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## The Last Bastion of Sexual and Gender Prejudice? Sexualities, Race, Gender, Religiosity, and Spirituality in the Examination of Prejudice Toward Sexual and Gender Minorities

Ryan T. Cragun and J. Edward Sumerau

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*Prior research has reported that many Americans hold prejudicial attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities. Most of this research analyzed attitudes toward target categories in isolation and not in relation to attitudes toward heterosexuals. In addition, most previous research has not examined attitudes of members of sexual and gender minority categories toward other categories. While some research has examined the influence of religiosity on attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities, none of these studies has examined religiosity while also examining the influence of spirituality. In this article we drew on insights from queer theory to examine attitudes toward heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals, as well as individuals who practice polygamy, among college students. Three samples gathered over a four-year period (2009, 2011, 2013) at a private, nonsectarian, midsized urban university in the Southeastern United States were used. We found that heterosexuals had the most positive rating, followed in order of rating by gay/lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals, and then those who practice polygamy. Regression analyses revealed gender and race were significant predictors of attitudes toward various sexual and gender categories. Holding a literalistic view of the Bible and self-identifying as more religious were related to more negative views toward sexual minorities, while self-identifying as more spiritual was related to more positive views.*

Research exploring societal attitudes concerning sexual and gender minorities has proliferated in the past four decades. During this time, researchers have documented shifting interpretations of and opinions about lesbian and gay (Herek, 1984; Raja & Stokes, 1998; Worthen, 2012), bisexual (Eliason, 1997; Mulick & Wright, 2002; Rust, 1995), and transgender (Hill, 2003; Leitenberg & Slavin, 1983; Nagoshi et al., 2008) (LGBT) people, as well as myriad ways social factors influence attitudinal patterns and changes. However, as Worthen (2013) noted, no studies to date have examined attitudes concerning each of these groups separately and in comparison to one another. Given that efforts to combat prejudice and discrimination against sexual and gender minorities may be more successful if based on investigations of the variations and similarities of the experiences of different sexual and gender minorities (Herek, 2000), the tendency for scholars to examine attitudes toward one group of sexual or gender minorities in isolation from other groups represents a significant gap in the

existing literature. Consequently, little is known about the variation in attitudes concerning specific sexual or gender minorities or the social factors that underlie these differences. Further, it is unclear whether shifting attitudes concerning lesbian and gay people trigger similar shifts in opinions regarding bisexual, transgender, or other marginalized communities. In addition, little is known about societal attitudes concerning heterosexuality due to scholars' almost exclusive focus on attitudes toward sexual minorities (Worthen, 2013).

### Queer Theory and Attitudes Toward Sexual and Gender Categories

To understand and explore attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities we drew on queer theory. Queer theory calls into consideration how some ways of thinking and being are conceptualized as normal, natural, and taken for granted, while others are interpreted as deviant, unusual, and worthy of stigmatization and marginalization (Butler, 2006; Foucault, 1980; Warner, 1999). Thus, no social aspect, pattern, or category may be fully understood without deconstructing the interpersonal, institutional, and structural construction

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and elaboration of it through the efforts of social beings, groups, and organizational frameworks (Crawley & Broad, 2008). As a result, researchers must recognize that people experience their lives—and thus develop their attitudes, opinions, and beliefs—within and between institutionalized methods of thinking, feeling, and knowing created and sustained via the efforts of other social beings (Foucault, 1980). Of particular concern to queer theorists is the institutional construction of dominant categories as normative, ahistorical, and revered as a social ideal (Ingraham, 2008; Isaiah Green, 2007; Sedgwick, 2008) wherein people—scholars as well as others—are systematically socialized and encouraged to leave these categories unexplored, unquestioned, and taken for granted in the daily operations of oppression and privilege. For example, investigations of sexual oppression focused on the ways social beings interpret sexual minorities mask the importance of critically evaluating and deconstructing social interpretations of heterosexuality, as well as the role these interpretations may play in the continued subordination of nonheterosexual people.

As evidenced in recent scholarship interrogating gendered and racial inequalities, past research into systems of oppression and privilege is limited by scholars' tendency to leave the dominant group unexamined. Whereas this recognition has led to the emergence of fields critically evaluating masculinities (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009) and whiteness (M. McDermott & Samson, 2005) in recent decades, this development has only recently found expression in investigations of sexual inequalities. Heterosexuality often remains an unexamined comparison group and heterosexual attitudes and opinions often take center stage in analyses (Irvine, 2003; Warner, 1999). In addition, Worthen (2013) noted the almost exclusive focus on heterosexual attitudes and opinions concerning LGBT people in studies about attitudes toward sexual categories while leaving opinions and attitudes concerning heterosexuality without mention. Without examining attitudes toward heterosexuality, however, efforts to combat the subordination of sexual minorities will—like similar efforts to combat sexism or racism without examining the social construction of men and White individuals—ultimately be limited by their implicit reinforcement of heterosexuality as an invisible, taken-for-granted standard for comparison.

Given the almost exclusive focus on attitudes concerning sexual minorities, many questions about attitudes toward heterosexuality remain unanswered. In this study, we sought to begin offering potential answers to some of these questions. First, in what ways do attitudes concerning heterosexuals vary in relation to other sexual categories? Second, what social factors may account for variations in attitudes concerning heterosexuals as well as those concerning sexual and gender minorities? Finally, in what ways might examining

attitudes about heterosexuality benefit sociological knowledge concerning sexual inequalities?

### Social Factors and Attitudes Toward Sexual Categories

While researchers have overwhelmingly focused on LGBT people as a group and generally left heterosexuality unexplored, our utilization of a queer framework led us to also remain sensitive to the ways that social factors influence attitudes concerning sexual types, categories, and expressions. As such, we followed Worthen's (2013) assertion that understanding attitudes concerning sexual beings also requires making sense of the demographic locations inhabited and experienced by respondents, and examining variations created by these differences. To this end, we compared attitudes toward heterosexual, gay/lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, as well as those who practice polygamy, in relation to other demographic factors that previous research suggested influence those attitudes. In so doing, we extend previous findings by drawing out nuances concerning the ways that social factors influence attitudes toward sexual categories.

Previous research has suggested that sexual identity—or identification—may be an integral factor in the development of attitudes toward sexual others. Whereas many studies find consistent negative portrayals of sexual minorities from heterosexual respondents, such studies have also noted the tendency for sexual minorities to develop more positive notions of sexual others even if their overall attitudes remain negative (Rust, 1995), and for attitudes about sexual categories to shift over time, with recent years witnessing more positive appraisals (Powell, Bolzendahl, Geist, & Steelman, 2012). We thus examined these potential variations in our data to demonstrate whether our respondents mirror these patterns, reveal new patterns, or exist between these two possibilities. In so doing, our analysis demonstrates the influence sexual identities may have on the development of attitudes—positive or negative—concerning sexual groups.

