

# The SAGE Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping and Discrimination

## Heterosexism

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## Chapter 21: Heterosexism

### Abstract

In this chapter, we provide readers with an overview of much of the psychological research that has been conducted on heterosexism. We begin by discussing the history of heterosexism research and describe ways in which heterosexism differs from other 'isms (i.e., sexism, racism). We then consider characteristics associated with (a) exhibiting heterosexism, and (b) being the target of heterosexism. We situate our review within the context of social interactions and describe the misunderstandings, prejudice and discrimination, disclosure behaviors that often occur. Finally, we consider the interaction consequences of heterosexism and potential remediation strategies.

### Heterosexism

Heterosexism is an ideological system that reinforces the denigration of nonheterosexual identity, behavior, relationship, or community (see Herek, 2004). By 'nonheterosexual,' we refer to any identity, behavior, relationship, or community in which physical and/or emotional attraction to same-gender individuals exists. Heterosexism encompasses components of

### History of Heterosexism Research

Research on heterosexism is still in its infancy although the rate of such research has increased substantially over the past twenty years. The majority of such research is situated within the tradition of stigma research (see also the [Chapter 25](#) by Major and Townsend in this volume), so it is here where we begin our brief review of its history.

The ancient Greeks first introduced the concept of 'stigma' by referring to it as a mark burned on or cut into the bearer, which indicated that the bearer was a criminal, sick, or should otherwise be avoided. In 1963, Goffman ignited research on the topic of stigmas by writing a poignant book that described stigmas and gave examples of how they are socially limiting and spoil one's identity (Goffman, 1963). He defined [p. 346 ↓ ] a stigma as an attribute that is discrediting and prevents full social acceptance for the stigmatized individual. Crocker, Major, and Steele, (1998) articulated four common features of stigma, including the fact that stigmatized individuals are: economically disadvantaged (e.g., Blacks earn less than Whites, obese women earn less than nonobese women), targets of negative stereotypes (e.g., obese individuals are viewed as lazy, slothful, and undisciplined), rejected interpersonally (e.g., physically disabled individuals are avoided and sought after as romantic partners less often than non-stigmatized individuals), and targets of social discrimination (e.g., Black applicants are hired less often than White applicants). All four of these criteria are relevant for nonheterosexuals. That is, they are: economically disadvantaged (e.g., Clain & Leppel, 2001), the target of negative stereotypes (e.g., Herek, 2002), rejected interpersonally (e.g., Herek, 2002), and the target of social discrimination (e.g., Hebl, Foster, Mannix, et al., 2002).

## Heterosexism versus Other 'isms'

Although heterosexism shares some commonalities with other stigmas, it differs from the other 'isms' (e.g., sexism, racism) in meaningful ways. First, heterosexism often involves an affective component in which individuals fear being gay, becoming gay, or being perceived as gay (Herek, 1984; Ragins, Cornwell, & Miller, 2003), and there is no parallel comparison for sexism or racism. Second, heterosexism involves a characteristic that can be concealed, which is not usually an option with gender or race. Thus, gay men and lesbians often spend a great deal of time managing their identities and deciding if, who, when, and how to disclose their identities to others (i.e., Goffman, 1963; Herek & Capitanio, 1996; King, Reilly, & Hebl, 2008b).

Third, heterosexism involves a characteristic that is perceived by most others to be controllable (see Jones, Farina, Hastorf, et al., 1984) and it is controllable stigmas that are reacted to with the greatest amount of negativity (Weiner, 1995). Based on the belief that homosexuality is a lifestyle choice many people simply believe

that individuals can and should change their nonheterosexual orientations. Fourth, heterosexism involves the all too often erroneous belief that non-heterosexual individuals have, or will soon contract, HIV/AIDS (Herek, Widaman, & Capitanio, 2005). This link between AIDS and heterosexism, which is not present with other 'isms,' further enhances the negativity directed toward nonheterosexual individuals.

Fifth, targets of heterosexism include individuals who do not comprise a federally protected class. While Title VII of the Civil Rights Act in the United States makes it illegal to discriminate on the basis of sex, religion, ethnicity, national origin, and race, it is often legal to discriminate against sexual minorities; the absence of overarching federal legal protection leaves nonheterosexual individuals particularly vulnerable to the ill effects of stigma. Sixth, research on heterosexism was, by and large, absent because up until the 1970s, deviations from heterosexuality were considered psychological disorders. Thus, it makes sense that heterosexism research has a short history, and one that is much briefer than that of the other 'isms.'

In the last two decades, however, there has been a burgeoning of empirical research being conducted on heterosexism. Perhaps central to these efforts is the work of Herek, who similarly to us situates heterosexism within a stigma framework and recently introduced the construct of 'sexual stigma,' which he referred to as 'shared knowledge of society's negative regard for any non-heterosexual behavior, identity, relationship, or community' (2004: 14). We will review much of the other heterosexism research that has been done in the following sections.

