Courtesy Stigma: The Social Implications of Associating With a Gay Person

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**ABSTRACT.** We investigated the operation of courtesy stigma with American male college students who reacted to a fictitious male student described as gay, rooming by choice with a gay male student, involuntarily assigned to room with a gay, or rooming with a male heterosexual. Among respondents who expressed strong intolerance of gays, the voluntary associate of a gay was perceived as having homosexual tendencies and as possessing the same stereotyped personality traits attributed to a gay. No such courtesy stigma was attached to the involuntary associate of a gay by these respondents. Relatively tolerant respondents engaged in no courtesy stigmatization at all. Thus, courtesy stigmatization occurred only under circumscribed conditions and appeared to depend more on the tendency of highly intolerant individuals to infer that a male student who apparently liked a gay individual was himself gay than on a motivation to maintain cognitive consistency.

Goffman (1963) called attention to courtesy stigma, the tendency for a person to be stigmatized or devalued based on his or her association with a stigmatized person. He argued that fear of courtesy stigma is probably a major reason for avoiding stigmatized individuals. Surprisingly little research, however, has been conducted to establish whether courtesy stigmatization does in fact occur or to identify the circumstances under which it is most likely to occur. The present study addresses these issues, examining whether the stigma attached to gay men extends to men who associate with them.

Most of the slim body of research on courtesy stigma has centered on the stigma experienced by relatives of stigmatized persons and has relied on sur-
vey research methods. Both Birenbaum (1970) and Levinson and Starling (1981), for example, reported that parents of mentally retarded children experienced strained relationships and social exclusion. Sack, Seidler, and Thomas (1976) found that the spouses of imprisoned parents suffered disrupted social relations and that their children were teased by peers. Similarly, the relatives of homosexuals—for example, the parents of gays and lesbians (Pfuhl, 1986) and the wives of men who reveal that they are bisexual (Gochros, 1985)—often report feeling stigmatized. Unfortunately, the descriptive nature of these studies makes it impossible to determine conclusively whether the relatives of stigmatized persons elicit negative social reactions merely because of their kinship ties. It is possible, for example, that these individuals perceive courtesy stigma when none exists simply because they expect it, or that the strain of having a family member imprisoned or living with a mentally retarded child diminishes their own ability to maintain positive social relationships.

There is also some experimental evidence of courtesy stigma and related phenomena. When Weyand (1984) presented American students with hypothetical descriptions of sons of alcoholic, mentally ill, and nonstigmatized fathers, she discovered signs of courtesy stigma. Sigall and Landy (1973) established that a man is less positively perceived when he is believed to be the boyfriend of an unattractive rather than an attractive woman. However, this effect could have been due not to courtesy stigmatization but to the inference that a man who has apparently failed in the dating market lacks desirable qualities.

If courtesy stigmatization does indeed occur, what are the mechanisms behind it? When the targets of courtesy stigma are the blood relatives of a stigmatized individual, perceivers might infer that kin share the genes responsible for the stigmatized condition, that they have been tainted by the same, presumably pathogenic, home environment, or even that they have created that environment, as when parents are blamed for their children's pathologies. If this is the case, it would be instructive to examine courtesy stigma in nonfamily relationships in which such inferences are not possible and other mechanisms must be at work.

If the social implications of being the acquaintance or friend of a gay person are considered, two other grounds for courtesy stigma seem plausible.

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First, the associate of a gay could be stigmatized based on an inference that he must be gay himself. In fact, it has been speculated, although not demonstrated empirically, that avoidance of gays by heterosexuals is partially motivated by a fear of being labeled gay (Gurwitz & Marcus, 1978; Karr, 1978). In a similar vein, perceivers could believe that homosexuality is contagious and can be contracted as if it were a social disease.

A second and more generally applicable basis for stigmatizing the associate of a stigmatized person is the motivation to maintain cognitive consistency or balance. Drawing on Heider's (1958) balance theory, one would predict that if Person P dislikes Person O (a gay man) and learns either that Person Q likes Person O (an associate of Person O), or that Person Q likes Person O, Person P will form a negative opinion of Person Q to achieve cognitive balance. In short, perceivers should dislike a close associate of someone they dislike and should also perceive similarities between two people who appear to like one another.