Past research has also demonstrated gender differences within the elaboration of attitudes toward sexual categories. Following Worthen (2013), women, men, and transgender individuals often develop distinct impressions of sexual and gender categories, and people in general often develop different attitudes regarding male, female, or other people who belong to various sexual categories or groups. While it was beyond the confines of our data to ascertain fully the ways people interpret members of sexual groups that claim separate gender identities (e.g., attitudes toward bisexual women versus bisexual men), we were able to examine the ways gender influenced attitudes concerning overall categories (e.g., male attitudes concerning heterosexuality,

homosexuality, or bisexuality versus female attitudes concerning the same). As a result, our analysis explored variations in attitudes between self-identified women and men to ascertain what role gender identity may play in the conceptualization of sexual groups.

Alongside gendered and sexual identities, researchers have often posited that race may play a role in attitudes concerning sexual and gender groups. Considering that racial minorities who are members of sexually marginalized groups may face significant burdens that revolve around sexuality (Diaz, Ayala, Bein, Henne, & Marin, 2001; Fish, 2008), racial minorities may demonstrate different attitudes concerning sexual and gender categories. Further, self-identified White respondents might react in different ways to racial and sexual dynamics, which could ultimately shape their attitudes concerning sexual categories. As a result, we examined the influence of race by exploring racial variations in attitudes concerning sexual and gender categories.

Another aspect of attitudes concerning sexual and gender categories that is often absent in previous literature concerns the expression of sexualities via nontraditional relationships. Examining internal debates about marriage within LGBT communities, for example, researchers have demonstrated that monogamy itself is often an issue fraught with social and political conflict (Bernstein & Taylor, 2013; Warner, 1999). Although research suggests tensions about “types” of relationships have been a steady element of sexual politics for decades (Heath, 2012), past studies rarely have attempted to capture this phenomenon. As such, we know very little about the ways people conceptualize—or develop attitudes toward—nonmonogamous sexual categories (though see Nielsen & Cragun, 2010). Seeking to begin shedding light on these issues, we examined attitudes toward polygamy in this article and compared these attitudes to responses concerning heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgender experience in general. In so doing, we offer evidence suggesting relationship types may play a role in the construction of attitudes concerning sexual categories.

Finally, much research suggests religion may be one of the primary social factors in the development of attitudes concerning sexual and gender categories, particularly in the United States (D. T. McDermott & Blair, 2012). Research has shown that high levels of Christian religiosity (Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002) and Christian church attendance (Herek, 2002) correlate with negative attitudes toward gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, and that religious fundamentalism is highly associated with transphobia (Nagoshi et al., 2008) and homophobia among young males (Marsiglio, 1993). Religious fundamentalism, which is characterized by literalistic attitudes toward scripture and black-and-white (e.g., binary) thinking (Emerson & Hartman, 2006), has been shown to be strongly associated with prejudice (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992). Yet analyzing attitudes toward

sexual and gender minorities among racial groups when controlling for fundamentalism has not been done. It may be the case that the higher levels of religiosity of Black individuals may play a role in their higher levels of prejudice toward sexual and gender minorities, which is a question we addressed.

There is also a growing body of research suggesting Christian privilege is pervasive in the United States (Schlosser, 2003), which may account for recent legislation passed in the Kansas State House of Representatives (currently pulled back for reintroduction in the next legislative session and similar to bills at various stages in other states), which would allow business owners to legally discriminate against same-sex couples by refusing to provide them services on the grounds that same-sex couples are an affront to their religious sensibilities (Aegerter, 2014). Although such bills offer the latest example, the privileging of religion—particularly Christianity—in the United States has long allowed religious people to justify prejudice toward and discriminatory treatment of sexual and gender minorities (Heath, 2012).

Importantly, most prior studies examining the influence of religion on attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities have primarily focused on Christianity while leaving religiosity as an aggregated form. We separated Catholics and Protestants—both Christian—from the nonreligious, Jewish individuals, and those of other religions to determine if there were denominational differences in attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities. We also examined whether the growing distinction between religiosity and spirituality influenced attitudes toward sexual categories. In so doing, our analysis offers some nuances to previous conclusions that increased religiosity and/or spirituality necessarily predicts negative attitudes.

## Method

### Participants

Data for this study come from three waves of a survey (2009, 2011, 2013) of college students at a mid-sized, urban, private, nonsectarian university in the Southeastern United States. The number of full- and part-time students at the university varied between 6,500 and 7,500 during the three years of the survey.

### Procedure

After receiving institutional review board approval, a complete list of all full-time students enrolled at the university was obtained from the registrar each year of the survey. The list was ordered alphabetically by last name, and students were assigned a number from one to four, which would serve as the order in which those

students would be contacted to take the survey. Invitations to participate in the online survey were sent to students in group number one, with a follow-up e-mail sent one week later as a reminder; students could also opt out. We had a goal of at least 400 responses per wave/year of the survey. If we did not receive 400 responses from the first group, invitations were sent to the second group, and so on, until 400 responses were received. At that point, no more e-mail invitations were sent, but the survey was left available for an additional two to four weeks to allow any who had already received the e-mail invitation to complete the survey. This approach resulted in 473 responses in 2009 (response rate = 14.5%); 557 responses in 2011 (response rate = 19.4%); and 613 responses in 2013 (response rate = 20.4%). The higher response rates in later years are likely due to better enticements; in 2013 respondents were entered into a draw for two new Android tablets; in 2009 they were entered into a draw for three \$25 gift certificates to a local restaurant.

To ensure respondent anonymity, we set the survey software to not include their e-mail addresses in the data collected, though the survey software allowed us to see which students had completed the survey so we could enter them into the draw for prizes. As a result, we cannot determine the extent to which respondents in later waves of the survey were repeat respondents. It is likely there were some students who completed the survey more than once, but we do not know how many. This raises a concern about dependence in the data, but the extent of the dependence is unknown.

## Measures

The surveys were primarily focused on student religiosity but included a number of additional questions, including those of interest in this study—attitudes toward heterosexual, gay/lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons, as well as people in polygamous relationships.

Despite the low response rates, demographic characteristics of the samples aligned very closely with data provided by the university (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics on the three samples). The percentage of male/female participants, the racial makeup, the regional distribution of students, and the distribution across class year (i.e., freshmen, sophomores) were not substantially different from that of the university.

Participants were asked a variety of questions about their religiosity and spirituality, including questions about belief in an afterlife, where they attend religious services, how frequently they pray, and their view of God. However, preliminary analyses indicated that some measures of religiosity were more strongly related to attitudes toward sexual orientations and practices; we focus on those measures here.