## Overview of Heterosexism Research: Antecedents to Heterosexist Prejudice and Behavior

We review perceiver and target features that serve as antecedents and/or correlates to heterosexist prejudice and behaviors. While [p. 347 ↓] our review of these features is not exhaustive, we review characteristics that are consistently linked with heterosexism.

## Perceiver Characteristics

Who is most likely to stigmatize others on the basis of sexuality? Past research shows that a number of individual differences are associated with heightened heterosexism, including demographic and social variables and previous experience interacting with nonheterosexual individuals. We describe these constructs in more detail.

### Gender

Research consistently shows that women tend to have less heterosexist attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors than men (Hoover & Fishbein, 1999; Johnson, Brems, & Alford-Keating, 1997). A survey conducted by Herek (2002) revealed that women were more likely to support equal rights for gay men (92.2 percent) and lesbians (95.1 percent) than were men (gay men = 82.7 percent and lesbians = 86.6 percent), and women were more likely to support passing laws that protect gay men (82.7 percent) and lesbians (81.1 percent) than were men (gay men = 64.2 percent and lesbians = 65.2 percent). Meta-analyses consistently reveal that men are more heterosexist than women (Whitely, 2001; Whitely & Kite, 1995) with heterosexual men being particularly negative toward gay men (Herek, 2002).

### Age and Educational Level

For age, research suggests that very young and very old individuals stigmatize non-heterosexual individuals more than middle-aged individuals do (e.g., Johnson, Brems, & Alford-Keating, 1997). For education, the relationship is linear more education is associated with less heterosexism (Hoover & Fishbein, 1999; Lambert, Ventura, Hall, et al., 2006).

## Religion

Many religions, particularly orthodox and/or conservative ones, denounce nonheterosexual lifestyles as unhealthy, immoral, and evil (see Jung & Smith, 1993; Linneman, 2004); thus, it is not surprising that religiosity is related to heterosexism. In fact, overall religiosity, specific religious beliefs, and religion-consistent behavior were all related to higher levels of homophobia, increased discomfort around gay men and lesbians, and less endorsement of human rights for gay men and lesbians (Bierly, 1985; Johnson, Brems, & Alford-Keating, 1997; Kunkel & Temple, 1992).

## Political Ideology and Gender-Related Beliefs

Those who tend to be politically conservative, against feminist ideals, and are anti-abortion also express more heterosexism than politically liberal individuals (Hicks & Lee, 1997). Similarly, those who engage in sex-role stereotyping, have traditional gender-role beliefs, endorse male-role norms, and score high on ambivalent and modern sexism scales express more heterosexism than those who are lower on these constructs (Hoover & Fishbein, 1999; Whitley, 2001). These measures may be tapping constructs that overlap with heterosexist ideologies, which involve traditional beliefs about the order of society (i.e., unions should involve a man and a woman, man is the head of a household). In support of this, both social dominance orientation and right-wing authoritarianism are associated with heterosexism (Whitley, 1999).

## Geographical Location

Heterosexism is more prevalent in rural than urban areas (Eldridge, Mack, & Swank, 2006). In the United States those living in the Midwest and South have the most negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians, while those living on the West coast have relatively positive attitudes (Dejowski, 1992; Irwin & Thompson, 1977). Differences based on geographical location may be partially explained by religion (fundamentalism

is more prevalent in the South than in the West), increased likelihood of contact (gay men and lesbians may be more likely to be 'out' in urban versus rural areas), or different regional norms (larger concentrations of 'out' gay men and lesbians influence heterosexual behaviors).

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## Empathic Concern

Lower levels of empathy are related to increased levels of prejudice, increased levels of homophobia, and decreased concern for the human rights of nonheterosexual individuals (Batson, Polycarpou, Harmon-Jones, et al., 1997b; Johnson, Brems, & Alford-Keating, 1997). A construct that is similar to empathy is perspective taking, or the ability to imagine what it must be like to live a day in the life of another person (Batson, Polycarpou, Harmon-Jones, et al., 1997b), and this is also negatively related to heterosexism (Johnson, Brems, & Alford-Keating, 1997).

## Previous Social Contact

Perceivers who have had contact with nonheterosexual individuals, even limited amounts, tend to engage in less sexual stigmatization of this target group than those who have no such contact (Eldridge, Mack, & Swank, 2006; Grack & Richman, 1996). In a meta-analytic review of the contact hypothesis, Pettigrew & Tropp (2006) found some of the strongest evidence (relative to all stigmas that they examined) that prejudice reduction occurs when heterosexual individuals engage in intergroup contact with gay men and lesbians (see also Herek & Capitanio, 1996).

