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. Those items are the primary focus for this article.

Because data are generally lacking for African American heterosexuals' attitudes toward lesbians and gay men, our analysis was guided by variables that have been found previously to be important correlates of such attitudes in U.S. samples that were primarily or exclusively White. Based on past research (e.g., Herek, 1984, 1994; Kite, 1994), we tested the following hypotheses.

1. *Black heterosexual men will manifest more negative attitudes than will Black heterosexual women, and this difference will be more pronounced in attitudes toward gay men than in attitudes toward lesbians.* This hypothesis was based on the finding of a reliable gender difference in (mostly White) heterosexuals' attitudes toward gay men and lesbians (Kite, 1994). Although the gender difference hypothesis seems plausible when extended to Blacks, at least one study (Ernst et al., 1991, described previously) appeared not to find a large attitudinal difference between Black women and men.

2. *Black heterosexuals who are less educated, older, less affluent, and married will manifest more negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians than will those who are highly educated, younger, affluent, and single.* These demographic differences have been observed reliably in survey research with national probability samples (Glenn & Weaver, 1979; Herek & Glunt, 1993; Irwin & Thompson, 1977; Schneider & Lewis, 1984).

3. *Black heterosexuals will manifest more negative attitudes toward homosexuality to the extent that they are highly religious.* Religiosity, as measured by frequency of attendance at religious services, is a highly reliable predictor of White heterosexuals' attitudes toward lesbians and gay men (Herek, 1984, 1987). Given the central role played by religious institutions in the African American community (Dalton, 1989; Icard, 1985), it was hypothesized that this relationship would hold among Blacks as well.

4. *Black heterosexuals will manifest more favorable attitudes toward lesbians and gay men to the extent that they are politically liberal and politically empowered.* In recent years, the issue of gay rights has become politically charged, with liberals generally supporting the passage of antidiscrimination statutes and conservatives denouncing gay men and lesbians as immoral (Herek, 1994). We expected the same political dynamics to operate among Blacks as in the rest of society.

5. *Black heterosexuals will manifest more favorable attitudes toward lesbians and gay men to the extent that they have had personal contact with gay people.* Empirical research with national probability samples (Herek & Glunt, 1993; Schneider & Lewis, 1984) and convenience samples (Gentry, 1987; Herek, 1988; Millham, San Miguel, & Kellogg, 1976; Weis & Dain, 1979; Whitley, 1990) has consistently indicated that interpersonal contact is correlated with tolerant attitudes and, indeed, is one of the best predictors of such attitudes. This finding is consistent with the contact hypothesis which, as originally stated by Allport (1954), asserts that "[p]rejudice (unless deeply rooted in the character structure of the individual) may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals. The effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by institutional supports (i.e., by law, custom, or local atmosphere), and if it is of a sort that leads to the perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups" (p. 267). As with our other hypotheses, the applicability of the contact hypothesis to Black heterosexuals' attitudes toward gay people has not been tested.

6. *Black heterosexuals who perceive a homosexual orientation to be an aspect of one's life over which an individual has no control will manifest more favorable attitudes toward lesbians and gay men than will those who believe that homosexuality represents a personal choice.* This is another finding from survey research with national probability samples (e.g., Schneider & Lewis, 1984) and convenience samples (Aguero, Bloch, & Byrne, 1984; Whitley, 1990). It is highly consistent with an important tenet of attribution theory, namely, that stigmatized individuals are more likely to be regarded negatively when their stigma is perceived as controllable and when they are perceived as responsible for having it (Weiner, 1993).

7. *Black heterosexuals will hold more negative attitudes toward homosexuality to the extent that they perceive homosexuality to*

be a “White” phenomenon. Many Blacks perceive homosexuality to be a White cultural phenomenon and the gay community to be a White community (Icard, 1985). Consequently, some heterosexual Blacks’ attitudes may be premised on the assumption that gay people are different from themselves not only in sexual orientation but also in race, ethnic identification, and the values associated with being African American. This assumption of dual differences may result in more negative attitudes than if gay people are perceived as different only on a sexual dimension. Thus, we hypothesized that Blacks whose cognitive category of “gay” overlaps with their category of “Blacks” would manifest more favorable attitudes toward gay people generally than would those who never think of Blacks as being gay.

### Method

The data were collected in the course of a two-wave national telephone survey concerning AIDS-related attitudes among adults in the United States (Herek & Capitanio, 1993, 1994). Except where noted, the data reported here are from the second wave of that study.