*Religious affiliation.* Participants were asked their religious affiliation, if any. They could choose

from a list of about a dozen common religious affiliations or write in a different option. These responses were recoded to align with the categories given in the General Social Survey: Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, none, or other.

*Views of the Bible.* Participants were also asked their view of the Bible using the same question as is used in the General Social Survey. Response options included: “The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word”; “The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word”; “The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by men”; and other. Based on feedback from the 2009 wave of the survey, another option was added in the 2011 and 2013 waves of the survey: “The Bible is not part of my religious tradition.”

*Religious service attendance.* Participants were also asked how often they attend religious services using the same question as the General Social Survey. Response options included *Never*, *Less than once a year*, *About once or twice a year*, *Several times a year*, *About once a month*, *2–3 times a month*, *Nearly every week*, *Every week*, and *Several times a week*.

*Religiosity/spirituality.* Finally, participants were asked to rate their religiosity and spirituality on a 10-point scale. The questions were: “How (religious/spiritual) do you consider yourself on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all and 10 being very much?” We did not specify what we meant by either religious or spiritual.

*Dependent variables: attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities.* The dependent variables of interest were ratings on a thermometer scale that ranged from 1 to 100. Thermometer scales are widely used instruments in examining attitudes toward target groups, and prior research has shown that they are more precise in their measurements while not being more prone to systematic measurement errors (Alwin, 1997; Cragun, Henry, Homan, & Hammer, 2012; C. Wilcox, Sigelman, & Cook, 1989). In addition, unlike many Likert-type questions, thermometer scales are true interval or ratio-level variables rather than ordinal variables, which provides greater statistical information. The question asked, “On a scale of 1 to 100, where 1 indicates you feel really cold toward people in that group and 100 indicates you feel really warm toward people in that group, indicate how warm or cold you feel toward each of the following groups.” Respondents could choose from 1, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, and 100. Close to 20 target groups were included in the survey, including religious, racial/ethnic, and sexualities groups. In this article we focus on the sexual and gender groups. To be clear in what

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics for Participants in Three Waves of Survey

Variables	2009 (N=473) % or M (SD)	2011 (N=557) % or M (SD)	2013 (N=613) % or M (SD)	Combined (N=1,612) <sup>c</sup> n or M (SD)
Race				
White	74.7	73.8	74.6	1,183
Black	5.6	6.2	5.2	90
Hispanic	8.7	13.5	13.1	190
Other	11.1	6.5	7.0	128
Sex <sup>a</sup>				
Male	29.4	28.9	32.7	489
Female	70.6	71.1	67.3	1,123
Sexual orientation				
Heterosexual individuals	90.0	94.0	91.5	1,482
Homosexual individuals	4.1	3.1	3.2	55
Bisexual individuals	3.4	2.0	3.8	49
Other	2.6	0.9	1.5	26
From United States	88.4	91.7	91.5	90
Religion				
None or nonreligious	31.3	25.0	26.6	441
Catholic	32.6	33.0	34.4	538
Protestant	26.1	31.7	31.6	484
Jewish	4.6	3.5	2.5	55
Other	5.4	6.9	4.9	92
Bible				
Bible is literal	7.5	7.2	7.3	108
Bible is inspired	45.3	50.3	48.4	710
Bible is myth	47.2	34.4	35.8	568
Bible is other <sup>b</sup>		8.0	8.5	88
Religious attendance				
Never	24.8	21.0	22.3	364
Less than once a year	13.4	13.0	12.0	205
About once or twice a year	21.1	18.2	23.0	336
Several times a year	14.0	18.0	16.6	263
About once a month	5.8	5.8	5.6	92
Two or three times a month	5.0	5.9	6.9	97
Nearly every week	5.8	6.1	5.2	92
Every week	7.1	9.3	7.5	129
Several times a week	3.0	2.0	0.8	30
Religion scale	4.1 (2.7)	4.4 (2.6)	4.2 (2.7)	4.24 (2.7)
Spiritual scale	5.8 (2.8)	5.5 (2.7)	5.6 (2.8)	5.63 (2.8)

<sup>a</sup>For biological sex, "Other" was listed as an option but was not chosen by any respondents.

<sup>b</sup>This response option was not offered in 2009.

<sup>c</sup>Numbers may not total 1,612 due to missing responses.

we meant by each of the terms, we provided short definitions for the groups in the survey itself, as follows: heterosexuals (people attracted to the opposite sex), polygamists (people who believe in or want multiple spouses at the same time), homosexuals (people attracted to the same sex), transgender individuals (people whose gender identity does not align with their biological sex), and bisexuals (people attracted to both opposite and same sex). In hindsight we recognize that the use of the term *opposite sex* implies a binary understanding of gender, which is a problematic oversight of the study design.

## Analysis

Our analysis began with some simple bivariate comparisons using *t* tests and ANOVA to illustrate differences in attitudes toward the target groups by

biological sex, religious affiliation, views of the Bible, and sexual orientation. These analyses are presented as figures. We then used ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to determine which of the demographic or religious variables were significant predictors of attitudes toward the various groups. Finally, we used correlations to examine the relationships between the attitude scores. Readers should note that the data from the three waves of the survey were combined for all of the analyses as the four-year timespan of data collection did not reveal notable differences between the waves in their attitudes.

## Results

On only one item did attitudes between students from the United States ( $M=48.87$ ) and those from outside

the United States ( $M = 57.22$ ) differ significantly: attitudes toward polygamists ( $t = 2.082, p < .05$ ). For all the others, there were no significant differences.

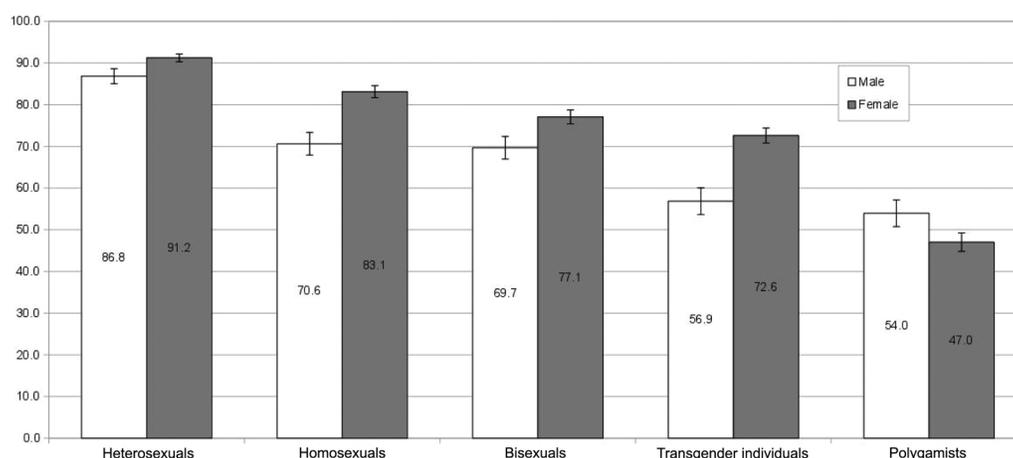
Figure 1 displays the comparison between men and women on their attitudes toward the five target groups. Because the comparisons are between just two groups, men and women,  $t$  tests were utilized. Women held significantly more positive attitudes toward four of the five target groups: heterosexuals ( $t = -4.665, p < .001$ ), lesbian/gay people ( $t = -8.675, p < .001$ ), bisexual people ( $t = -4.68, p < .001$ ), and transgender individuals ( $t = -8.887, p < .001$ ). Men held significantly more positive attitudes toward polygamists ( $t = 3.429, p < .001$ ).

