

**EXPLAINING OKLAHOMANS' SUPPORT FOR  
GAY AND LESBIAN ISSUES:  
AFFECT, COGNITION, AND PREJUDICE**

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Prejudice and symbolic beliefs were expected to have a direct effect on Oklahoma's support for gay and lesbian issues, while emotions and stereotypes concerning gays and lesbians were expected to have an indirect effect. The model is tested and confirmed among students at Oklahoma State University. Gender and ideology provide an independent effect on support for gay and lesbian policies.

**Gay and lesbian issues** moved on to Oklahoma's political agenda in 1996 when Oklahoma's first openly gay congressional candidate received a major party's nomination and the legislature passed a law to prevent same-sex marriages. The hope in a democracy is that as our representatives make decisions on these and other issues, they will use the people's interests as a criteria. There is some debate however as to how interests should be defined. Does it mean policy makers should be pollsters gauging the views of their constituents, or should they do what they see as being in the constituent's interests? To some degree the answer to the question depends on the quality of the peoples' views. Are the beliefs well reasoned and thoughtful? To determine the thoughtfulness of Oklahomans' views on gay and lesbian issues, it is important to understand the correlates to those beliefs.

Very surprisingly little research has been done to determine what affects people's support for gay and lesbian issues. This paper shines a light into that void by exploring a social psychological theory that helps us understand attitudes toward gay and lesbians rights.

For a theoretical framework, we rely on recent work by Esses, Haddock and Zanna (1993) who suggest that a combination of cognition and affect explain prejudice. Affect, according to Esses et al. (1993), refers to positive or negative emotions or feelings toward a group. In this study, we examine the feelings individuals have when they are in contact with gays or lesbians. Two key cognitions, according to Esses and her colleagues, are stereotypes and symbolic beliefs. Stereotypes are the characteristics people associate with a particular group and can be consensual or individual. Consensual stereotypes are beliefs about a group that are shared by society. Individual stereotypes are beliefs about a group that are idiosyncratic. For example, most Oklahomans may think of gay males as feminine and lesbians as masculine (consensual stereotypes), but an individual may see gay men as masculine, a stereotype not held by society at large (individual stereotype).

A second cognitive component, symbolic beliefs, concerns how well a group fits with the social norms or the values of society (Esses, Haddock, and Zanna 1993). Individuals who see gays and lesbians as child molesters have negative symbolic beliefs about them, whereas individuals who see gays and lesbians as well educated and upper-middle-class people who support our economy have positive symbolic beliefs.

Prejudice is defined as negative evaluations or attitudes toward a group (Esses, Haddock, and Zanna 1993). Attitudes toward gay and lesbian policies refer to support for policies that affect the lives of gays and lesbians. Although the two are likely to be strongly related they are distinct. Tolerant individuals, for example, recognize that groups they dislike should still be afforded their civil rights (see for example Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1982).

Most examinations of the effect of affect, stereotypes and symbolic beliefs about groups on prejudice have examined each component separately and found that each contributes to prejudice (Katz and Stotland 1959, Rokeach and Mezei 1966, Brigham 1971, Eagley and Mladinic 1989, Esses et al. 1993, Haddock et al. 1993, Sniderman et al. 1993). That is, individuals with negative stereotypes, emotions and symbolic beliefs about an out group tend to have high levels of prejudice toward that group.

However, Esses et al. (1993) used a multivariate approach to measure the relative strength of each of these components on prejudice. After examining Canadians' attitudes toward five social groups (including homosexuals), they concluded that individuals' emotions and symbolic beliefs have strong direct effects on their attitudes, whereas individuals' stereotypes have only indirect effects.

In this paper we expanded the Esses et al. (1993) line of research to measure the effects of individuals' prejudices, stereotypes, emotions and symbolic beliefs on their attitudes toward issues. We expected that individuals who have high levels of prejudice against gays and lesbians will not support policies favorable to gays and lesbians. Except for highly tolerant people, individuals' attitudes toward a group should affect their support of the group's rights. What is less clear is whether individuals' stereotypes, emotions and symbolic beliefs have an independent effect on their support for policies beneficial to gays and lesbians or if their effect is primarily through prejudice. We expected stereotypes to have little direct or indirect effect on individuals' support for gay rights. This expectation is based on the small independent effect that stereotypes had on prejudice (Esses et al. 1993). While emotions may affect support for gay and lesbian policies indirectly through prejudice, there is little reason to expect a strong independent effect. On the other hand, symbolic beliefs are expected to have an independent effect since they relate directly to the part of society that the policy would regulate if enacted.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