## Target Characteristics

Who is most likely to be the target of sexual stigma? Several target characteristics consistently emerge, some of which are static (e.g., gender) while others involve beliefs



and behaviors that may be dynamic (e.g., degree of 'outness'; identity centrality and group identification; stereotypicality; perceptions of stigma). We discuss each in turn.

## Gender

More negative attitudes are directed toward gay men than toward lesbians (Kerns & Fine, 1994). For instance, heterosexual participants view as mentally ill, have negative reactions to, and oppose adoption rights for gay men more than lesbians (Herek, 2002). Recall that these gender differences may be driven, in large part, from the responses of heterosexual men, who view gay men much more severely than they view lesbians (Herek, 2000).

## Degree of 'Outness'

At one extreme, nonheterosexual individuals may conceal their orientation to everyone, often experiencing a 'private hell' because they are constantly preoccupied with concealment (Smart & Wegner, 2000: 229). At the other extreme, nonheterosexual individuals may disclose to everyone, maximizing their psychological coherence (see Ragins, 2008) and be less vulnerable to psychological problems (see Waldo, 1999). But because these latter individuals are out to more people, they are statistically more likely to encounter discrimination. Alternatively, nonheterosexual individuals might avoid either extreme and 'come out' to a select number of individuals. This situation can also be challenging, however, because of what Ragins (2008: 194) refers to as 'disclosure disconnects,' in which being 'out' to some but not other individuals leads to role conflict, stress, and disharmony in trying to maintain psychological coherence.

## Identity Centrality and Group Identification

Identity centrality involves the extent to which individuals view their sexual orientation it may be one of the most centrally defining features of themselves or it may be just one of many aspects that is important but not centrally defining. Group identification involves the extent to which individuals identify with other ingroup members. Those

individuals who have central identities and/or strong identifications with their ingroups are likely to accrue both benefits and losses from such associations (Turner, 1991). For instance, nonheterosexual individuals may be more likely to compare the stress they experience to that which other nonheterosexual individuals report, thereby minimizing perceived discrimination because others are sure to have experienced worse treatment. However, strong identification with an ingroup can sometimes make individuals more, and not less, vulnerable (for a review, see Settles, 2004). When a negative event [p. 349 ↓ ] happens (e.g., a hate crime), individuals who strongly identify with their nonheterosexual orientation may personalize the event and it may exacerbate their vulnerability. As a result, such individuals may more acutely perceive and experience discrimination in social interactions.

## Stereotypicality

The extent to which individuals show stereo-typicality, or have traits that are stereotypic of their group, influences others' perceptions about them (Eberhardt, Davies, Purdie-Vaughns, et al., 2006). Nonheterosexual individuals may choose to engage in behaviors that increase the salience of their non-heterosexual orientation (e.g., wearing a pink triangle, participating in a gay pride march, wearing a particular hairstyle, enacting stereotypical mannerisms). As a result of acting stereotypically, then, targets might increase the associations that perceivers have between stereotypes and prejudice, which in turn might enhance perceivers' homophobic, prejudicial, and discriminatory responses to targets.

## Chronic Stigmatization, Stigma Consciousness, and Rejection Sensitivity

These three closely related concepts capture nonheterosexual individuals' anticipation of discrimination. First, nonheterosexual targets may possess varying levels of *chronic stigmatization*. Although this construct has not been examined specifically with respect to gay men and lesbians, it has been identified to influence the interactions of ethnic minorities (see Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2005; Vorauer, Main, & O'Connell,

1998). Non-heterosexual individuals may have a greater propensity to expect negative outcomes from interactants or engage in compensatory and/or negative behaviors themselves (see Vorauer, Main, & O'Connell, 1998). Second, nonheterosexual targets may also possess differing levels of *stigma consciousness* (see Pinel, 1999), or varying levels of perceptions about being the target of stereotypes and discrimination. Such targets may not necessarily internalize the stereotypes others hold but they may misperceive or overattribute behaviors directed toward them to prejudice and discrimination (see Kleck & Strenta, 1980 for relevant research conducted with respect to physical disability). Third, nonheterosexual targets may vary in the extent to which they possess *rejection sensitivity*, or expectancies that they will be rejected because of their membership status (see Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, et al., 2002 for relevant research conducted with respect to race). Again, such sensitivity may make individuals vigilant and even hypervigilant about the behaviors and intentions of their interaction partners.