Figure 2 displays a similar comparison but based on religious affiliation. Because there were five groups compared, ANOVA was used. Significant differences were observed among the five religious groups in their attitudes toward the five sexual and gender minority groups: heterosexual ( $F = 8.312, p < .001$ ), lesbian/gay people ( $F = 7.11, p < .001$ ), bisexual people ( $F = 9.397, p < .001$ ), transgender individuals ( $F = 10.061, p < .001$ ), and polygamists ( $F = 4.183, p < .01$ ). The nonreligious had more negative views toward heterosexuals than did Protestants ( $p < .001$ ), Catholics ( $p < .001$ ), and Jewish students ( $p < .01$ ), but not those of other religions. Jewish students had significantly more positive attitudes toward gay and lesbian people than did Protestants ( $p < .05$ ), Catholics ( $p < .05$ ), and those of other religions ( $p < .01$ ). Likewise, the nonreligious had significantly more positive attitudes toward lesbian and gay people than did Protestants ( $p < .05$ ), Catholics ( $p < .01$ ), and those of other religions ( $p < .01$ ). A similar pattern was observed for attitudes toward bisexual people. Jewish students had more positive attitudes than did Protestants ( $p < .01$ ), Catholics ( $p < .01$ ), and those of other religions ( $p < .01$ ); so too did the nonreligious: Protestants ( $p < .01$ ), Catholics ( $p < .001$ ), and those of other religions ( $p < .01$ ). Jewish students also had more positive attitudes toward transgender individuals than

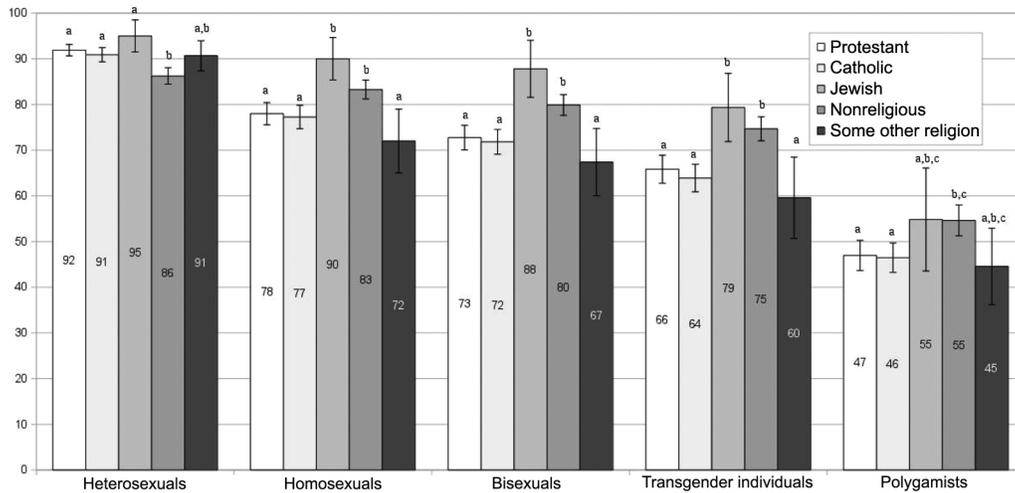
did Protestants ( $p < .05$ ), Catholics ( $p < .05$ ), and those of other religions ( $p < .01$ ), as did nonreligious students: Protestants ( $p < .001$ ), Catholics ( $p < .001$ ), and those of other religions ( $p < .01$ ).

Attitudes toward polygamists differed from attitudes toward other groups, in part because of greater variance in responses on this item. Jewish students and those from other religions were not significantly different from any of the other religious groups (which may also be a power issue, given the smaller numbers in these two groups). Nonreligious students had significantly more positive attitudes than did Protestants ( $p < .05$ ) and Catholics ( $p < .01$ ).

Figure 3 displays comparisons in attitudes toward the target sexual and gender minority groups based on views of the Bible. Significant differences were observed between the three views of the Bible in their attitudes toward the five sexual and gender groups: heterosexual individuals ( $F = 7.166, p < .001$ ), gay/lesbian people ( $F = 13.146, p < .001$ ), bisexual people ( $F = 12.166, p < .001$ ), transgender individuals ( $F = 12.528, p < .001$ ), and polygamists ( $F = 4.692, p < .01$ ). Individuals who viewed the Bible as inspired had significantly more positive attitudes toward heterosexuals than did those who saw the Bible as myth ( $p < .001$ ). Biblical literalists reported significantly more negative attitudes toward gay and lesbian people than both students who viewed the Bible as inspired ( $p < .001$ ) or as myth ( $p < .001$ ). Likewise, biblical literalists reported significantly more negative attitudes toward bisexual people than students who viewed the Bible as inspired ( $p < .001$ ) or as myth ( $p < .001$ ), while students who viewed the Bible as myth had significantly more positive attitudes toward bisexual people than did those who viewed the Bible as inspired ( $p < .05$ ). An identical pattern was observed on attitudes toward transgender individuals. However, on attitudes toward polygamists, only biblical literalists had significantly more negative views than did those who viewed the Bible as myth ( $p < .05$ ).



**Figure 1.** Mean attitude scores (1–100) toward sexual orientation, gender identity, and relationship type by biological sex. All comparisons were statistically significant. For the first four,  $p < .001$ ; for the last comparison,  $p < .01$ .