#### *Respondents*

*Black sample.* The initial sample was selected using a list of telephone numbers purchased from Survey Sampling, Inc. (Fairfield, CT). The list was based on U.S. census tracts where the density of Black households is 30% or higher. According to 1980 census data, 13.7% of all U.S. census tracts fit this description. Telephone numbers were taken from telephone directory listings and, in 21 states, were supplemented by motor vehicle registration data. This approach excluded Blacks living in untraced areas (e.g., very rural settings) as well as those living in neighborhoods with fewer than 30% Black households.

Eligibility criteria were that the respondent be a Black, English-speaking household resident at least 18 years of age. Of the 1,900 telephone numbers initially in the sample list at Wave 1 of data collection, 1,523 (80.2%) were found to be

residential households. Of these, the household’s racial composition was determined for 1,343 (88.2%). Excluding non-Black households left 794 eligible homes, from which 607 interviews (76.4%) were completed. Because one goal of our project was to monitor reactions to AIDS among Black Californians, this group was oversampled, representing 263 of the 607 completed interviews. The Wave 1 response rate for the Black sample was 67.4%.

At Wave 2, reinterviews were completed with 420 (69.2%) of the original respondents. The Wave 2 sample did not differ significantly from the Wave 1 sample except by income and employment status. Respondents who were unemployed or in the lowest household income category (less than \$10,000 annually) were disproportionately likely to be lost to attrition.

*White sample.* For comparison purposes, data are reported from a sample of White U.S. residents who were part of a larger national probability sample recruited at the same time as the Black sample (total  $n = 538$  at Wave 1, which included 436 Whites). The full sample was originally drawn from the population of all English-speaking adults (at least 18 years of age) residing in households with telephones within the 48 contiguous states. Ten-digit telephone numbers were generated using a stratified two-phase procedure for random-digit dialing (Casady & Lepkowski, 1991; see Herek & Capitanio, 1994, for a detailed description of the two-phase procedure). This method resulted in a sample in which 48.7% (768/1578) of the selected telephone numbers were found to be households. Of these, information about the household composition was successfully enumerated for 653 households (85%). Interviews were completed with 538 (82.4%), yielding a response rate (enumeration rate  $\times$  completion rate) of 70%.

Wave 2 reinterviews were completed with 382 (71%) of the original respondents. The Wave 2 subsample of Whites did not differ significantly from the Wave 1 sample except by income. Attrition was disproportionately high among Whites in the lowest income category

(less than \$10,000 annually) and disproportionately low among those with an income greater than \$70,000. For this article, the analysis was restricted to individuals who described themselves as White and heterosexual ( $n = 310$ ).

### Measures

*Attitudes toward gay men and lesbians.* Attitudes were measured with a six-item short form of the Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men (ATLG) scale, which has been shown to be a reliable and valid measure of heterosexuals' attitudes toward lesbians and gay men (Herek, 1988, 1994). Three items in the scale referred to lesbians (Attitudes Toward Lesbians subscale, or ATL), and three other items were identically worded except that they referred to gay men (Attitudes Toward Gay Men subscale, or ATG). When scored separately, the two subscales were highly correlated ( $r = .73$ ). For ease of reporting and because combining the subscales substantially improved the measure's reliability (*alphas* for the ATL, ATG, and ATLG were .51, .51, and .74, respectively), scores for the combined six-item ATLG are reported in this article. For each item, respondents were provided with four response alternatives (*agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, disagree strongly*), which were scored on a four-point scale. Item responses were reversed as necessary and summed to yield a scale score that could range from 6 to 24, with higher scale scores indicating more unfavorable attitudes.

*Contact experiences.* Personal contact was assessed through a series of questions, only some of which are directly relevant to this article. First, respondents were asked whether they had "any male or female friends, relatives, or close acquaintances who are gay or homosexual." Those answering in the affirmative were asked how many gay friends, relatives, or close acquaintances they had. Respondents reporting only one relationship with a gay person were asked to describe that person's gender and how she or he was related to the respondent (immediate family, other family, close friend, other friend, close

acquaintance). Respondents who reported knowing two or more gay people were asked the same series of questions about each of "the two gay people you feel closest to."

*Attributions of choice.* Respondents were asked whether they believed that "homosexuality is something people choose for themselves" or that homosexuality "is something over which people do not have any control."

*Perceptions of Blacks as gay.* At Wave 1, respondents were asked a series of questions to assess the extent to which their conceptualization of the social category "gay man" included Blacks. First, respondents were asked which racial or ethnic group came to mind first when they heard the term *male homosexual* or *gay man*. If they responded with any group other than Blacks, they were asked if they "ever think of Black men as belonging to that group" and, if they responded affirmatively, how often they "think of Black men as belonging to that group." Aggregating responses to the items permitted a five-category classification of respondents according to how often they think of Black men as gay: never, rarely, sometimes, usually, or primarily (i.e., Blacks were the first group that the respondent mentioned).