## A Framework for Considering Heterosexism within Mixed Interactions

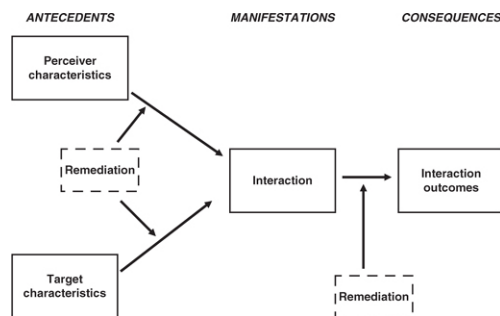
More recent research has gone beyond identifying antecedent conditions of heterosexism to understanding heterosexism within the context of *mixed interactions*, or interactions involving a perceiver (e.g., heterosexual interactant) and a target (e.g., nonheterosexual interactant). [Figure 21.1](#) depicts an abbreviated version of a mixed interaction framework proposed by Hebl and Dovidio (2005), in which the dynamic interplay between perceiver and target becomes visible. Central to this framework is the belief that there are three characteristics that are commonly manifested in such interactions: misunderstandings, prejudice and discrimination, and disclosure behavior.

### Misunderstandings

Mixed interactions often produce mismatches and misinterpretations between interaction partners (Dovidio, Hebl, Richeson, et al., 2006; see [Chapter 17](#) by Richeson & Shelton in this volume). For instance, perceivers' limited past experience interacting

with non-heterosexual individuals may result in anxiety and concerns with appearing egalitarian. Although the perceiver may not actually be prejudiced, the constellation of nonverbal behaviors associated with anxiety may be [p. 350 ↓ ] interpreted, from the target's perspective, as discriminatory.

Figure 21.1 A mixed interaction framework.



Additional misunderstandings in social interactions can be created by a disconnect in interactants' implicit and explicit attitudes. Explicit attitudes tend to be controllable and susceptible to social desirability concerns whereas implicit attitudes tend to be uncontrollable and reflect unintended, automatic attitudes. Perceivers tend to hold positive, explicit attitudes but negative, implicit attitudes toward stigmatized targets (see Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002; Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2005). These different sets of attitudes tend to influence different sets of behaviors explicit attitudes tend to influence verbal behaviors while implicit attitudes tend to influence nonverbal behaviors (see Chapter 16 by Maio, Haddock, Antony, et al. in this volume). Hence, there is often a verbal/nonverbal mismatch in that perceivers may verbally communicate positive regard (i.e., give complements); but simultaneously nonverbally communicate negativity (i.e., less smiling and contact).

Further misunderstandings arise from erroneous cognitions that targets and perceivers hold about each other. For instance, targets often inaccurately believe that perceivers are not as interested in interacting with them as the targets are with the perceivers, and perceivers hold these same erroneous beliefs about targets (Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2005). Both interactants avoid interactions because they fear they will be rejected by their interaction partners, but they interpret avoidance from others as a lack

of others' interest. Clearly, these inaccurate and imbalanced assumptions may lead to increased stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination.

## Prejudice and Discrimination in Mixed Interactions

Mixed interaction research involving heterosexual and nonheterosexual interactants reveals that prejudice and discrimination are alive and well. Clearly, overt types of prejudice and discrimination (e.g., hate crimes, failure to rent apartments to gay couples) continue to exist but there is also encouraging evidence suggesting that overt expressions are much less frequent today than in the past (Loftus, 2001). Unfortunately, more subtle expressions of heterosexism are abundant. To examine such expressions, Hebl and colleagues (e.g., Hebl, Foster, Mannix, et al., 2002; Hebl, King, Glick, et al., [p. 351 ↓ ] 2007; King, Shapiro, Hebl, et al., 2006) introduced a distinction between 'formal' and 'interpersonal' forms of discrimination.

Formal discrimination consists of behaviors directed toward stigmatized group members that are typically prohibited by law (e.g., unfair selection and promotions). Interpersonal discrimination, however, consists of behaviors that are not legally sanctioned (e.g., nonverbal behaviors, socially isolating behaviors) but that can accumulate over time to create profound differences in advantage (Martell, Lane, & Emrich, 1996; Valian, 1998). Hebl, Foster, Mannix, et al. (2002) had confederate 'applicants' (blind to their condition) wear hats labeled with either 'Gay and Proud' (pretested as stigmatizing) or 'Texan and proud' (pretested as neutral) and apply for retail jobs. Researchers coded tape-recorded conversations between managers and 'applicants,' examined questionnaires indicating managerial reactions that were completed by applicants, and counted the job callbacks for three months following the initial interactions. The results revealed that gay and lesbian applicants did *not* experience formal discrimination (i.e., no differences in being told there were jobs available, being able to fill out applications, or in receiving job callbacks) relative to assumed heterosexual applicants. However, gay and lesbian applicants consistently faced more interpersonal discrimination (e.g., terminated interactions, less warmth, increased interaction distance, more rudeness) than did assumed heterosexual applicants. These results were replicated by Singletary

& Hebl (2009) and reveal the importance of examining prejudice and discrimination in various forms. Many factors may restrain perceivers from formally discriminating against nonheterosexual targets (i.e., organizational policies, pressures of political correctness, increases in egalitarian attitudes), necessitating the examination of more covert, interpersonal discrimination.