No matter which of these two mechanisms may be more powerful, courtesy stigma is most likely to operate if two basic conditions are met. First, the perceiver obviously must hold negative attitudes toward the stigmatized person, or there would be no basis for devaluing his or her associate. Second, it seems unlikely that mere association with a stigmatized individual, unaccompanied by evidence of a positive bond with that person, is sufficient to produce courtesy stigma. The explanations based on inferring homosexuality and achieving cognitive balance both depend on an inference that the gay man and his associate like each other. In support of this argument, Sigall and Landy (1973) found that although perceptions of the apparent boyfriend of a woman were influenced by her physical attractiveness, perceptions of a man who was simply in the same room with her were not. Courtesy stigma should be more pronounced when an individual voluntarily chooses to associate with a stigmatized individual, thereby actively declaring his or her liking for the person, than when the association is involuntary. Stigmatized individuals themselves are clearly devalued more when they are believed to be personally responsible for their stigmatizing attributes than when they are considered blameless (Aguero, Bloch, & Byrne, 1984; Jones et al., 1984).

In the present study of male college students in the United States, we hypothesized that highly intolerant perceivers would be more likely to stigmatize a gay male student and to attach courtesy stigma to his associate than less intolerant perceivers, as indicated by their perceptions of stimulus men's traits, mental health status, and likability. In addition, we predicted that a student who involuntarily roomed with a gay would be less likely to be the victim of courtesy stigma than a student who voluntarily roomed with a gay acquaintance. The inclusion in the study of an involuntary associate of a gay should help to delineate the circumstances under which one need not fear being known by the company one keeps.
Method

Subjects

Thirty student interviewers (11 male, 19 female) at a Southeastern university stationed themselves at public sites on campus in the spring of 1986 and randomly determined which White male students, excluding students they knew, would be approached and asked to participate in the study. The study was introduced as a psychology project on impression formation in which each participant would evaluate one of a large number of descriptions of students at the university. Of 150 men approached, 120 (80%) agreed to participate, and 116 provided usable data. The mean age of the sample was 21.10 years ($SD = 2.76$; range = 18–38); all undergraduate classes and a broad range of majors were represented.

Independent Variables

Each respondent was given one of four versions of a standard description of a male freshman supposedly enrolled in the university. The text was accompanied by a picture of a relatively attractive, slight high school senior with an androgynous appearance. The stimulus person, Paul D., was deliberately endowed with both positive and negative and both masculine- and femininestereotyped interests and behaviors so that respondents could, depending on their inclinations, attribute either homosexual or heterosexual tendencies to him. The standard description, minus the manipulated information, read as follows:

Paul D. is a 19-year-old freshman, five feet nine inches tall, with a slender but muscular build and no major health problems. He comes from a middle-class suburban area in Ohio. [Manipulated information inserted.] He and his roommate, John, spend some time together during the week, but since John frequently visits [a girlfriend or male friend, depending on the experimental condition] in a nearby city, they rarely see each other on weekends. Paul and John both like to go to plays on campus and also work out together once in a while. Meanwhile, Paul has gotten to be friends with a girl who was in one of his first semester classes and calls her once in a while. He has worked as a camp counselor and enjoys children of all ages, so he is thinking of going into teaching, but other times he thinks he would be better off as a business major. Mainly, his first year away from home has been enough to adjust to. He continues to call his mother frequently or wish that he were home riding his motorcycle cross-country. He hasn’t been working very hard on his classes unless something turns him on, and his grades have been pretty average so far. He tends to put off assignments and skip classes fairly often. He has started singing in a church choir, but otherwise he spends a lot of time doing things that he enjoys more than studying—watching sports on TV, playing tennis with a guy down the hall,
or sketching people's faces. According to those who know him, when he really has a strong opinion, he tends to push for his view and to get angry if anyone tries to talk him out of it. On a lot of other issues, he's not sure what he thinks and just agrees with what others say without saying much himself. He wishes he could figure out what he really wants in life.

The four versions of this description constituted the primary independent variable, the stimulus person's degree of association with homosexuality. In the gay condition, it was said of Paul: "Shortly before he came to [the subjects' university], he came to the realization that he is gay"; in the room-by-choice condition, "When he came to [the university], he decided to room with a guy named John who was in his high school class and is gay"; In the assigned-to-room condition, "... he was assigned to room with a guy named John, who turned out to be gay." In both of the latter conditions, Paul's roommate John was said to visit a male friend frequently on the weekends. In the heterosexual control condition, Paul's roommate was described as having a girlfriend rather than a male friend in a nearby city. In all but the gay condition, Paul's sexual orientation was not explicitly stated and therefore could be presumed to be heterosexual.