Consistent with the Wave 1 survey's overall focus on AIDS and male homosexuality, the question was restricted to perceptions of gay men. Because attitudes toward gay men were highly correlated with attitudes toward lesbians in Wave 2, we thought that it was defensible to assume that respondents' perceptions of the racial characteristics of lesbians were similar to their conceptualizations of gay men. We hope, however, that this issue will be addressed empirically in future research.

*Sexual orientation.* Sexual orientation was assessed with the following item: "Now I'll read a list of terms people sometimes use to describe themselves – heterosexual or straight; homosexual, gay, lesbian [included only for female respondents]; and bisexual. As I read the list again, please stop me when I get to the term that best describes how you think of yourself." The analyses reported hereafter

were restricted to self-identified heterosexuals ( $n = 391$ , or 93.1% of the sample). Excluded from the analyses were respondents who identified themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, or who did not answer the sexual orientation question.

*Demographic and social variables.* In addition to race and gender, we also assessed respondents' educational attainment (eighth grade or lower, some high school, high school graduate, some college, college graduate, some graduate work or graduate degree), age, marital status, total household income in the previous year, political party affiliation, political ideology (seven categories ranging from strongly liberal to strongly conservative), voter registration status, and attendance at religious services in the past year.

### *Procedure*

Interviews were conducted by the staff of the Survey Research Center at the University of California at Berkeley, using their computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) system. Wave 1 interviews were completed between September 12, 1990 and February 13, 1991. Wave 2 interviews were completed between November 20, 1991 and February 13, 1992. No limit was set on the number of recontact attempts at either wave of data collection. Upon reaching an adult in the household, the interviewer enumerated the first name and race of each person 18 years or older living in the household. Based on this information, one respondent was selected randomly, and, if that person was available, the interview began. If the target respondent was unavailable, the interviewer established a later time for recontact.

After the Black target respondent was identified, most interviews (59.1% at Wave 1 and 66.4% at Wave 2) were completed within one or two attempts. Twenty-nine respondents, however, required more than seven attempts before the Wave 1 interview was successfully completed. At Wave 2, six respondents required more than seven attempts. The maximum number of attempts before completing an interview with a Black respondent was 18 at

Wave 1 and 14 at Wave 2. The mean duration of the interview was 39 minutes at Wave 1 and 40 minutes at Wave 2.

## **Results**

*Respondents.* Interviews were completed with 391 Black heterosexuals (38% men and 62% women). The sample's mean age was 48.2 years ( $s.d. = 16.7$ ), and the median level of educational attainment was "high school graduate." Slightly more than half of the respondents (56.5%) were employed at the time of the interview; the sample's median annual household income was between \$20,000 and \$30,000. Other demographic information about the sample is reported in Table 2.

Because the principal focus of this article is Blacks' attitudes, only limited data from the White heterosexual respondents are reported here for comparison purposes. Readers interested in a more detailed analysis of the latter group are referred to another article (Herek & Capitanio, 1995), wherein we presented detailed results from the larger sample from which the White subsample was drawn. Because Whites constituted approximately 84% of this sample, the total sample findings corresponded closely to those obtained in analyses of the White subsample alone.

*Attitudes.* Negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men were widespread (see Table 1). More than two-thirds of the Black respondents agreed that sex between two men or two women is wrong, and more than half expressed disgust at male homosexuals and lesbians. Fewer than one respondent in four agreed that female or male homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality. As shown in Table 1, the response patterns of White respondents did not differ substantially from those of the Black sample.

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Insert Tables 1 & 2 about here

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*Hypothesis 1. Gender differences.* No significant gender difference was observed for total scores on the six-item ATLG scale (see

Table 2). However, analyses of the ATL and ATG subscales suggested that Black heterosexual men had more negative attitudes toward gay men than toward lesbians. A two-way ANOVA (respondent's gender by ATL/ATG) yielded a significant interaction,  $F(1,370) = 11.62$  ( $p < .01$ ). Tests of simple main effects indicated that the difference between men's (but not women's) ATL and ATG scores was significant,  $F(1,370) = 12.09$  ( $p < .001$ ). In addition, men's ATG scores were higher than women's ATG scores,  $F(1,370) = 2.10$  ( $p = .075$ , one-tailed). Mean scores were 9.57 (men's ATG), 9.10 (men's ATL), 9.21 (women's ATG), and 9.36 (women's ATL). Because the ATL and ATG subscales had somewhat low levels of reliability, we interpreted this pattern with caution. Comparison of responses to the individual items with ANOVA revealed a significant gender difference only on the NATURAL item: Men were less likely than women to agree that male homosexuality is a natural expression of human sexuality.

