



International Journal of Clinical Biology and Biochemistry

ISSN Print: 2664-6188
ISSN Online: 2664-6196
Impact Factor: RJIF 5.35
IJCBB 2025; 7(1): 25-28
www.biochemistryjournal.net
Received: 18-11-2024
Accepted: 25-12-2024

Shibasish Mukherjee
Ph.D., Research Scholar,
Department of Psychology,
Swami Vivekananda
University, West Bengal, India

Dr. Nilanjana Mitra
Assistant Professor & Head,
Department of Psychology,
Swami Vivekananda
University, West Bengal, India

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Nilanjana Mitra
Assistant Professor & Head,
Department of Psychology,
Swami Vivekananda
University, West Bengal, India

A comprehensive review of sexual prejudice: Societal attitudes towards homosexuality and bisexuality

Shibasish Mukherjee and Nilanjana Mitra

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26646188.2025.v7.i1a.79>

Abstract

Sexual prejudice leads to discrimination and negative attitudes toward individuals based on their sexual orientation. This review paper examines societal views on homosexuality and bisexuality, exploring the role of gender norms, heteronormativity, and social expectations in producing prejudice and discrimination. Research shows that heterosexual men often display stronger negative attitude towards homosexual individuals and it is influenced by cultural and psychological factors. Bisexual individuals face unique discrimination, not only from heterosexuals but also from the LGBTQ+ community. Institutional structures, religious beliefs, and feelings of sexual disgust further reinforce these prejudices and discriminations. The study shows the need for education, awareness, policy reforms, and greater social interaction between the people of different sexual orientations to challenge stereotypes and promote inclusivity.

Keywords: Sexual prejudice, homophobia, biphobia, gender norms, discrimination

Introduction

Sexual bias is an issue that exists across societies manifesting as attitudes, unfair treatment and discriminatory behaviour towards individuals based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. To understand bias, it is crucial to explore the concepts of gender, sex, sexuality and homosexuality that form the basis for these prejudices. This part of the article seeks to provide an overview of these terms laying the groundwork for an examination of the roots and effects of sexual prejudice in contemporary society.

The Distinction between Gender and Sex

Despite their frequent confusion, the terms gender and sex have different meanings. Understanding the difference between sex and gender is essential to comprehending sexual prejudice because it emphasises how cultural norms shape expectations and biases. The biological traits that categorise people as male, female, or intersex are referred to as 'sex'. These characteristics include chromosomes, hormone levels, and reproductive organs (Fausto-Sterling, 2000) [3]. Individuals who identify as intersex display characteristics that defy the traditional male-female binary, highlighting the complexity and diversity of biological sex (Blackless *et al.*, 2000) [3]. In contrast, gender is a socially constructed construct that includes roles, behaviours, and characteristics that are acceptable for men, women, and other gender identities in a given society (West & Zimmerman, 1987) [29]. Gender is shaped by societal expectations rather than being biologically determined, unlike sex. Characteristics such as emotional expression and nurturing are frequently associated with femininity, whereas stoicism and assertiveness are associated with masculinity (Connell, 2005) [7]. These gender norms differ between cultures and are not determined by biology, but rather by socialisation processes (Butler, 1990) [5]. Now according to American Psychological Association (APA), an individual's internal perception of their gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned to them at birth, is referred as their gender identity (American Psychological Association, 2015) [1]. People can identify as either male, female, neither, both, or somewhere in between. For instance, someone who was assigned the gender 'female' at birth may identify as male; this is referred to as transgender (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009) [27]. In the same way cisgender individuals are those whose gender identity corresponds with their assigned sex.

Sexual Orientation: Categories and Fluidity

An individual's ability to feel sexually attracted to someone and to build romantic or emotional relationships is referred to as their sexuality. A fundamental component of sexuality is sexual orientation which describes one's emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to other people (Herek, 2000) [15]. Heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, and asexuality are the four main classifications of sexual orientation. These classifications, though, are not all-inclusive and might not adequately convey the diversity of human experiences (Diamond, 2008) [8]. The different perspectives that society has on these orientations affect how accepting or discriminatory people are towards them. Attraction to the other sex, or heterosexuality, is frequently seen as the default or normative orientation and is supported by society norms (Herek, 2002) [17]. On the other hand, homosexuality entails attraction to people of the same sex, with gay and lesbian identities based on gender (Herek, 2000) [15]. Attraction to both same- and opposite-sex people is a sign of bisexuality, which challenges binary presumptions about sexual orientation (Callis, 2009) [6]. Lastly, people who are asexual may still be in romantic or emotional relationships, but their lack of sexual attraction to other people is what defines them as asexual (Bogaert, 2004) [4]. Several studies claim that many people undergo changes in their sexual identity throughout their lives, which reflects the fluidity of sexuality (Diamond, 2008) [8].