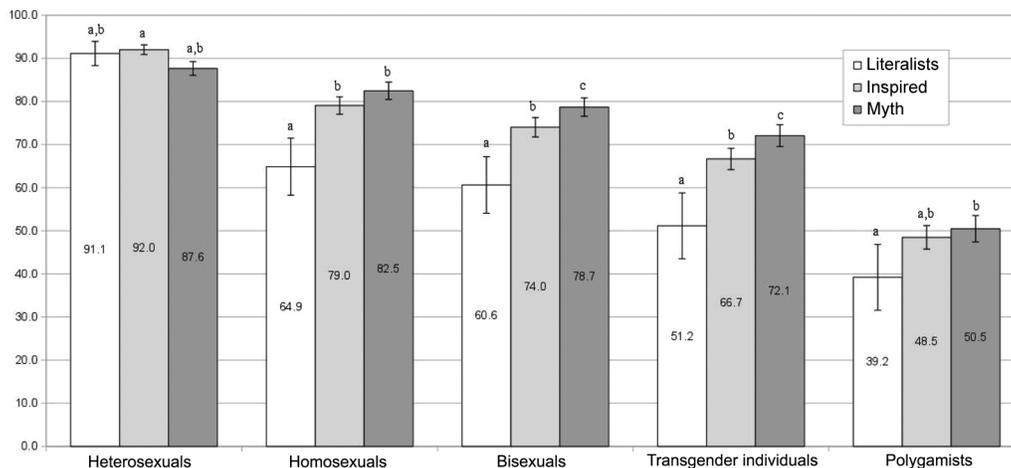


**Figure 2.** Mean attitude scores (1–100) toward sexual orientation, gender identity, and relationship type by religious affiliation. Letters indicate groups that were *not* significantly different ( $p > .05$ ) based on Tukey’s post hoc test. All groups labeled “a” were not significantly different from one another; all groups labeled “b” were not significantly different from one another, etc.

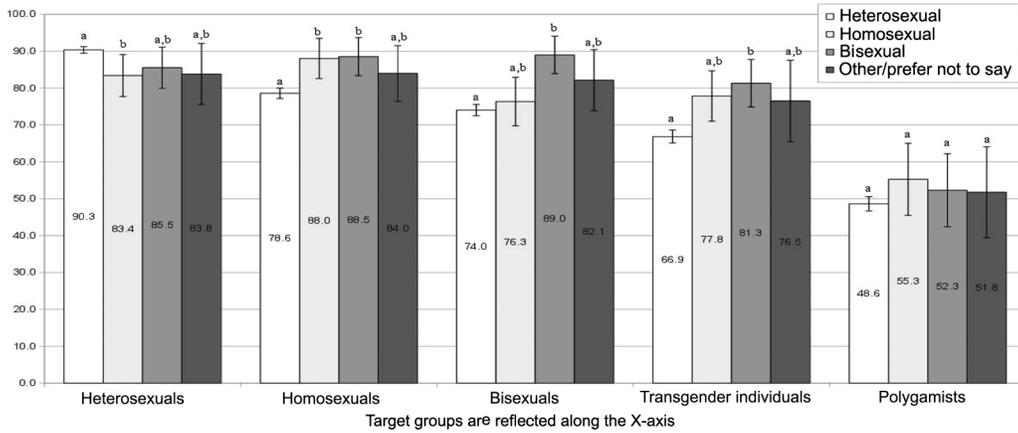
Figure 4 displays a comparison between four different sexual orientations on their attitudes toward the sexual and gender minority groups. Significant differences were observed between the four sexual orientations in their attitudes toward four of the five sexual and gender groups: heterosexuals ( $F = 5.039, p < .01$ ), lesbian/gay people ( $F = 4.561, p < .01$ ), bisexual people ( $F = 4.924, p < .01$ ), and transgender individuals ( $F = 5.594, p < .01$ ), but not polygamists ( $F = .774, p > .05$ ). Heterosexuals reported more positive attitudes toward heterosexuals than lesbian and gay people ( $p < .05$ ). Heterosexuals reported significantly more negative views toward homosexuality than did gay/lesbian ( $p < .05$ ) and bisexual participants ( $p < .05$ ). Heterosexuals reported significantly more negative attitudes toward bisexuality than did bisexual people ( $p < .01$ ), as well as significantly more negative attitudes toward

transgender persons than did bisexual participants ( $p < .05$ ).

We now turn to the OLS regression analysis. Table 2 presents the results of five regressions. Attitudes toward each of the target groups—heterosexuals, lesbian/gay, bisexuals, transgender individuals, and polygamists—were regressed upon basic demographic variables as well as four religiosity variables: religious affiliation, view of the Bible, and self-reported religiosity and spirituality. We originally included religious service attendance in the regressions, but it proved to be collinear with self-reported religiosity so it was removed from the analyses. The first regression examined attitudes toward heterosexuals. Just a handful of variables were significant predictors of attitudes toward heterosexuals. Women had more favorable views ( $B = 3.714, p < .001$ ) than did men. Individuals who identified their race/ethnicity as



**Figure 3.** Mean attitude score (1–100) toward sexual orientation, gender identity, and relationship type by views of the Bible. Letters indicate groups that were *not* significantly different ( $p > .05$ ) based on Tukey’s post hoc test. All groups labeled “a” were not significantly different from one another; all groups labeled “b” were not significantly different from one another, etc.



**Figure 4.** Mean attitude score (1–100) toward sexual orientation, gender identity, and relationship type by sexual orientation. Letters indicate groups that were *not* significantly different ( $p > .05$ ) based on Tukey’s post hoc test. All groups labeled “a” were not significantly different from one another; all groups labeled “b” were not significantly different from one another, etc.

something other than Black, White, or Hispanic had more negative views toward heterosexuals than did White individuals ( $B = -4.302, p < .05$ ). Lesbian/gay participants had significantly more negative attitudes toward heterosexuals than did heterosexuals ( $B = -6.654, p < .01$ ). Jewish students had significantly more positive views of heterosexuals than did the nonreligious ( $B = 8.501, p < .01$ ). A small amount of the variation in attitudes toward heterosexuals was explained (5%).

The second regression was of attitudes toward lesbian/gay people on demographic and religiosity variables. More of the variables were significant predictors.

Females had far more positive views of lesbian/gay people than did males ( $B = 12.337, p < .001$ ). Lesbian/gay ( $B = 9.217, p < .05$ ) and bisexual ( $B = 8.379, p < .05$ ) participants both had significantly more favorable views toward homosexuality than did heterosexuals. Jewish students had more favorable views ( $B = 11.596, p < .01$ ) than did the nonreligious, while those of other religions had significantly less favorable views ( $B = -7.658, p < .05$ ). Compared to those who viewed the Bible as myth, biblical literalists had significantly and substantially more negative views ( $B = -13.938, p < .001$ ). Individuals who scored higher in religiosity

**Table 2.** Attitudes Toward Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Relationship Type Regressed on Demographic and Religion Variables