We compared gender differences in Blacks' and Whites' ATL and ATG scores with two-way (respondent race by gender) MANOVAs. A main effect for gender (Pillai's Trace = .034,  $p < .001$ ) was the only significant difference. Univariate analyses revealed that the gender effect was specific to the ATG,  $F(1,671) = 9.24$  ( $p < .01$ ), with men – regardless of race – showing significantly more negative attitudes than did women. Neither the main effect for race nor the race-by-gender interaction were significant.

*Hypothesis 2. Other demographic differences.* As expected, ATLG scores differed significantly according to education,  $F(3,368) = 8.19$  ( $p < .001$ ) and marital status,  $F(3,368) = 3.90$  ( $p < .01$ ). Student-Newman-Keuls comparisons ( $ps < .05$ ) indicated that respondents with a college degree held significantly more favorable attitudes than did those with less education, whereas those who had never married held more favorable attitudes than did those who were widowed or currently married. Contrary to expectations, no significant

differences in ATLG scores were observed across different age or income groups. This contrasted with the White sample, for which significant differences in the expected directions were observed for education and age.

*Hypothesis 3. Attitudes and religiosity.* As expected, more negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians were observed among respondents who attended religious services frequently,  $F(3,368) = 5.94$  ( $p < .001$ ). Mean ATLG scores were 16.75 (never attended in past year), 18.19 (attended once or a few times), 18.41 (attended once or a few times each month), and 19.72 (attended at least weekly). A similar pattern – also statistically significant – was observed among Whites.

*Hypothesis 4. Attitudes, political ideology, and empowerment.* Respondents who indicated that they were registered to vote scored significantly lower on the ATLG than did those who were not registered (means = 18.30 and 20.58, respectively),  $F(1,370) = 11.75$  ( $p < .001$ ). As shown in Table 2, the relationship between attitudes and political ideology was not linear, but scores were generally consistent with the hypothesis that political conservatism is associated with higher ATLG scores (more negative attitudes),  $F(6,345) = 2.33$  ( $p < .05$ ). Student-Newman-Keuls comparisons indicated that respondents who were somewhat conservative (i.e., score of 2 on the seven-point continuum) had significantly more negative attitudes than did most respondents toward the more liberal end of the continuum. Respondents in the *strongly conservative* group had the lowest mean ATLG score, and self-described moderates manifested the highest mean ATLG score, but these groups were not reliably different from the other categories. Democrats scored slightly lower than Republicans, but the difference was not statistically significant.

In the White sample, in contrast, Republicans and conservatives scored significantly higher on the ATLG than did, respectively, Democrats or independents and liberals or moderates. No attitude differences were found between White registered and unregistered voters.



*Hypothesis 5. Attitudes and interpersonal contact.* Nearly one third (31.1%) of the respondents reported knowing at least one gay man or lesbian. As expected, respondents who reported that they knew someone who is gay had significantly lower ATLG scores ( $M = 17.58$ ) than did those without such contact ( $M = 19.03$ ),  $F(1,363) = 8.14$  ( $p < .01$ ). The effect was more pronounced to the extent that they reported more than one contact (mean ATLG scores = 18.84 for those with one contact, 16.6 for those with two, and 17.1 for those with three or more),  $F(3,358) = 3.92$  ( $p < .01$ ). Student-Newman-Keuls comparisons indicated that respondents with three or more contacts were significantly different from those with no contacts. ATLG scores tended to be lower (more favorable attitudes) for respondents who reported more intimate relationships ( $M = 16.82$  for the 26 respondents with a gay close friend or immediate family member) than for more distant relationships ( $M = 18.03$  for the 84 respondents whose closest relationship was with a gay distant friend, acquaintance, or distant relative), but the effect was not statistically significant. Similar patterns were observed among the White respondents. For example, Whites with contact had significantly more favorable ATLG scores than did those without contact ( $M_s = 15.26$  and  $19.57$ , respectively),  $F(1,300) = 48.79$  ( $p < .001$ ).

*Hypothesis 6. Attributions of controllability and choice.* As expected, respondents who felt that homosexuality is a choice manifested more negative attitudes than did those who regarded it as something beyond an individual's control ( $M_s = 20.11$  and  $16.40$ , respectively),  $F(1,362) = 68.45$  ( $p < .001$ ). A similar pattern was observed among White respondents ( $M_s = 20.03$  and  $15.78$ , respectively),  $F(1,294) = 52.25$  ( $p < .001$ ).