The second independent variable, the respondent's degree of intolerance for gays, was constructed from verbatim answers to a question asked at the conclusion of the research interview: "Generally, how do you feel about gays? Be honest." Two raters were unanimous in their codings of responses as positive, mixed, or negative in content. Of the 116 men answering the question, 47% gave purely negative answers (e.g., "I don't like them, I want nothing to do with them, and I hope AIDS wipes them out"); 45% gave answers mixing tolerance and intolerance (e.g., "Generally they don't bother me if they don't try to press their beliefs on me"); and only 9% were purely tolerant (e.g., "To each his own"). For purposes of analysis, the purely intolerant respondents (n = 54) and those giving either mixed or tolerant answers (n = 62) were defined as highly intolerant and less intolerant individuals, respectively. Although this measure is only dichotomous, it does distinguish between individuals who are unabashedly and strongly antigay and those who moderate their intolerance to at least some degree.\(^1\)

\(^1\)Despite the fact that the question of tolerance for gays was asked after the stimulus descriptions had been presented, the degree of intolerance expressed was unaffected by experimental condition, \(\chi^2(3, N = 116) = 4.91, p > .05\). Moreover, sex of interviewer had no effect on degree of intolerance, even though participants might have been expected to be especially concerned about distancing themselves from homosexuality in the presence of a female interviewer. These findings increase confidence that this measure of attitudes toward gays was not biased by the demand characteristics of the experiment.
Measures

After reading one of the four descriptions, participants rated each of 20 traits on a scale ranging from not at all (1) to very, very much (7), according to how much it characterized the stimulus person, Paul. In previous studies, 10 of the traits had been established as gay stereotyped and the remaining 10 as traits unassociated with being gay (Gurwitz & Marcus, 1978; Karr, 1978; Simmons, 1965; Taylor, 1983; Weissbach & Zagon, 1975). An overall gay stereotype score was calculated by summing the 10 gay-stereotyped items, coded in appropriate directions, so that a high total score meant that Paul was seen as unaggressive, not a good leader, gentle, weak, unmasculine, lonely, emotional, passive, unconventional, and sensitive. A constant of 10 was subtracted to make the scale range from totally unlike the gay stereotype (0) to precisely like the gay stereotype (60). A parallel 0-to-60 score was calculated for the nonstereotyped traits, so that a score of 60 meant that Paul was perceived favorably—specifically, as highly calm, unforgettable, intellectual, tactful, happy, kind, honest, religious, tolerant, and flexible. Both scales displayed modest internal consistency (Cronbach’s α = .55 in each case). The gay stereotype scale permitted us to determine whether the associates of a gay were attributed the personality traits commonly attributed to gays themselves, and the nonstereotyped trait scale allowed us to determine whether they were also perceived to have negative personal qualities beyond those that form part of the gay stereotype.

Three items borrowed from Gurwitz and Marcus (1978) measured liking for Paul. The liking score was the average of three 7-point items assessing how favorable an impression he made on the respondent, how likely the respondent would be to develop a friendship with him, and how willing the respondent was to have him live on the same dorm floor (α = .86). Three other 7-point items were constructed to measure his perceived mental health, in view of evidence that gays are perceived as maladjusted and in need of psychological help (Rooney & Gibbons, 1966). A high score on the resulting three-item scale indicated that Paul was perceived as well-adjusted, not depressed, and not a person who should seek counseling for his problems (α = .62). An additional 7-point question, included to check on the manipulation and assess inferences of homosexuality, asked about the extent to which Paul had homosexual tendencies.

Procedure

Each interviewer administered all four descriptions of Paul, one to each of four subjects, in order to control for interviewer characteristics. He or she arranged the four descriptions in a random order before recruiting subjects.
Each interviewer then handed descriptions and accompanying photos to respondents upside down so that he or she was blind to which description each subject read. After reading the description for as long as they chose, participants were given a page with the numbers 1 through 7 arranged horizontally and anchored by not at all at one end and very, very at the other to aid them in responding to questions. Items were administered in the order described above. At the conclusion of the interview, respondents were debriefed.

Results

Each social perception measure—perceived homosexuality, gay-stereotyped and nonstereotyped traits, perceived mental health, and liking—was subjected to a $4 \times 2$ (Stimulus Person Description: gay vs. room-by-choice vs. assigned-to room vs. control $\times$ Intolerance of Gays: highly intolerant vs. less intolerant) analysis of variance (ANOVA). Follow-up tests for simple effects and Newman-Keuls tests were employed to identify significant ($p < .05$) differences between means. Preliminary ANOVAs indicated that sex of interviewer had no main or interactive effects on responses; accordingly, data obtained by male and female interviewers were pooled.