Literature Review

Homophobia: Manifestations and Institutional Reinforcement

Homosexuality has historically been stigmatised and disregarded. Many societies, often based on religious or cultural beliefs, have seen it as a disorder or moral failing (Fone, 2000) [15]. Due to the continued existence of these negative perceptions, LGBTQ+ people are frequently the target of violence, social exclusion, and discrimination (Herek, 2000) [15]. The fear or hatred of homosexuality, known as homophobia, can take many different forms, including systemic bias, physical violence, and verbal and physical abuse (Meyer, 2003) [25]. The idea that heterosexuality is better or more 'natural' than other sexual orientations is reinforced by institutional structures, including laws and religious doctrines, which are the source of this type of sexual prejudice (Herek, 2004) [22]. The social acceptance of homosexuality and other non-heteronormative identities is restricted by these institutional norms, which also serve to reinforce stigma and marginalisation. Although over the past thirty years, attitudes have shifted positively, with a decrease in moral judgment and a growing resistance to discrimination against gay individuals, still during the initial years of this century sexual prejudice was a common thing among the young adults of developed country like USA. In the year 2000 when studies were done to understand sexual prejudice, its prevalence, psychological factors, underlying motivations, and its links to hate crimes and anti-gay behaviours, it showed that heterosexual men display greater level of sexual prejudice than heterosexual women but the presence of any interpersonal contact with gay individual significantly reduce the level of prejudice. Further it revealed that this prejudice is related to political ideology, religious belief and authoritarianism (Herek, 2000) [15]. The attitudes of heterosexual men towards

homosexual people are bit complex as they have a tendency of showing more negative attitude towards gay individuals than the lesbians (Herek, 2000) [15]. According to the survey it may coz because of the feelings and beliefs linked to being a straight man often include the need to show strength by rejecting gay men (Herek, 2000) [15]. However, the author claimed that heterosexual women does not show any kind of difference in case of gay and lesbians, they display the same degree of prejudice for both the gender.

Now when a new angle is explored by keeping the lesbian section before coming to the topic of homosexual men, the results of the survey gets more interesting. When opinions about lesbians were evaluated without bringing up gay men, White and Black men's attitudes towards lesbians were generally more favourable. When White men were first asked about lesbians, their responses to gay men were less hostile. But among Black men, this pattern was not always evident. The study found that the sequence in which questions were asked affected heterosexual men's perceptions of lesbians and homosexual men (Herek and Capitanio, 1999) [20]. Men's ratings were lower than women's when they rated their feelings towards gay men first. Men rated lesbians and gay men higher when they were asked about them first, though. Interestingly, when Black men were asked about lesbians before gay men, their opinions of lesbians were substantially more positive. This split-ballot experiment further revealed that when lesbian items were presented first, heterosexual women rated lesbians more favourably and gay men less favourably. To reduce this negative attitude and stigma, Herek proposed that the social scientists should take huge responsibility. They have to challenge heterosexism and contribute to social and legal change and should communicate their scientific knowledge to the policymakers (Herek, 2007) [19]. Stigma and prejudice bring violence and harassments, and violence against the homosexuals are not something new. When researchers try to found possible causes behind this violence, they found four motivational themes and those are peer dynamics, antigay ideology, thrill-seeking, and perceived self-defence (Franklin, 2000) [13].

With all these studies a question definitely need to be answered that what are the root causes of these hostile feelings among the heterosexuals. And one possible answer could be sexual disgust. Sexual disgust can be defined as something that refers to the emotional response elicited by perceived violations of sexual norms or behaviours that are considered inappropriate, immoral, or deviant. This form of disgust is often linked to societal and cultural beliefs about sexuality and can play a significant role in shaping attitudes towards individuals or groups whose sexual practices differ from those considered normative (Tybur *et al.*, 2009) [28]. Ray and Parkhill in 2021 [26] conducted a study in United States with 409 people to find out whether sexual disgust has any role behind the hostile behaviour of heterosexual people toward the homosexuals and they claimed that Men who experienced disgust towards gay men's sexual behaviour were more prone to harbour hostile attitudes toward them. This disgust was primarily related to gay men not conforming to traditional gender roles, rather than worries about disease or moral issues. The study indicates that these negative attitudes are connected to both heteronormative beliefs and feelings of sexual disgust.