*Hypothesis #7. Racial associations with homosexuality.* Most respondents did not usually think of Black men in connection with the word *gay* (see Table 2). Black heterosexuals who indicated that they included Black men in their personal conceptualization of homosexuality

scored significantly lower on the ATLG than did those who did not think of gay men as including Blacks,  $F(4,347) = 2.50$  ( $p < .05$ ). Mean ATLG scores ranged from 16.72 (for those who volunteered that Black men were the first group to come to mind in response to the word *gay*) to 19.84 (for those who never thought of Black men in association with the term *gay*).

### ***Predictors of Black Heterosexuals' Attitudes***

To assess the relative importance of the variables described previously in explaining Blacks' attitudes toward lesbians and gay men, we conducted an ordinary least-squares regression analysis. Because approximately 20% of the cases were missing data on at least one independent variable, we computed two equations, one in which mean scores were substituted for missing data and one with listwise deletion of missing data. The proportion of explained variance ( $R^2$ ), unstandardized regression coefficient ( $b$ ), and standardized regression coefficient ( $\beta$ ) for each independent variable with the mean substitution method are reported in Table 3. Favorable attitudes toward gay men and lesbians were best predicted by believing that homosexuality is beyond an individual's control, being single (never married), and attending religious services infrequently or never. These three variables accounted for approximately 16% of the variance in ATLG scores, with the overall equation explaining 25.1% of the variance,  $F(14,369) = 8.83$  ( $p < .001$ ). With the listwise deletion method, the results were substantially the same, except that being registered to vote emerged as a significant predictor of lower ATLG scores ( $b = -1.639$ ,  $\beta = -.12$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

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Insert Table 3 about here

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For comparison purposes, we performed a similar analysis for the White sample. Two of the same variables (attributions of choice and religious attendance) emerged as significant

predictors, along with education, contact experiences, and political ideology. Thus, Whites were more likely to manifest favorable attitudes to the extent that they believed that homosexuality is beyond an individual's control, were highly educated, were politically liberal, attended religious services infrequently or never, and had had personal contact with lesbians or gay men. In contrast to Blacks, marital status was not a significant predictor of ATLG scores for Whites.

We noted with interest that the contact variable was not a significant predictor in the full equation for Blacks. This finding is inconsistent with earlier research with general population samples (e.g., Herek & Glunt, 1993). Attributions of choice concerning homosexuality accounted for most of the explained variance (13.4%) in the equation. We wondered whether these two variables might be correlated; perhaps interpersonal contact experiences establish or strengthen the belief that homosexuality is not a choice. We reasoned that heterosexuals who have had personal contact with gay men or lesbians might have discussed with them what it is like to be gay or lesbian. Such discussion might have led the heterosexual person to believe that homosexuality – and perhaps sexual orientation in general – does not represent an individual choice.

To test this hypothesis – and to study further the relationship among contact, attributions, and attitudes – we conducted two additional sets of analyses. First, we examined the cross tabulation of attributions and contact experiences. Of the respondents who reported interpersonal contact experiences, 57% believed homosexuality to be a choice; of those who reported no contact, 64% believed it to be a choice. This difference was not statistically significant. Thus, Blacks reporting contact experiences were not more likely to perceive homosexuality as a choice than were those reporting no contact.

Second, we computed separate hierarchical regression equations to assess the proportion of variance explained by the contact and attribution

variables when each was entered alone. In one equation, we entered the contact variable on the first step, followed on the second step by the attribution variable and the other variables listed in Table 3. In the other equation, we entered the attribution variable on the first step, followed by contact and the others. When entered alone, the contact variable explained 2.1% of the variance; the other variables subsequently explained an additional 23% of the variance, more than half of it (13.2%) explained by the attributions variable. When the attributions variable was entered alone, it explained 15.3% of the variance; the remaining variables explained an additional 9.8% of the variance, with less than 1% explained by the contact variable. Thus, even when entered alone in the equation, the contact variable explained only a small proportion of variance in attitudes relative to the attribution variable. Furthermore, whereas the attribution variable accounted for a substantial amount of variance in attitudes independent of the variance it shared with contact, the contact variable explained very little additional variance when the effects of attribution were statistically controlled.