Variables	Heterosexuals			Homosexuals			Bisexuals			Transgender Individuals			Polygamists		
	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i>
Sex (Female = 1)	3.693	0.998	.000	12.325	1.512	.000	7.408	1.666	.000	15.931	1.874	.000	-6.942	2.219	.002
Race (White is comparison group)															
Black	0.353	2.214	.873	6.479	3.372	.055	8.467	3.743	.024	11.925	4.195	.005	11.544	4.888	.018
Hispanic	-1.642	1.404	.242	1.967	2.118	.353	1.185	2.349	.614	3.658	2.640	.166	6.563	3.113	.035
Other	-4.319	2.019	.033	2.411	3.031	.426	2.877	3.343	.390	3.883	3.722	.297	-0.309	4.383	.944
From United States (=1)	-2.975	2.036	.144	1.537	3.097	.620	4.510	3.428	.188	2.369	3.866	.540	-7.751	4.511	.086
Sexual orientation (heterosexual individuals are comparison group)															
Homosexual individuals	-6.717	2.494	.007	9.093	3.808	.017	1.376	4.152	.740	11.963	4.590	.009	4.202	5.500	.445
Bisexual individuals	-2.683	2.601	.302	8.220	3.885	.035	12.678	4.280	.003	10.628	4.787	.027	1.611	5.588	.773
Other	-7.372	3.774	.051	2.143	5.702	.707	3.776	6.280	.548	5.291	7.141	.459	0.625	8.450	.941
Religion (None is comparison group)															
Catholic	2.727	1.455	.061	-2.582	2.206	.242	-4.266	2.433	.080	-7.394	2.715	.007	-8.630	3.212	.007
Protestant	3.325	1.575	.035	-2.036	2.398	.396	-3.170	2.640	.230	-6.947	2.936	.018	-5.944	3.483	.088
Jewish	8.427	2.789	.003	11.365	4.105	.006	12.277	4.523	.007	10.485	5.010	.037	4.181	6.011	.487
Other	3.694	2.491	.138	-7.544	3.733	.043	-7.830	4.129	.058	-15.744	4.649	.001	-9.293	5.416	.086
Bible (Myth is comparison group)															
Bible is literal	1.217	2.246	.588	-13.833	3.423	.000	-11.406	3.774	.003	-15.112	4.234	.000	-4.150	5.008	.407
Bible is inspired	1.916	1.279	.134	-0.188	1.939	.923	0.451	2.142	.833	0.010	2.381	.997	4.440	2.828	.117
Bible is other	1.063	1.659	.522	-2.083	2.507	.406	-3.148	2.776	.257	-3.949	3.108	.204	0.977	3.651	.789
Religion scale	-0.228	0.275	.408	-1.507	0.420	.000	-1.628	0.464	.000	-2.085	0.517	.000	-1.532	0.610	.012
Spiritual scale	0.207	0.213	.333	1.036	0.321	.001	0.994	0.354	.005	1.963	0.394	.000	1.118	0.465	.016
Constant	87.746	2.312	.000	71.868	3.502	.000	69.426	3.875	.000	57.036	4.353	.000	63.409	5.112	.000
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>			.050			.117			.081			.144			.045

had more negative views toward gay/lesbian people ( $B = -1.518, p < .001$ ), while individuals who scored higher in spirituality had more positive views ( $B = 1.088, p < .01$ ). Finally, when all variables in the regression were included, Black individuals appeared to have more positive attitudes toward lesbian and gay people than did White individuals ( $B = 6.425, p = .057$ ). The relationship was not statistically significant. Just under 12% of the variation in attitudes toward lesbian and gay people was explained by these variables.

The third regression was of attitudes toward bisexuality. Females had more positive attitudes toward bisexual people than did males ( $B = 7.418, p < .001$ ). Similar to the previous regression, Black participants, with religiosity controlled, had more positive attitudes toward bisexual people than did White participants ( $B = 8.295, p < .05$ ). Bisexual individuals had more positive attitudes toward bisexuality than did heterosexuals ( $B = 12.953, p < .01$ ), but gay/lesbian individuals did not ( $B = 1.579, p = .703$ ). Jewish students had more positive attitudes toward bisexuals than did the nonreligious ( $B = 12.642, p < .01$ ), but the other three religious groups, with coefficients that were negative compared to the nonreligious, were not significantly different from the nonreligious. However, biblical literalists had significantly more negative attitudes than did those who viewed the Bible as myth ( $B = -11.589, p < .01$ ). Likewise, as self-reported religiosity increased, attitudes toward bisexual people became more negative ( $B = -1.644, p < .001$ ). However, as self-reported spirituality increased, attitudes toward bisexual people became more positive ( $B = 1.075, p < .01$ ). Just over 8% of the variation in attitudes toward bisexual people was explained by the variables in the equation.

The fourth regression was of attitudes toward transgender individuals on the demographic and religiosity variables. Females had significantly more positive attitudes toward transgender individuals than did males ( $B = 15.974, p < .001$ ), and Black individuals had more positive attitudes than did White individuals ( $B = 11.883, p < .01$ ). Both gay/lesbian ( $B = 12.167, p < .01$ ) and bisexual ( $B = 10.610, p < .05$ ) people had more positive attitudes toward transgender individuals than did heterosexuals. Jewish students had more positive attitudes than did the nonreligious ( $B = 10.950, p < .029$ ), but

Catholics ( $B = -7.711, p < .01$ ), Protestants ( $B = -7.633, p < .05$ ), and those of other religions ( $B = -15.868, p < .01$ ) had more negative attitudes toward transgender individuals than did the nonreligious. Biblical literalists also had more negative views toward transgender individuals ( $B = -15.205, p < .001$ ) than did those who viewed the Bible as myth. Finally, as self-reported religiosity increased, attitudes toward transgender individuals became more negative ( $B = -2.085, p < .001$ ), but as self-reported spirituality increased, attitudes toward transgender individuals became more positive ( $B = 2.032, p < .001$ ). A larger amount of the variation in attitudes toward transgender individuals was explained than in any of the other equations (14%).

The final regression was attitudes toward polygamists on the demographic and religion variables. Females had more negative views toward polygamists than did males ( $B = -6.854, p < .01$ ). Black respondents had more positive views than did White respondents ( $B = 11.534, p < .05$ ). Catholics ( $B = -9.254, p < .01$ ) and Protestants ( $B = -7.193, p < .05$ ) both had more negative attitudes toward polygamists than did the nonreligious. There was no difference in attitudes based on views of the Bible. However, as self-reported religiosity increased, attitudes toward polygamists became more negative ( $B = -1.526, p < .05$ ), while the inverse occurred with spirituality ( $B = 1.234, p < .01$ ). A small portion of the variation in attitudes toward polygamists was explained by these variables (4.5%).