Perceived Homosexuality

Perceived homosexuality was affected by both stimulus person description, $F(3, 108) = 9.41$, $p < .0001$, and intolerance of gays, $F(1, 108) = 17.06$, $p < .0001$, with no interaction between the two factors. For both groups of subjects combined, the gay student was seen as having significantly stronger homosexual tendencies than the other three stimulus students (Table 1). In addition, those subjects with highly negative attitudes toward gays perceived more homosexuality in the stimulus men generally than did those with more tolerant attitudes.

As indicated in Table 1, more and less intolerant subjects responded somewhat differently to the four stimulus persons. Highly intolerant subjects viewed the student who roomed by choice with a gay as only somewhat less homosexual than the gay student and as significantly more homosexual than the heterosexual control student, while viewing the gay student as more homosexual than both the assigned-to-room and heterosexual control students. Less intolerant subjects simply viewed the gay student as more homosexual in orientation than the other three stimulus men. Thus, attribution of homosexuality to the voluntary (room-by-choice) associate of a gay might be expected to influence highly intolerant respondents’ other perceptions of this individual.
TABLE 1
Mean Perceptions of Stimulus Persons by Highly Intolerant and Less Intolerant Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Association with homosexuality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homosexual tendencies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly intolerant</td>
<td>5.69a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less intolerant</td>
<td>4.43a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay-stereotyped traits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly intolerant</td>
<td>38.85a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less intolerant</td>
<td>35.64a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonstereotyped traits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly intolerant</td>
<td>34.38a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less intolerant</td>
<td>32.93a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly intolerant</td>
<td>2.26a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less intolerant</td>
<td>3.00a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly intolerant</td>
<td>1.87a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less intolerant</td>
<td>3.83a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Means in each row that do not share a common subscript are significantly different as indicated by Newman–Keuls tests ($p < .05$). Maximum score for homosexual tendencies, mental health, and liking = 7; maximum score for gay-stereotyped and nonstereotyped traits = 60.

**Trait Perceptions**

The ANOVA for inference of gay-stereotyped traits revealed an effect of level of intolerance, $F(1, 108) = 4.51, p < .05$, and an interaction between intolerance and stimulus person description, $F(3, 108) = 3.18, p < .05$, with the main effect of stimulus person falling just short of significance ($p < .08$).

Among those with strongly intolerant attitudes, both the gay student and the student who roomed by choice with a gay were seen as having significantly more gay-stereotyped traits than the heterosexual control student. The student assigned to room with a gay was rated in the intermediate range. Among relatively tolerant respondents, similar degrees of gay traits were attributed to the four stimulus persons. $F$ tests for simple effects comparing the two subgroups of respondents indicated that only in rating the room-by-choice student did highly intolerant subjects attribute significantly more gay-stereotyped traits than less intolerant subjects did. By contrast, neither stimulus person nor subject's degree of intolerance had any impact on the attribution of nonstereotyped traits. Thus, the courtesy stigmatization detected
here was restricted to the attribution of gay-stereotyped personality traits to the voluntary associate of a gay by highly intolerant subjects.

**Mental Health**

Judgments of mental health were affected only by stimulus person description, \( F(3, 108) = 7.49, p < .0001 \). Both highly and less intolerant respondents perceived the gay student to be significantly less mentally healthy than either the room-by-choice or assigned-to-room associates of a gay, and highly intolerant respondents also viewed him as less mentally healthy than the heterosexual control student. Neither the voluntary nor the involuntary associate of a gay was viewed as any less mentally healthy than the heterosexual control.

**Liking**

On the liking measure, there were significant effects of stimulus person description, \( F(3, 108) = 4.44, p < .01 \), and level of intolerance, \( F(1, 108) = 12.40, p < .001 \), and the interaction between the two variables was nearly significant \( (p < .06) \). Highly intolerant subjects liked the gay male student less than they liked either the control student or the student assigned to room with a gay. They rated the student who roomed by choice with a gay as intermediate, liked somewhat more than the gay and somewhat less than the remaining two stimulus men. By contrast, relatively tolerant respondents liked all four stimulus students to the same degree. Highly intolerant subjects liked both the gay student and the voluntary roommate of a gay student significantly less than relatively tolerant subjects did, but the two groups did not differ in their acceptance of the other two students.