Perceptions of Bisexuality among Heterosexuals: Stereotypes and Discrimination

Beyond homophobia, there are other forms of sexual prejudice, such as transphobia and biphobia. Biphobia is the term used to describe prejudice and discrimination against people who identify as bisexual. This prejudice is frequently based on stereotypes that depict bisexuals as promiscuous, confused, or unable to commit to monogamous relationships (Herek, 2002) [17]. According to research, bisexual people experience particular difficulties, such as greater rates of mental health problems and prejudice from the heterosexual and homosexual communities (Dodge *et al.*, 2012) [9]. Herek continued his studies in 2002 and this time the aim was to find out how heterosexual people views those who are bisexual. In this domain he suggested that heterosexuals' perceptions of bisexuals are impacted by a range of social, psychological, demographical, and contact factors; no single factor appears to be the main predictor of these perceptions (Herek, 2002) [17]. It can be seen that, with the exception of injecting drug users, bisexual men and women scored lower on feeling thermometers than members of other groups, such as religious, racial, ethnic, and political ones. Older age, less education, lower income, living in the rural areas, higher religiosity, political conservatism, traditional values surrounding gender and sexual behaviour, authoritarianism, and not interacting with gay men or lesbians were all linked to negative attitudes towards bisexuals (Herek, 2002) [17]. Research has shown that higher social dominance orientation, political conservatism, and essentialist beliefs about the discreteness of homosexuality are linked with a lower willingness to engage in romantic/sexual activities with a bisexual partner where as being in contact with a bisexual person was linked to more accepting views of bisexuality and a higher desire to have romantic or sexual relations with a bisexual partner (Feinstein *et al.*, 2015) [11]. In 2015, Herek *et al* made an interesting claim that people who believe that one's sexual orientation is a choice, have a tendency to display lower stigma for gays and lesbians but not for the people who are bisexuals. Now this attitude towards bisexual people differs with sexual orientations. It is evident that there is a difference in attitude between heterosexual and homosexual people for people who are bisexual. According to studies these differences are not related with gender. According to Hertlein *et al.*, heterosexual people possessed significantly more biphobia and negative bi-attitude than people who are homosexuals and gender of the person does not play any significant role there (Hertlein *et al.*, 2016) [23]. These studies are prime example of negative attitude towards bisexuals and the findings were supported by the newer studies as well. In 2018 an online survey was done to find out if the people are okay with dating and maintaining romantic relationship with bisexual community. And even their results show that heterosexual women considered bisexual men less attractive and less desirable (Gleason *et al.*, 2018) [14].

Prejudice in the LGBTQ+ Community: Bisexual Marginalization by Homosexuals

In the last two parts we saw how heterosexual people display negative attitudes towards homosexual and bisexual people. Now let's discuss about the attitude of homosexual's on people who are bisexuals. We have seen that heterosexual people have a tendency of showing negative attitude for both the homosexuals and bisexual people but

what interesting is that researches have shown that bisexual people face prejudice from homosexuals also. A study was done to find out the role of prejudice and how it affects the wellbeing of the marginalised population within the LGBTQ community and the findings showed that lesbians think that bisexual women has instable sexual orientation additionally homosexual people think that bisexual population is more attracted to male than female (Matsick and Rubin, 2018) [24]. A survey was conducted in US with 350 people who consider themselves as bisexual and according to them, they face more bi-negativity from the people who are gay and lesbians than heterosexual community (Arriaga and Parent, 2019) [2].