To test the effects of affect and cognition on attitudes toward gay rights, we surveyed students in four sections of the Introduction to American Government course at Oklahoma State University. Of the 210 students surveyed, 55 percent were male, 75 percent were white, and most self-identified as moderate to conservative in political ideology. While this cannot be considered a representative sample of any population, the concern here is the interrelationship among ideas (attitudes, opinions) rather than the distribution of particular opinions within a population. Whether the interrelationships documented here are typical of other Oklahoma groups will have to be determined in future research. Nevertheless, the subjects, Oklahoma State University undergraduates, are a suitable group with which

to test hypotheses on the sources of support or opposition to gay and lesbian rights. The theory we are exploring should apply.

The survey instrument examined respondents' prejudice, stereotypes, emotions, symbolic beliefs, demographic characteristics and support for key gay and lesbian issues. Although our instrument differed from the one used by Esses et al. (1993), we modeled our items on prejudice, stereotypes, emotions, and symbolic beliefs after their instrument.

The instrument had two forms. One concerned prejudice, stereotypes, emotions and symbolic beliefs toward lesbians and the other form concerned gay men. Americans' prejudice, stereotypes, emotions, and symbolic beliefs concerning lesbians differ from those concerning gay males (Kite and Deaux 1987). For example, gay men are believed to be feminine and lesbians to be masculine. To examine only gays and lesbians as one group would be too general whereas to examine only lesbians or only gay men would be too limited.

Another important feature of the instrument is that respondents were asked directly about their views concerning gays and lesbians and their rights. Although this can lead to socially desirable responses if respondents feel society dictates a certain response, social desirability should not be a problem with studies of gays and lesbians. Because there is not a consensus in society concerning gays and lesbians (Moore 1993; Hugick 1992), respondents are unlikely to feel that they are expected to respond in a particular way.

To measure stereotypes, students were asked to "provide a list of characteristics which you would use to describe gay men" (or lesbians). Students were then asked to indicate on a scale from one to five the favorability rating of each characteristic. Since respondents provided a different number of characteristics the stereotype score is the average favorability rating of the stereotypes listed. The higher the score the more favorable the stereotypes.

To measure emotions or affect respondents were asked to "provide a list of the feelings you experience when you think about gay men" (or lesbians) and to rate the favorability of each of the feelings listed using a five-point scale. Again, the average favorability rating is used as a measure of how lesbians or gay men make respondents feel. The higher the number the more positive the feelings.

To measure symbolic beliefs respondents were asked to "list all the values, customs, and traditions that you believe are helped or hurt by gay

men” (or lesbians) and to decide if each item listed was helped or hurt by gay men (or lesbians). Respondents who felt that a value was greatly helped by gay men (or lesbians) gave the value a four and those who felt a value was greatly hurt gave it a one. The average of the scores was used as an overall measure of symbolic beliefs.

Following the work of Esses et al. (1993), prejudice was measured with a feeling thermometer. The question asked respondents to “provide a number between 0 and 100 to indicate how you feel about gay men” (or lesbians). Respondents were instructed to give a score between 50 and 100 if they had a positive attitude toward gay men (or lesbians) or if a negative attitude, between 0 and 50.

To measure support for policies beneficial to gays and lesbians, respondents were given a list of nine statements concerning gay and lesbian issues and asked to indicate if they agreed or disagreed with the statements using a seven point scale. The total of the scores was used as our measure of support for gay rights. The higher the number the greater the support.

Since demographic characteristics have been found to affect Americans’ views about gays and lesbians, we use gender and ideology as control variables (Herek 1988; Gurwitz and Marcus 1978; Moore 1993; Hugick 1992). Gender was coded one for female and two for male. Ideology was measured with a five-point self-identification scale, with one being conservative and five being liberal. Other research (Fisher, Derison, Polley, Cadman, and Johnston 1994; Haddock et al. 1993; Herek and Capitanio 1996; Hugick 1992; Moore 1993) noted variation in attitudes toward gays and lesbians based on religious beliefs and knowing someone who is gay, these were not significantly related to support for gay rights in this study.