**Correlational Analyses**

Further insight into the dynamics of courtesy stigma was gained from correlational analyses exploring whether the attribution of homosexual tendencies to a stimulus person was associated with other perceptions of him. For each stimulus person except the heterosexual control student, the inference that he had homosexual tendencies was accompanied by the inference that he possessed gay-stereotyped personality traits \( (rs = .52 \text{ to } .56, p < .01; r = .18 \text{ for the control}) \). Moreover, to the extent that respondents believed that he had homosexual tendencies, they liked him less \( (rs = -.54 \text{ to } -.60 \text{ for the four stimulus descriptions}) \). The link between inferring homosexuality and judging a stimulus person to be mentally unhealthy was weaker, significant only for the student who roomed by choice with a gay \( (r = -.40, p < .05) \), and there was no significant correlation between attribution of homosexuality and attribution of nonstereotyped personality traits.
Discussion

In interpreting the findings of this study, it should be borne in mind that an experiment involving hypothetical stimulus persons may not generalize to situations in which gay men or their associates are actually known to perceivers and have many other characteristics that can shape social perceptions. In addition, the stimulus person was deliberately chosen for his androgynous appearance and was endowed with both masculine- and feminine-stereotyped traits. As a result, some subjects may have suspected that he was gay regardless of what was said about his association with homosexuality, and so the effects of the manipulated information may have been masked. Alternatively, his androgyny may have made it easier for perceivers to infer that he was gay when he associated with a gay than it might have been had he been very masculine-stereotyped in appearance and behavior. Only a study presenting multiple stimulus persons can shed light on whether some individuals are more likely to be stigmatized based on their association with a gay person than others are. Finally, the collection of data through face-to-face interviews may have heightened self-presentation concerns.

We set out to determine whether courtesy stigma attaches itself to the associate of a gay male individual and thus can operate in a social relationship other than a familial one. The data suggest that it can, under very circumscribed conditions. There were no indications at all that an individual who involuntarily associated with a gay was stigmatized—even through the relatively close association that roaming with someone represents. In other words, association in and of itself was insufficient to evoke negative responses. It was only when an individual actively chose to room with a gay that he was stigmatized—and then only by those with the most intolerant attitudes toward gays and only in some respects.

The individual who chose to room with a gay man was seen by the intolerant respondents as having homosexual tendencies and as possessing many of the same personality traits commonly attributed to gays. Intolerant subjects did not, however, perceive the voluntary associate of a gay as negatively as they perceived a known gay, who was not only believed to possess gay-stereotyped traits, but was viewed as maladjusted and unlikeable as well, compared with a heterosexual. Indeed, although relatively tolerant respondents were generally unaffected by information about an individual’s association with homosexuality, even they appeared to perceive homosexuality as a psychological disorder, or at least as evidence of the need for counseling.

The findings suggest that the primary mechanism behind courtesy stigmatization of the voluntary associate of a gay was the inference that he too had homosexual tendencies. The correlational analyses linking inferences of homosexuality to the attribution of gay-stereotyped traits and expression of dislike reinforce this interpretation. We cannot entirely rule out the possibility
that the motivation to maintain cognitive balance also contributed to courtesy stigmatization. However, the case for cognitive balance would be stronger if courtesy stigma effects had been evident across measures rather than being largely restricted to inferences of gay-stereotyped personality traits. Cognitive consistency would be best maintained by consistently devaluing a person who appears to like and be liked by someone one dislikes.

Coupled with previous findings, the data here suggest that courtesy stigma can operate when perceivers infer that the relatives or companions of a stigmatized person share some of that person's devalued attributes—for example, the genes or family socialization experiences underlying a disorder, or, as in the present instance, a sexual orientation. It remains unclear whether courtesy stigma can also work solely through a cognitive consistency mechanism and can attach itself even to people who merely fraternize with stigmatized individuals and cannot be presumed to share their stigmatizing attributes.

The findings also suggest that courtesy stigmatization, like stigmatization in general (see Jones et al., 1984), may or may not occur depending on characteristics of the perceiver (e.g., his or her level of prejudice toward a particular social group), available social cues (e.g., information suggesting that an individual has stigmatizing attributes or is voluntarily associating with someone who does), and the social-cognitive processes involved in attending to and interpreting available cues (e.g., in inferring that a person possesses socially devalued characteristics). Just as people with invisible stigmas such as homosexuality are not always identified as such, those who associate with stigmatized individuals are not always known by the company they keep.

REFERENCES


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