## Identity Disclosure

Disclosures often happen within the context of social interactions and can alter social interactions profoundly in both positive and negative ways. Additionally, through a variety of ways (i.e., suspicions, information from second-hand sources, prior acknowledgments on the part of targets), perceivers may come to learn or suspect sexual orientation of nonheterosexual targets. In [Figure 21.2](#), we present an illustration of the various ways in which these disclosures (from the target), information known/suspected (by the perceiver), and information disclosed (from the target) interact to influence mixed interactions. In the interests of clarity, this represents a simplification of the broader range of identity management strategies that nonheterosexual individuals might use.

Nonheterosexual targets may disclose their orientation to perceivers who already know or suspect the target's orientation (see cell A). Such disclosures, or 'acknowledgments,' can greatly benefit both interactants. Targets benefit from verifying their true identity to others (see Swann, Polzer, Seyle, et al., 2004; see also Ragins, 2008), and prevent the negative effects on mental health that are associated with keeping secrets (Fassinger, 1996; Smart & Wegner, 2000). Perceivers benefit because acknowledgments can reduce anxiety and self-regulatory efforts that occur when they must suppress a topic that is on their minds but is taboo for them to introduce. Perceivers may also appreciate acknowledgments to the extent that the disclosure makes them feel special, trusted, or otherwise important (see Jones & Archer, 1976; Taylor, Gould, & Brounstein, 1981). Acknowledgments may also hinder interactions if the content reveals poor adjustment (see Hebl & Skorinko, 2006) or is delivered too soon in an interaction (King, Reilly, & Hebl, 2008b).

Nonheterosexual targets may disclose to heterosexual perceivers who do not know or suspect the targets' sexual orientation (see cell B). Such targets may experience benefits but also become vulnerable to enhanced discrimination (Croteau, 1996). For perceivers, the more surprised and prejudiced they are, the more likely they will experience the disclosure as an awkward and negative event. [p. 352 ↓ ] Benefits accrued in this scenario may also depend on disclosure characteristics (e.g., directness, timing; King, Reilly, & Hebl, 2008b).

Figure 21.2 The ways disclosures interact to influence mixed interactions.

	Nonheterosexual target discloses	Nonheterosexual target does not disclose
Heterosexual perceiver suspects/knows	<p><b>A</b></p> <p>Target: self-verification, potential discrimination</p> <p>Perceiver: relief from thought suppression, potential benefits of self-disclosure (feel special, trusted, important), motivation to appear nonprejudiced</p>	<p><b>C</b></p> <p>Target: problems associated with concealment, potential identity disconnects, potentially avoid discrimination</p> <p>Perceiver: thought suppression, motivation to appear nonprejudiced</p>
Heterosexual perceiver does not suspect/know	<p><b>B</b></p> <p>Target: self-verification, potential discrimination</p> <p>Perceiver: potential benefits of self-disclosure (feel special, trusted, important), surprise element, potentially awkward</p>	<p><b>D</b></p> <p>Target: problems associated with concealment, potential identity disconnects, passing, potentially avoid discrimination</p> <p>Perceiver: no detection</p>

Nonheterosexual targets may not disclose but perceivers may know and/or suspect targets' orientation (see cell C). This predicament presents challenges for perceivers because norms prevent them from initiating conversations about targets' stigmas. Thus, they may exert great efforts to suppress stigma-related thoughts. For prejudiced perceivers, this scenario may evoke rampant discrimination and the target (who has not disclosed) may not even recognize its origin.

Finally, the nonheterosexual targets may not disclose and heterosexual perceivers may not suspect or know targets' sexual orientation (see cell D). In this situation, the target is doing what Goffman (1963: 73) refers to as 'passing.' Such targets seemingly accrue the same interaction benefits given to nonstigmatized interactants because perceivers are unaware and cannot discriminate; yet, targets must simultaneously manage potential stress and anxiety associated with being 'closeted' and concealing (e.g., Frable, Platt, & Hoey, 1998; Major & Gramzow, 1999).



## Consequences of Mixed Interactions

Both the target and perceiver experience positive and negative consequences from mixed interactions. From the target's perspective, interactions that have gone well and are devoid of perceptions of discrimination, particularly when targets are able to successfully self-disclose, can be affirming and relieving (see Woods, 1993). Targets may feel reduced amounts of stress, experience congruency across life domains, increased social support, and increased voice (see Ragins, 2008). However, interactions that go badly for the target may create extensive problems.