Due to the nature of the survey and the number of open ended questions, there were a large number of missing values. Of the 212 surveys returned, only 123 were usable in the multivariate equations. We had some concerns about this and examined bivariate correlations using both pairwise and listwise deletion. The correlations for both were very similar. Thus we feel fairly confident that our conclusions would be similar had the percent of usable surveys been higher. Table 1 lists the means and standard deviations for each of the variables.

TABLE 1

## Means, Standard Deviations, and Number of Cases

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Number of Cases
Affect (emotions felt when in contact with gay men or lesbians: higher scores are more favorable).	2.61	1.46	159
Stereotypes (characteristics associated with gay men or lesbians: higher scores are more favorable).	2.53	1.25	158
Symbolic beliefs about gay men or lesbians: higher scores are more favorable.	1.82	0.89	152
Views on gay-lesbian rights (minimum 9, maximum 63, higher scores are more favorable).	36.81	14.28	200
Ideology (1= most conservative, 5= most liberal).	2.66	1.19	203
Gender (1= female, 2= male).	1.55	.50	207
Feelings toward gay men and lesbians (provide a number between 0 and 100 to indicate how you feel about gay men (lesbians): 0= most unfavorable, 50= neutral, 100= most favorable).	30.94	28.62	210

SOURCE: Authors' calculations from Oklahoma State University student survey.

## FINDINGS

Our expectations were generally confirmed. In the bivariate relationships individuals' feelings, emotions, symbolic beliefs, and stereotypes were all significantly related to their support for gay and lesbian policies (see Table 2). What is particularly notable is the strong relationship

**TABLE 2**  
**Relationship among Attitudes toward Gay Men, Lesbians,  
and Gay Rights (Pearson's Correlations)**

		Bivariate Correlation					
<b>Attitudes Toward Gay Men</b>							
	Affect	Stereotypes	Beliefs	Feelings	Rights	Ideology	
Affect	1.00						
Stereotypes	.71*	1.00					
Beliefs	.50*	.53*	1.00				
Feelings	.52*	.56*	.65*	1.00			
Rights	.63*	.59*	.67*	.81*	1.00		
Ideology	.33*	.21	.29*	.33*	.40*	1.00	
Gender	-.16	-.08	-.16	-.35*	-.25*	-.14	
<b>Attitudes Toward Lesbians</b>							
	Affect	Stereotypes	Beliefs	Feelings	Rights	Ideology	
Affect	1.00						
Stereotypes	.67*	1.00					
Beliefs	.26*	.21	1.00				
Feelings	.35*	.56*	.60*	1.00			
Rights	.33*	.23	.58*	.83*	1.00		
Ideology	.18	.04	.32*	.37*	.41*	1.00	
Gender	.08	.27*	.06	.08	-.15	-.04	

\*significant at the .05 level (two tailed)

For the lesbians form, the number of cases varied from 66 for stereotypes with symbolic beliefs to 101 for gender with feelings. For the gay men form, the number of cases varied from 70 for stereotypes with symbolic beliefs to 105 for gender with feelings.

SOURCE: Authors' calculations from Oklahoma State University student survey.

**TABLE 3**  
**Explaining Variation in Respondent's Support for**  
**Gay and Lesbian Rights (Partial Slopes)**

	Gay Men Survey Form	Lesbian Survey Form
Stereotypes	.99	-.02
Affect	1.27	.42
Symbolic Beliefs	2.42	1.94
Gender	-.92	-5.02*
Ideology	2.03*	.93
Feelings	.25**	.37**
Constant	14.77**	25.40**
R <sup>2</sup>	.73	.80
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.71	.78
N	66	57

\*\* significant at the .01 level using a two tailed test

\* significant at the .05 level using a two tailed test

SOURCE: Authors' calculations from Oklahoma State University student survey.

between individuals' feelings and their support for gay and lesbian issues ( $r = .81$  for gay men and  $.83$  for lesbians).

The findings were very similar to findings on the impact of affect and cognition on feelings toward gay men and lesbians. For both forms of the instrument, respondents' feelings toward gay men and lesbians were positively related to their emotions, stereotypes, and symbolic beliefs. Emotions, stereotypes and symbolic beliefs were also directly related to each other. Men had high levels of negative feelings toward gay males but not lesbians.