The same follow-up analyses with the White heterosexual respondents produced different results. First, the cross-tabulation of attributions and contact indicated that the two are related. Only 37% of the Whites with contact experiences believed that homosexuality is a choice, whereas 64% of those without contact experiences made this attribution (*chi-square* (1,  $N = 296$ ) = 18.30 ( $p < .001$ )). Similarly, the regression equations for Whites indicated that the contact variable had greater explanatory power than for the Black sample. When the contact variable was entered first in the equation, it accounted for 13.7% of the variance in Whites' ATLG scores. The other variables subsequently explained an additional 21.8% of the variance (with 5.1% explained by attributions). When the attributions variable was entered first in the equation, it accounted for 14.4% of the variance in Whites' attitudes, with the additional variables explaining an additional 21.1% (with 2.1% explained by contact).

## Discussion

The data indicate that negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians are widespread among Black heterosexuals, with Black men expressing somewhat more negative attitudes toward gay men than do Black women. This gender difference results primarily from men's greater tendency to regard male homosexuality as unnatural. In addition, Black heterosexuals who were well educated, single, registered to vote, and not religious were more likely than others to express positive attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. Being politically liberal was associated with holding more favorable attitudes, although individuals who described themselves as strongly conservative also expressed favorable attitudes. Respondents also were more likely to express favorable attitudes to the extent that they reported multiple personal relationships with gay people, included Blacks in their cognitive category of *gay*, and perceived homosexuality to be an aspect of the self that a person cannot control. Of these variables, three emerged as the most powerful predictors of favorable attitudes: believing that homosexuality is beyond an individual's control, being single (never married), and attending religious services infrequently or never.

These findings are generally consistent with previous empirical research on non-Black heterosexuals' attitudes toward gay people. Nevertheless, a few interesting discontinuities with earlier research were observed. In contrast to studies with non-Black samples, for example, the variables of education, age, and income were not significant predictors of attitudes in regression analyses. Another difference concerned political ideology; in contrast to previous studies, a linear relationship between ideology and attitudes was not observed. Furthermore, although interpersonal contact was associated with favorable attitudes as hypothesized, contact was not a particularly powerful predictor of attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. This finding is quite different from the conclusions of previous studies with predominantly White samples in which contact

experiences accounted for a substantial portion of the variance in heterosexuals' attitudes (e.g., Herek & Glunt, 1993). It is also in contrast to our findings with the White subsample, for whom contact was a significant explanatory variable.

We believe that the contact variable's lack of explanatory power may be due to several factors. First, many contact experiences reported by Blacks in our sample (76%, compared to 61% of Whites) involved distant friends, mere acquaintances, or distant relatives – that is, relationships that were not particularly intimate. We have argued elsewhere (Herek & Capitano, 1995) that such relationships are less likely to affect attitudes than are relationships with a close friend or family member.

Second, although the interview did not include a question about the race of the gay person with whom the respondent reported contact, at least some relationships described probably were with non-Blacks. Of the respondents reporting contact, 28% nevertheless indicated that they rarely or never thought of Black men as gay. Because a personal relationship with a Black gay person presumably would have led them to include Blacks in the category of *gay*, it seems reasonable to assume that many of those respondents' relationships were with non-Black gay men or lesbians. In such an interracial relationship, the participants' mutual differences on both sexual orientation and race may prevent the heterosexual from perceiving that he or she shares significant common values and experiences with the gay person. According to the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1976), this sort of commonality is an important factor in whether intergroup contact affects attitudes. In other words, contact experiences may influence racial attitudes as well as sexual attitudes, but perhaps not both at once. Thus, contact may not have been a significant predictor of attitudes among Black heterosexuals in the current study because the type of contact that most respondents experienced did not meet the conditions of the contact hypothesis; namely, it was not of an intimate nature and did not highlight the participants' fundamental similarities

and shared values and goals.

A third factor in the association between attitudes and contact is suggested by the findings concerning attributions of choice in sexual orientation. Replicating earlier research with general population samples (Schneider & Lewis, 1984), respondents in the current sample were more likely to express hostile attitudes to the extent that they perceived homosexuality to be a choice. But whereas such beliefs were more likely among Whites who reported not personally knowing a gay man or lesbian, they were equally prevalent among Blacks who did and did not have contact experiences. This finding suggests a potentially important cultural difference between Black and White heterosexuals. For Whites, acquiring the belief that homosexuality is not a choice may be a concomitant of personal interactions with gay men or lesbians. Indeed, changes in such beliefs may be an underlying mechanism through which contact experiences affect intergroup attitudes (see Herek & Capitanio, 1995, for an extended discussion of the contact hypothesis as it relates to heterosexuals' attitudes toward lesbians and gay men).