Finally, in line with recommendations in previous research, we analyzed the interrelationships between the attitudes toward all five groups using correlations. Table 3 is a correlation matrix between the five attitude measures. There are three notable findings among the correlations. First, attitudes toward heterosexuals were significantly positively correlated with attitudes toward all the other groups: lesbian/gay people ( $r = .436, p < .001$ ), bisexual individuals ( $r = .373, p < .001$ ), transgender individuals ( $r = .266, p < .001$ ), and polygamists ( $r = .160, p < .001$ ). Second, there were very high correlations between attitudes toward gay/lesbian and bisexual ( $r = .825, p < .001$ ) people, attitudes toward gay/lesbian and transgender individuals ( $r = .790, p < .001$ ), and attitudes toward bisexual and transgender individuals ( $r = .778, p < .001$ ). Finally, there were also significant

**Table 3.** Correlations Between Attitude, Religiosity, and Spirituality Measures

Measures	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(1) Heterosexuals	—						
(2) Homosexuals	.436***	—					
(3) Bisexuals	.373***	.825***	—				
(4) Transgender individuals	.266***	.790***	.778***	—			
(5) Polygamists	.160***	.352***	.458***	.471***	—		
(6) Religiosity scale	.102***	-.148***	-.165***	-.156***	-.106***	—	
(7) Spirituality scale	.098***	.000	-.027	.034	-.023	.591***	—

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

and positive correlations between attitudes toward polygamists and all the other measures, but they also ranged from small to medium correlations. The implications of these findings are discussed next.

### Discussion

Drawing on insights from queer theory, we set out to answer several questions previously unaddressed in the literature concerning attitudes toward sexual and gender groups. Rather than simply comparing attitudes toward different sexual minorities, for example, following Crawley and Broad (2008), we sought to examine variations in attitudes concerning *both* heterosexual and LGBT groups. As Figures 1 through 4 show, heterosexuals were evaluated more positively than all other groups but, as queer theorists have long argued (Warner, 1999), such evaluations were contextually specific and susceptible to social influence. Gay and lesbian respondents and those that reported their race/ethnicity as “other,” for example, were significantly less likely to hold favorable attitudes toward heterosexuality. Further, female and Jewish respondents were much more likely to demonstrate more positive attitudes toward all sexual and gender groups while displaying more negative attitudes toward polygamy. Our findings thus lend empirical weight to queer conceptualizations of fluid and variable sexual attitudes constructed in relation to existing social norms and ideals (Butler, 2006).

Our findings also demonstrate some ways existing social norms and ideals influence attitudes toward varied sexual and gender groups. In terms of religion, Jewish and nonreligious students tended to have more positive views toward sexual and gender minority groups than did Catholics, Protestants, and those from “other” religions. While our findings echo other observations that biblical literalism significantly predicts attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992), we found that this was not a significant predictor of attitudes toward polygamists or heterosexuals. While the absence of an effect on attitudes toward heterosexuality mirrors queer recognitions of the privileged social location of heterosexuality within contemporary society (Ingraham, 2008), the lack of influence on attitudes toward polygamy may be a reflection of the fact that the Bible does not condemn polygamy and that polygamy does not in fact challenge heterosexual privilege. Rather, the Bible suggests heterosexual polygamy was once condoned (and potentially favored) by God. Thus, while most contemporary Christians reject polygamy, biblical literalists may have a difficult time condemning a practice that holds a prominent place in the Bible and may not need to condemn an alternative sexual practice that does not necessarily subvert heterosexuality.

Moving beyond biblical literalism, however, our findings further complicate (Warner, 1999) existing

assumptions concerning the relationship between religion and sexual minorities. While self-reported religiosity and spirituality were statistically unrelated to attitudes toward heterosexuals, a consistent relationship emerged in all the regressions on sexual and gender minorities: Higher scores on religiosity were related to more negative views toward the target group, while higher scores on spirituality were related to more positive views toward the same group (D. T. McDermott & Blair, 2012). Considering that opposition to same-sex marriage and gender equality are both largely attributed to religion in the United States (Cragun & Kosmin, 2013), and that the nonreligious population in the United States is rather large and appears to be growing (Kosmin, Keysar, Cragun, & Navarro-Rivera, 2009), it may be that religion is becoming the last bastion of explicit sexual and gender prejudice, because religious adherents can defend their prejudice by claiming religious privilege (e.g., “I oppose same-sex marriage because the Bible says it’s wrong”). While there is certainly diversity within religious attitudes toward various groups (Cragun, 2013), our findings echo queer suggestions (Barton, 2012) that religious practice may lie at the heart of prejudicial attitudes toward sexual minorities.

While religion appears to facilitate prejudicial attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities, spirituality seems to have the opposite effect. What may be happening is that young people in the United States, who are both less prejudiced toward sexual and gender minorities and less religious (Chaves, 2011; Herek, 2002; Kosmin et al., 2009), are leaving religions precisely because religions remain the primary opposition to sexual and gender equality in the United States (Cragun & Kosmin, 2013; see also M. M. Wilcox, 2009, for examples of queer women who have departed mainstream religions for similar reasons). But those who are leaving religion, like many of the women Wilcox (2009) interviewed, may retain certain elements of religion—elements that can be divorced from institutional religion, that they find beneficial, such as believing all humans are connected or there is a higher power or purpose for existence. Our data seem to suggest that something along these lines is occurring, and other research supports the idea that young people in particular are leaving religions because of prejudicial and discriminatory teachings about sexual and gender minorities (Jones, Cox, & Navarro-Rivera, 2014).

These findings also complicate existing conceptualizations of the relationship between race and attitudes toward sexual and gender groups. Whereas previous research has noted higher levels of homophobia among Black individuals (Comstock, 2001; Pitt, 2010; Ward, 2005), these studies have not controlled for religion. Considering that Black individuals remain the most religious members of U.S. society, our study suggests that religion is important for understanding Black individuals’ attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities

(Pitt, 2010). In our population, once religiosity was controlled, Black individuals were actually more likely to demonstrate positive attitudes toward sexual and gender minority groups than were White individuals. Rather than a straightforward relationship between sexual and gender prejudice and race, our findings reveal that previous studies may be conflating race and religion, and in so doing, miscasting Black individuals' attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities. Our findings, echoing observations from studies of Black queer religious groups (McQueeney, 2009), thus suggest researchers should remain sensitive to the influence of religion upon Black individuals' attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities.

These findings also revealed a correlation between attitudes toward heterosexuals and various sexual and gender minorities. Considering that attitudes toward heterosexuals are positively correlated with attitudes toward all other groups, our results suggest heterosexual privilege cannot be explained completely by people thinking highly of heterosexuality. Rather, as some queer theorists have argued (Warner, 1999), people who develop positive interpretations of heterosexuality may also develop more positive interpretations of sexualities in general. The inverse would also be true: People who develop negative interpretations of heterosexuality will also think poorly of other sexual and gender identities. While it is possible that some people do not hold favorable attitudes of anyone and rely on prejudice to navigate their social lives (Butler, 2006), it is also possible that the culture of shame, repression, and fear concerning sexual expression in the United States may forbid these people from embracing any overt sexual identification (Warner, 1999). In either case, our results suggest there may be much to learn from the ways people's interpretations of privileged sexualities influence their attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities.