To test for the relative value of each of the six variables, we used multiple regression analysis. Table 3 reports these findings. The overall equation explained 71 percent of the variance in support for gay and lesbian issues when looking at views about gay men and 80 percent of the variance when looking at views about lesbians. Almost all of the explanatory power, however, came from feelings toward gay men and lesbians. For both forms of the survey, the strength of the relationship between individuals' feelings



and their support for gay and lesbian policies was such that most of the other variables lost statistical significance. Stereotypes and emotions did not have a direct effect on support for gay rights (see Table 3). However, symbolic beliefs continued to have a recognizable effect on support for gay and lesbian policies especially for the gay male form of the survey. Respondents' ideology also retained its significant relationship with support for gay and lesbian policies after controlling for feelings toward gay men and lesbians. Liberals were more supportive of gay and lesbian policies. Finally, respondents' gender was related to support for the lesbian form of the survey, with women being more supportive of gay and lesbian policies.

Although stereotypes and emotions did not have a direct effect on support for gay and lesbian policies, they may influence support for policies indirectly through feelings toward gay men and lesbians. Table 3 examines the effect of individuals' emotions and cognitions on their feelings controlling

**TABLE 4**

**Explaining Variation in Respondent's Feelings toward  
Gay Men and Lesbians (Partial Slopes)**

	Gay Men Survey Form	Lesbian Survey Form
Stereotypes	-.49	4.02
Affect	7.32**	.42
Symbolic beliefs	11.10**	16.90**
Gender	-15.31**	4.08
Ideology	5.17*	6.37*
Constant	-.90	-34.86*
R <sup>2</sup>	.59	.43
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.56	.38
N	66	57

\*\* significant at the .01 level using a two tailed test

\* significant at the .05 level using a two tailed test

SOURCE: Authors' calculations from Oklahoma State University student survey.

for gender and ideology. The equations explained a large percentage of the variations in feelings ( $R^2 = .56$  for the gay men form and  $.38$  for the lesbian form). As with the Esses et al. (1993) study, symbolic beliefs and emotions (at least toward gay men) have a significant effect on feelings, but stereotypes do not. This finding is particularly noteworthy since it indicates that the effects of stereotypes on support for gay and lesbian issues is quite small. Not only do individuals' stereotypes of gay men and lesbians fail to have a direct effect on support for rights but stereotypes do not indirectly affect policy support through feelings as well.

## DISCUSSION

The findings generally supported our expectations. Feelings toward gay men and lesbians and symbolic beliefs have a direct effect on Oklahomans' support for policies beneficial to gays and lesbians. That is, individuals with negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians and who feel that gays and lesbians do not support the values of society do not support gay and lesbian policies. However, once feelings and symbolic beliefs are controlled, individuals with negative emotions or stereotypes toward gays and lesbians are not significantly less supportive of gay and lesbian policies than others.

These findings have several implications. First, it indicates that social psychological research on prejudice can help us understand variations in peoples' policy preferences. Here feelings, and their cognitive and affective components, explained over three-fourths of the variation in individuals' attitudes toward gay and lesbian policies. The findings also indicate that individuals' emotions and symbolic beliefs account for a significant portion of their feelings.

Second, individuals' stereotypes of outgroups do not have much effect on their support of gay and lesbian policies. This finding seems counterintuitive. It is generally thought that individuals who have negative stereotypes will be prejudiced and not support gay rights. However, that view appears simplistic. Individuals' stereotypes main effect on their feelings and policy support is caused by their stereotypes' effects on emotions and symbolic beliefs. When an individual's emotions and symbolic beliefs are controlled for, their stereotypes' effect on feelings and policy support is not significant.

The findings also suggest that individuals' symbolic beliefs are critical factors in explaining support for policy preferences. Symbolic beliefs not only had a moderate direct effect on policy preferences, but also had a strong indirect effect through their effect on levels of feelings. Thus an understanding of individuals' policy preferences on gay and lesbian policies requires an examination of individuals' symbolic beliefs about gays and lesbians.

Finally, that feelings are critical in explaining support for gay and lesbian issues may indicate that representatives should behave like trustees on this issue. That is, assuming representatives are not themselves prejudiced, they should act according to what they believe is right, not according to public opinion. Otherwise, public policy would be based on prejudice.

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