For Blacks, however, attributions about the degree of choice associated with homosexuality – and, perhaps, sexual orientation generally – appear not to be contingent upon having contact. Instead, such beliefs may be shaped by African American cultural constructions of sexuality. Various authors (e.g., Mays, 1989; Peterson, 1992) have commented on the prevalence of bisexuality among African American men, as well as the frequency of homosexual behavior among African American men who label themselves heterosexual. Perhaps this cultural pattern of relative fluidity in sexual behaviors and identities shapes Blacks' perceptions of the amount of choice that underlies homosexuality.

This discussion points to the possibility that African American social constructions of heterosexuality and homosexuality may differ from those prevalent in White America. Several writers, for example, have pointed out that the Black American community has long provided

social roles for homosexuals, although social norms have required that homosexuality not be explicitly avowed or acknowledged (Dalton, 1989; Mays, 1989; Peterson, 1992). The survey items used in the current study may not have been sufficiently sensitive to detect attitudinal differences resulting from differing cultural constructions. Nevertheless, the language of the items was consistent with the language used in contemporary debates surrounding homosexuality and public policy (e.g., Herek, 1994). In that sense, the current data are useful for beginning to understand African Americans' attitudes toward antidiscrimination laws and similar policies concerning sexual orientation.

A limitation inherent in the current study is that the sampling procedures tended to exclude Blacks living in sparsely populated rural areas as well as those living in non-Black neighborhoods (i.e., those with fewer than 30% Black households). Consequently, the sample is best understood as representing that portion of the Black population residing in neighborhoods where Blacks represent a significant portion (albeit not necessarily a majority) of the population. In addition, unemployed and low-income respondents from Wave 1 were somewhat more likely than others to have been lost to follow-up in the Wave 2 sample.

Another factor possibly affecting the results is that the sample may have included gay, lesbian, and bisexual respondents. This could have occurred for either of two reasons. First, respondents with a history of homosexual conduct may nevertheless have considered themselves to be heterosexual, not gay or bisexual. Examination of responses to separate questions about sexual history, however, revealed that only two respondents who self-identified as heterosexual reported any past homosexual experiences. A second, more significant factor affecting the sample composition is that some gay, lesbian, or bisexual respondents probably chose to identify themselves as heterosexual because of the stigma attached to homosexuality. Because most such individuals might be unmarried, an

underreporting of sexual orientation may be partly responsible for the strong association between being unmarried and expressing less negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians.

Recognizing these qualifications, the data reported here are important because they represent the most comprehensive examination to date of Black heterosexuals' attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. In most respects, we did not find substantial attitudinal differences between Black and White heterosexuals. The two groups did not differ substantially in the direction and intensity of their attitudes toward gay men and lesbians, either in the aggregate or when analyzed according to gender. Thus, it does not appear warranted to characterize Black heterosexuals as more or less prejudiced against gay men and lesbians than are their White counterparts. It is possible, however, that the sources of Black heterosexuals' attitudes toward homosexuality are different from those of Whites. The current study suggests especially that contact experiences and attributions about choice may exert different influences on the attitudes of Black and White heterosexuals. In addition, the relationship of political ideology, age, and income with attitudes toward gay people warrants further consideration. Exploring these cultural differences in the roots of attitudes represents a fertile field for future research.

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## Note

1. We recognize that consensus does not currently exist for the best terminology to use in characterizing race and ethnicity. Survey data indicate that a plurality of Black Americans prefers the term "Black" to describe themselves, but a growing proportion prefers "African American" (Smith, 1992; see also Martin, 1991). In the current article, we use "Black" to characterize the respondents to our survey. This label is appropriate because, consistent with most survey research (Smith, 1992), our respondents indicated their racial background (e.g., White, Black) rather than their ethnic identification. Consequently, we do not know how many of the Black respondents identified as African American, Caribbean American, or otherwise. We use "African American," when appropriate to refer to the communities and culture of Blacks in the United States.

Table 1

*Attitudes Toward Gay Men and Lesbians Among Heterosexual Blacks and Whites*

Item	Blacks		Whites	
	% Agree	% Disagree	% Agree	% Disagree
1. Sex between two men is just plain wrong.	74.1	25.0	69.3	30.5
2. I think male homosexuals are disgusting.	57.4	41.4	58.4	41.2
3. Male homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in men.	20.8	76.3	23.4	76.6
4. Sex between two women is just plain wrong.	72.4	26.7	64.9	34.9
5. I think lesbians are disgusting.	57.0	41.9	58.8	40.8
6. Female homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in women.	23.4	74.7	25.3	74.4

The Agree column combines *agree strongly* and *agree somewhat* responses. The Disagree column combines *disagree strongly* and *disagree somewhat*. Percentages do not sum to 100 because of *don't know* responses and refusals. For the Black sample ( $n = 391$ ), response proportions are post-stratified by gender and geographical region. Whites' responses ( $n = 310$ ) are taken from a general population sample, which was post-stratified by gender and race.