Perceptions and experiences of discrimination are related to increased stress and [p. 353 ↓ ] poor physical health for targets (Waldo, 1999) and job-related outcomes such as lower organizational commitment, career commitment, organizational self-esteem and job satisfaction (Ragins and Cornwell, 2001). Perceivers also experience consequences. On the positive side, by denigrating others, perceivers may actually experience a stereotype 'lift' (Davies, Spencer, Quinn, et al., 2002), in which they bolster their own sense of self-esteem through denigrating others. Engaging in discrimination may also relieve perceivers' anxiety associated with an ambivalent state (see Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998) and may be a desirable end state for those who are actually prejudiced (see Crandall and Eshleman, 2003). On the negative side, prejudiced perceivers may inhibit their own development processes, miss out on developing friendships, and suffer consequences in the workplace (e.g., reduced likelihood of being helped prosocially; King, Hebl, Matusik, et al., in press).

## Remediation Strategies

Remediation strategies can do much to improve perceivers' and targets' experiences in mixed interactions. Such strategies can be categorized into those adopted by the target; those adopted by the perceiver and third-party individuals in the interaction; and those enacted at a larger institutional, organizational, or national levels.



# What can Nonheterosexual Targets Do?

We discuss four strategies that targets can adopt to remediate negative interactions and outcomes:

## Optimal Self-Disclosures

Research conducted on disclosures reveals a positive link between disclosing and both healthy personal identity development, as well as professional related outcomes for nonheterosexual individuals (Button, 2001; Day & Schoenrade, 1997; Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Hebl & Kleck, 2002). As indicated in [Figure 21.2](#), however, disclosures may result in both advantages and disadvantages; hence, we review characteristics associated with successful disclosure experiences: (a) reasons for disclosing ('if'), (b) timing of disclosures ('when'), (c) methods of disclosing ('how'), and (d) recipients of self disclosure ('to whom') may all greatly impact the success of such a remediation strategy.

First, deciding to disclose may be most strategic for targets whose nonheterosexual orientation is very central to their identities. Specifically, for individuals who experience 'personal hell' (i.e., Smart & Wegner, 2000) by remaining closeted and/or who otherwise strongly identify with their nonheterosexual identity, the potential discrimination that they face is greatly outweighed by the personal benefits that they derive from not having to hide their orientation from others. Second, the timing of the disclosure impacts the success, but in ways that may be optimally different for the heterosexual perceiver versus the nonheterosexual target. That is, targets prefer disclosing immediately in interactions and perceivers prefer receiving disclosures after the passage of some time (King et al., 2008b).

Third, targets vary in *how* they disclose with some doing it openly and directly (e.g., stating upfront 'I'm gay') while others do it indirectly (e.g., display a pink triangle; Crouteau, 1996). King, Reilly, & Hebl, (2008b) found that targets preferred to disclose in explicit ways and that perceivers showed no preference in the disclosures they received. Fourth, disclosures are most strategic when the recipients are supportive.

Such disclosures can result in a win-win situation nonheterosexual individuals feel confirmation of their identities and experience social support while heterosexual recipients are accepting, do not show or feel prejudice and discrimination, and even derive benefits from the disclosure (i.e., Jones and Archer, 1976; Taylor, Gould, [p. 354 ↓ ] & Brounstein, 1981). Many of the positive outcomes that nonheterosexual individuals experience as a result of 'coming out' (i.e., job satisfaction, organizational commitment) are fully mediated by disclosure recipients' favorable reactions (Button, 2001; Griffith & Hebl, 2002). Thus, if there is some way that targets can learn how heterosexist their interactants are, they might use this information to decide whether disclosing would be strategic.

## Concealment and Counterfeiting

Some targets decide to conceal, or actively hide their nonheterosexual orientation, in an attempt to avoid discrimination (Woods, 1993). However, for many individuals, concealment is not a desirable or healthy goal (Cain, 1991; Coleman, 1982). Other targets decide to counterfeit, or engage in active deception such as changing pronouns of significant others or engaging in conversation that makes references to their having a heterosexual partner (Chrobot-Mason, Button, & DiClementi, 2001; Woods, 1993). Unfortunately, such a strategy can have psychological and physiological costs such as increased stress, decreased self-esteem, and obsessive thinking (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003; Lane & Wegner, 1995).

## Compensation

Nonheterosexual individuals who suspect they might be the target of discrimination may compensate, or engage in verbal and nonverbal behaviors designed to circumvent others' negative reactions. For instance, targets might accentuate their friendliness or behave in ways that indicate interest, positivity, and/or kindness. Singletary & Hebl (in press) examined the potential effectiveness of the compensation strategy for nonheterosexual individuals by having 'Gay and Proud' applicants (see Hebl, Foster, Mannix, et al., 2002) make enthusiastic statements and smile more and use more eye

contact with managers. Relative to a control condition in which they were not instructed to engage in compensation, targets who compensated experienced less interpersonal discrimination.