References

1. American Psychological Association. Guidelines for psychological practice with transgender and gender nonconforming people. *Am Psychol.* 2015;70(9):832-864.
2. Arriaga AS, Parent MC. Partners and prejudice: bisexual partner gender and experiences of binegativity from heterosexual, lesbian, and gay people. *Psychol Sex Orientat Gen Divers.* 2019;6(3):382-391. DOI:10.1037/sgd0000337.
3. Blackless M, Charuvastra A, Derryck A, Fausto-Sterling A, Lauzanne K, Lee E. How sexually dimorphic are we? Review and synthesis. *Am J Hum Biol.* 2000;12(2):151-166.
4. Bogaert AF. Asexuality: Prevalence and associated factors in a national probability sample. *J Sex Res.* 2004;41(3):279-287. doi:10.1080/00224490409552235.
5. Butler J, Trouble G. *Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* Gender Trouble. 1990;3(1):3-17.
6. Callis AS. Playing with Butler and Foucault: Bisexuality and Queer Theory. *J Bisex.* 2009;9(3-4):213-233. DOI:10.1080/15299710903316513.
7. Connell RW. *Masculinities.* 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press; c2005.
8. Diamond LM. *Sexual fluidity: Understanding women's love and desire.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press; c2008.
9. Dodge B, Reece M, Gebhard PH. Kinsey and bisexuality: An analysis of the Kinsey Scale and other bisexuality-related constructs. *J Bisex.* 2012;12(4):434-449.
10. Fausto-Sterling A. *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality.* New York: Basic Books; c2000.
11. Feinstein BA, Dyar C, Bhatia V, Latack JA, Davila J. Conservative beliefs, attitudes toward bisexuality, and willingness to engage in romantic and sexual activities with a bisexual partner. *Arch Sex Behav.* 2015;45:1535-1550. DOI:10.1007/s10508-015-0642-x.
12. Fone BRS. *Homophobia: A History.* New York: Metropolitan Books; c2000.
13. Franklin K. Antigay behaviors among young adults: Prevalence, patterns, and motivators in a noncriminal population. *J Interpers Violence.* 2000;15(4):339-362. DOI:10.1177/088626000015004001.
14. Gleason N, Vencill JA, Sprinkle E. Swipe left on the bi guys: Examining attitudes toward dating and being sexual with bisexual individuals. *J Bisex.* 2018;18(4):516-534. DOI:10.1080/15299716.2018.1563935.

15. Herek GM. Sexual prejudice and gender: Do heterosexuals' attitudes toward lesbians and gay men differ? *J Soc Issues*. 2000;56(2):251-266. DOI:10.1111/0022-4537.00164.
16. Herek GM. The psychology of sexual prejudice. *Curr Dir Psychol Sci*. 2000;9(1):19-22. DOI:10.1111/1467-8721.00051.
17. Herek GM. Gender gaps in public opinion about lesbians and gay men. *Public Opin Q*. 2002;66(1):40-66. DOI:10.1086/338409.
18. Herek GM. Heterosexuals' attitudes toward bisexual men and women in the United States. *J Sex Res*. 2002;39(4):264-274. DOI:10.1080/00224490209552150.
19. Herek GM. Confronting sexual stigma and prejudice: Theory and practice. *J Soc Issues*. 2007;63(4):905-925. DOI:10.1111/j.1540-4560.2007.00544.x.
20. Herek GM, Capitano JP. Sex differences in how heterosexuals think about lesbians and gay men: Evidence from survey context effects. *J Sex Res*. 1999;36(4):348-360. DOI:10.1080/00224499909552007.
21. Herek GM, Gillis JR, Cogan JC. Internalized stigma among sexual minority adults: Insights from a social psychological perspective.
22. Herek GM. Beyond "homophobia": Thinking about sexual prejudice and stigma in the twenty-first century. *Sex Res Soc Policy*. 2004;1(2):6-24. doi:10.1525/srsp.2004.1.2.6.
23. Hertlein KM, Hartwell EE, Munns ME. Attitudes toward bisexuality according to sexual orientation and gender. *J Bisex*. 2016;16(3):339-360. DOI:10.1080/15299716.2016.1200510.
24. Matsick JL, Rubin JD. Bisexual prejudice among lesbian and gay people: Examining the roles of gender and perceived sexual orientation. *Psychol Sex Orientat Gend Divers*. 2018;5(2):143. DOI:10.1037/sgd0000283.
25. Meyer IH. Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychol Bull*. 2003;129(5):674-697. DOI:10.1037/0033-2909.129.5.674.
26. Ray TN, Parkhill MR. Heteronormativity, disgust sensitivity, and hostile attitudes toward gay men: Potential mechanisms to maintain social hierarchies. *Sex Roles*. 2021;84(1):49-60. doi:10.1007/s11199-020-01146-w.
27. Schilt K, Westbrook L. Doing gender, doing heteronormativity: "Gender normals," transgender people, and the social maintenance of heterosexuality. *Gend Soc*. 2009;23(4):440-464. doi:10.1177/0891243209340034.
28. Tybur JM, Lieberman D, Griskevicius V. Microbes, mating, and morality: Individual differences in three functional domains of disgust. *J Pers Soc Psychol*. 2009;97(1):103-122. DOI:10.1037/a0015474.
29. West C, Zimmerman DH. Doing gender. *Gend Soc*. 1987;1(2):125-151. DOI:10.1177/0891243287001002002.