Our correlation matrix also has important implications for investigations of sexual boundaries (Heath, 2012; Irvine, 2003; Schwalbe et al., 2000). Considering that we found high correlations between attitudes toward gay/lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals, our findings suggest that in some cases people have begun to develop attitudes that integrate these distinct experiences within the framework suggested by collective acronyms (e.g., LGBT) and advocacy efforts (e.g., coordinated social movement activities representing multiple sexual and gender minority groups; see Fetner, 2008). On the other hand, the lower correlations between attitudes toward all other groups and attitudes toward polygamists suggest people think about polygamy in a substantively different way. While this may be because people still view polygamy as both deviant and a lifestyle choice, it could be tied to the elevated emphasis on monogamy and marriage policies in contemporary American legal, political, and religious arenas (Bernstein & Taylor, 2013; Heath, 2012). In either

case, our results suggest that polygamy may be the sexual bridge too far for some Americans.

The lower correlations between attitudes toward all the other groups and polygamy also reveal that attitudes toward polygamists were the most negative. Why attitudes toward polygamists are so negative is not entirely clear, though it may be related to the fact that polygamy is often associated with religious fundamentalism and cults, both of which are groups that are viewed quite negatively (Cragun et al., 2012). In addition, given that females had more positive views toward all groups except polygamists, toward whom they had significantly more negative views, it may be that people view polygamy as a relationship arrangement that is not egalitarian. However, it is also the case that the male participants in our study, who had more positive attitudes toward polygamy than did the female participants, still held more negative attitudes toward polygamy than they did toward any of the other sexual or gender groups; this suggests that dislike of polygamy cannot be due only to inequality and patriarchy, as men also disliked it. Another possibility is simply the strangeness of polygamy, because monogamy is pervasive and normative in our society (Stacey, 2012).

Our findings, coupled with queer conceptualizations of the privileged status of marriage and monogamy (Ingraham, 2008), raise an important question: Is the negativity witnessed in our data due to concerns about multiple partners (polyamory) or multiple spouses (polygamy)? Although we specifically asked respondents about polygamy, there is no way to ascertain whether we would have received similar responses to polyamory. Considering the central place of monogamous marriage in the American mythology (Heath, 2012), one might expect more tolerance for multiple relationships than for multiple spouses. On the other hand, contemporary American attacks on "sexual fluidity" (Diamond, 2008), combined with legal and governmental promotion of monogamous marriage (Ingraham, 2008), could foster similarly negative reactions to both polyamory and polygamy. Although we can only speculate based on the data at hand, our results suggest the multitude of relationship types available in our social world may provide an important—though as yet relatively untapped—source of information concerning sexual attitudes and politics (Stacey, 2012).

In terms of "sexual fluidity" (Diamond, 2008) our findings also suggest bisexuality may present an interesting meeting place for gay, lesbian, and heterosexual respondents. Whereas gay and lesbian respondents had more positive attitudes toward transgender people and more negative attitudes toward heterosexuality (compared to heterosexual respondents), the two groups came together in their interpretation of bisexuality. Similar to past assertions that homo- and biphobia may represent distinct social issues (Eliason, 1997), our findings suggest that bisexual individuals may have

difficulty finding tolerance both within and beyond the LGBT community. What may be happening is that gay and lesbian individuals, who must navigate heterosexism while seeking rights and recognition, may be clinging to binary constructions (e.g., homo/hetero, Black/White, male/female) and essentialized versions (e.g., born this way) of sexuality predicated on “fixed” sexual desires, and these claims lead them to disavow more fluid (e.g., bisexual, pansexual, and queer) sexual identities and practices (Butler, 2006). However, if this was the case, one would also expect them to demonstrate more negative attitudes toward other groups (e.g., transgender people) that exist between binaries, and yet this was not the case in our data. While we do not dispute the potential influence of binary and essential notions of sexualities (Butler, 2006; Warner, 1999), our data seem to suggest that there is something beyond binary structures linking heterosexual and lesbian/gay interpretations of bisexuality.

Considering that recent studies suggest bisexual people experience greater mental health concerns and discriminatory treatment than their gay, lesbian, and heterosexual counterparts (Dodge et al., 2012; Ross, Dobinson, & Eady, 2010), we would speculate that some answers may be found in the stereotypical constructions of bisexuality found among *both* heterosexuals and gay/lesbian individuals. Studies of both gay/lesbian (Burleson, 2005) and heterosexual (Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 2012) populations, for example, have revealed constructions of bisexuality as inauthentic, politically problematic, irresponsible, overly promiscuous, and transitional. Further, researchers have found that bisexual individuals experience constant pressure to conform to binary sexual categories and justify their sexual-emotional desires (Brewster & Moradi, 2010; Diamond, 2008; McLean, 2007). As a result, it may be that stereotypical depictions of bisexuality shared by heterosexuals *and* gays/lesbians lie at the heart of negative attitudes about bisexuality.

Despite what we believe are important findings, our study had several limitations. To begin with, our data derived from college students at one university in the Southeastern United States, which means there is limited generalizability beyond a college student population. In addition, given that prior research has found differences in attitudes toward “gay men” and “lesbian women,” it may also be worthwhile to ask about attitudes toward “polygamist men” and “polygamist women” separately, as well as “bisexual men” and “bisexual women,” “male heterosexuals” and “female heterosexuals,” and “male-to-female” and “female-to-male” transgender people as separate target categories (Worthen, 2013). While our analysis begins responding to long-standing queer calls for empirical deconstructions of sexual categories (Crawley & Broad, 2008; Irvine, 2003; Sedgwick, 2008), we would emphasize the need for more systematic research into the variations within and between attitudes

concerning sexual and gender groups. Another possible limitation is that we used just a single indicator of prejudice. While thermometer scales have been found to be powerful tools for evaluating prejudice, our study would have been strengthened if we had used additional indicators.

## Conclusion

Our analysis sheds light on some ways that examination of attitudes about sexualities may benefit social scientific knowledge of inequalities. Considering that stratification systems are built on and maintained via the promotion and acceptance of normative and deviant categories (Schwalbe et al., 2000), fully understanding sexual and gender inequalities—and potentially combating them—requires deconstructing the categories themselves as well as the ways people interpret them. To this end, our analysis revealed that respondents’ locations in systems of race, gender, sexuality, and religion may produce dramatically different attitudes. Religion, in particular, appears to be highly related to sexual and gender minority prejudice. The privileging of Christianity in the United States may be why some people believe sexual and gender prejudice justified by religion is socially acceptable. Although it may be tempting to wish for clear paths toward equality, our findings show that reducing sexual and gender inequalities may require systematically examining and comparing the multitude of social factors that influence people’s interpretations of sexual and gendered others.

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