## Individuation

Prejudicial and discriminatory reactions are heightened toward individuals when perceivers know only the stigmatized status and little else about the target (Fiske and Neuberg, 1990). For this reason, it is advantageous for targets to present perceivers with information beyond their stigmatizing status. Singletary and Hebl (in press) also examined this strategy and found that 'Gay and Proud' job applicants who individuated themselves experienced less interpersonal discrimination than those in a 'Gay and Proud' control condition.

## What can the Perceiver and/or Others Do?

Perceivers can also engage in remediation strategies although it may be fairly unlikely that perceivers who are heterosexist want to change their attitudes and behaviors. For perceivers who want to reduce their negative assumptions and/or for less prejudicial perceivers who nonetheless may display anxieties that can be interpreted as prejudice and discrimination, the most effective strategy might be to simply engage in increased intergroup contact. This has repeatedly been shown to be an effective means of reducing prejudice and discrimination and has been shown to be particularly effective in hetero-sexual/nonheterosexual mixed interactions.

Another strategy that may be effective is for perceivers to witness nonprejudiced attitudes and nondiscriminatory intentions being modeled by others. That is, in a study conducted by Zitek and Hebl (2007), individuals who heard others condemn discrimination against stigmatized individuals (including 'gays') showed significant increases in favorable attitudes and reduced behavioral intentions to discriminate than those who heard others condone or say nothing about such discrimination. Although such interactions lasted fewer than five minutes, the reductions in discrimination were both immediate and also showed longer-term effects still evident one month later. Thus,

even seemingly small actions on the part of third-party individuals can have enormous consequences.

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## What can be Done at the Organizational and National Level?

Initiatives that can be adopted by organizations are particularly advantageous to the target because they remove the burden of remediation from the victim of discrimination and also because the effects of these institutional strategies may impact more than a single interaction or relationship. We discuss two initiatives protective legislation and other organizational policies.

### Protective Legislation

There may be nothing more remedial with regard to discrimination against nonheterosexual individuals than laws that prevent discrimination and make such behaviors illegal. Not surprisingly, Ragins and Cornwell (2001) identified that one of the most important factors influencing nonheterosexual individuals' perceptions of discrimination in the workplace was the presence of protective legislation. Unfortunately, such legal protection is limited. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 did not include nonheterosexual individuals as a protected class. This lack of federal protection prompted a barrage of efforts to enact legislation, and in 1973, the Civil Service Commission issued a bulletin stating that federal agencies could not discriminate against an individual based on sexual orientation (Lewis, 1997). In this same year, the Board of Trustees at the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality as a mental disease from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders*. Two years later, the Civil Service Reform Act made it illegal to discriminate against a federal employee 'on the basis of conduct which does not adversely affect the performance of the employee or applicant or the performance of others' (Human Rights Campaign [HRC], 2002). Furthermore, in 1998, President Clinton amended Executive Order

11478 and added 'sexual orientation' to the list of protected groups (Executive Order 13087, 1998), making it illegal for the federal government to discriminate against *civilian* employees based on sexual orientation.

Although nonheterosexual federal employees are protected from discrimination, millions of Americans across the country are not protected, and discrimination in the armed forces remains legal.

In 1994, the Employment Nondiscrimination Act (ENDA) was introduced to members of Congress, which would prohibit employers from using sexual orientation as the sole basis for making employment decisions. If passed, ENDA would not cover the following:

Despite these exceptions, this piece of legislation may pave the way for decreased heterosexism (cf. Badgett, 1995). Yet, because of heterosexism itself, ENDA has not yet been passed and continues to meet with resistance. Partly in response to this resistance, battles are being fought at the statelevel. For instance, since 2004, 14 states and the District of Columbia have prohibited sexual orientation discrimination. Additional legislation is also underway that would further reduce discrimination such as The Tax Equity for Health Plan Beneficiaries Act (House of Representatives Version) and the Domestic Partner Health Benefits Equity Act (The Senate Version), both of which seek to alleviate the tax burden on gay men and lesbians, who must pay taxes on health insurance benefits for domestic partners, and the Family and Medical Leave Inclusion Act, which would allow employees leave to care for a seriously ill domestic partner, same-sex married partner, adult child, sibling or grandparent. The counter-offensive legislation (i.e., The Federal Marriage Amendment (FMA), The Don't Ask, Don't Tell Policy) that has been and is being introduced reveals that there are many institutionalized obstacles to [p. 356 ↓ ] extinguishing heterosexism and that there is still a long way to go.