Table 2

*ATLG Scores By Demographic Groups*

Demographic Group	Unweighted % of Sample	Mean	<i>F</i> (d.f.)
Entire sample	100	18.62	n/a
Gender:			NS
Female	62	18.57	
Male	38	18.67	
Education:			8.19 (3,368)***
Less than high school	27.6	18.09 <sup>a</sup>	
High school graduate/GED	34.0	19.41 <sup>a</sup>	
Some college	26.6	19.32 <sup>a</sup>	
College degree or higher	18.4	16.13 <sup>b</sup>	
Marital/Relationship Status:			3.90 (3,368)**
Married/widowed	48.8	19.23 <sup>a</sup>	
Never married	22.8	17.47 <sup>b</sup>	
Divorced/separated	22.3	18.69	
Cohabiting	6.1	17.02	
Income:			NS
0-20,000	43.7	18.36	
20-40,000	31.4	18.61	
40-60,000	15.3	19.01	
60,000+	6.9	17.82	

*(table continues)*



Table 2 (continued)

Demographic Group	Unweighted % of Sample	Mean	F (d.f.)
Age:			NS
18-29	17.3	17.97	
30-49	36.4	19.03	
50-64	29.0	18.57	
65 and older	17.3	18.52	
Religious attendance in past year:			5.94 (3,368)***
Never	12.3	16.75 <sup>a</sup>	
Once, few times	22.0	19.19 <sup>a</sup>	
1-3 times/month	25.0	18.41 <sup>a</sup>	
Weekly or more often	40.7	19.72 <sup>b</sup>	
Registered to vote:			11.75 (1,370)***
No	12.3	20.58	
Yes	87.7	18.30	
Political ideology			2.33 (6,345)*
Strongly conservative	15.3	17.97	
Conservative, not strongly	10.7	20.80 <sup>a</sup>	
More conservative than liberal	19.2	18.42 <sup>b</sup>	
Moderate	3.6	21.06	
More liberal than conservative	16.6	18.34 <sup>b</sup>	
Liberal, not strongly	13.3	18.05	
Strongly liberal	19.2	18.30 <sup>b</sup>	

(table continues)

Table 2 (continued)

Demographic Group	Unweighted % of Sample	Mean	<i>F</i> (d.f.)
Political party:			NS
Republican	6.9	19.33	
Democrat	72.9	18.30	
Independent	16.9	19.28	
Personal Contact			8.14 (1,363)**
No	65.0	19.03	
Yes	34.3	17.58	
Attributions for Homosexuality			68.45 (1,362)***
Choice	61.6	20.11	
Beyond Individual's Control	35.8	16.40	
Think of Blacks (Males) as Gay			2.5 (3,347)*
Never	11.0	19.84 <sup>a</sup>	
Rarely	21.0	18.76	
Sometimes	35.5	18.26	
Often	17.9	18.76	
Blacks = First Group Named	7.9	16.72 <sup>b</sup>	

\*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

*Note:* NS = not significant. Higher ATLG scores indicate more negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. Within demographic variables, means with different letter superscripts are significantly different ( $p < .05$ ). Because of missing data for some independent variables, the number of cases differs slightly according to variables. Total sample  $n = 391$  Black heterosexual adults.

Table 3

*Regression Analysis: Predictors of Black Heterosexuals' Attitudes*

Independent Variable	R <sup>2</sup>	b	β
Attribution of No Choice	.134	-3.472	-.376***
Never Married	.016	-1.811	-.170**
Religious Attendance	.016	0.362	.142**
<i>Gender (Female)</i>	< .010	-0.174	ns
<i>Age</i>	< .010	-0.029	ns
<i>Education</i>	< .010	-0.330	ns
<i>Income</i>	< .010	0.072	ns
<i>Currently Married</i>	< .010	0.192	ns
<i>Political Ideology</i>	< .010	0.037	ns
<i>Democrat</i>	< .010	-0.730	ns
<i>Republican</i>	< .010	0.589	ns
<i>Registered to Vote</i>	< .010	-1.082	ns
<i>Blacks as Gay</i>	< .010	-0.297	ns
<i>Contact</i>	< .010	-0.873	ns

\*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$

*Note:* Higher ATLG scores indicate more negative attitudes. Total  $R^2 = 25.1$ ,  $F(14,369) = 8.83$ ,  $p < .001$ . The group mean was substituted for missing values of independent variables.