## Organizational Policies

Many organizations are not waiting for legislation to pass and are simply taking matters in their own hands by mandating policies that forbid discrimination against gay employees, offer same-sex partner benefits, and welcome same-sex partners at

company events. This, in turn, leads nonheterosexual employees to experience an organizational culture of support and inclusion (Friskopp & Silverstein, 1995; Mickens, 1994; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001). More specifically, Day and Schoenrade (2000) found that the inclusion of sexual orientation in an anti-discrimination statement was positively related to both job satisfaction and affective organizational commitment. Griffith and Hebl (2002) also found that those who worked for companies perceived to be gay-supportive reported more favorable job-related attitudes. Ragins and Cornwell (2001) found that nonheterosexual employees perceived less discrimination when they had gay supervisors and when they had larger percentages of gay coworkers in their group. In essence, these findings suggest that the organizational climate is a fundamental predictor of the extent to which heterosexism will be predicted and actually occurs (see also Welle & Button, 2004).

## Future Directions for Research on Heterosexism

Research on heterosexism is still in its infancy; hence, there are many promising directions for future research. We particularly encourage researchers to examine heterosexism within the context of ongoing social interactions and to better identify the attitudes and behaviors of both heterosexual perceivers and nonheterosexual targets in mixed interactions. [Figure 21.1](#) provides only a rudimentary model of such mixed interactions but we encourage researchers to develop more sophisticated models in which affect, cognitions, and behaviors involved in heterosexist attitudes and behaviors, the 'coming out' experience, and effective personal strategies for combating heterosexism are better understood.

We also encourage researchers to examine more organizational-level strategies that can be adopted to reduce heterosexism. One such strategy may involve the use of diversity training programs. An ongoing program of research conducted by King and Hebl (2009) designed and compared three strategies of diversity training with regard to sexual orientation diversity: 1) goal-setting, or making goals about ways in which individuals can decrease heterosexism, 2) perspective-taking, or considering what it must be like to spend a day in the life of a nonheterosexual individual, and 3)

stereotype discrediting, or actively debunking some of the most common myths that comprise heterosexism. The preliminary results of this longitudinal study suggest that such interventions can help to reduce heterosexism. Thus, carefully designed training programs might serve as a method by which to reduce heterosexism in organizations. Other research supports the notion that diversity training might reduce discrimination and/or perceptions of discrimination (King, Dawson, Kravitz, et al., 2008a) but more research is needed.

## Summary and Conclusions

In this chapter, we reviewed the research that has been conducted on heterosexism by focusing both on who is most likely to stigmatize others ('perceiver characteristics') and on who is most likely to be stigmatized ('target characteristics'). The research reveals that perceivers who are male, very young or very old, less educated, more fundamental in their religiosity, more conservative in their political ideology, living in rural areas, low in empathy, and have not had much previous contact with gay men and lesbian are most likely to be heterosexist. The research also reveals that targets who are male, more 'out,' have more central gay identities, are higher in stereotypicality, and are more sensitive [p. 357 ↓ ] to reactions from others are more likely to experience heterosexism.

In this chapter, we also examined the impact of heterosexism by considering 'mixed interactions,' which are social interactions that occur between heterosexual and gay/lesbian individuals. The research has shown that such interactions (a) are plagued with many forms of misunderstandings, (b) involve prejudice and discrimination emanating from both sides of the interaction, and (c) can be altered dramatically via simple behaviors (i.e., disclosure behaviors) in both positive and negative ways. There are a number of elements that gay men and lesbians might adopt if and when they disclose, if they want to maximize the positive effect that the disclosure will have on its recipients. We described these elements as well as other strategies that gay men and lesbians might adopt to remediate negative interactions and outcomes. Perceivers can also act in ways that enhance such mixed interactions, and most of these behaviors involve increasing exposure to and interactions with gay men and lesbians. Finally, we described in this chapter the history of and important future role that protective



legislation and organizational policies can play in improving the rights and welfare of gay men and lesbians.

We conclude by reminding readers that only a little more than 30 years ago gay men and lesbians were viewed by the American Psychiatric Association as having a mental disorder. In the last several decades, strides have been made in granting equality toward and increasing the tolerance and acceptance of gay men and lesbians. Indeed, attitudes toward those who are gay and lesbian are generally becoming more favorable, incidences of overt forms of discrimination have decreased, and many local laws and organizations now offer protection. Yet, this chapter reveals that more strides are needed as there is still a great deal of subtle, interpersonal discrimination, which may be just as pernicious as the more blatant forms. We hope future policies and protective laws will be passed and that more research will continue to focus on the stigma of heterosexism. Indeed, we look forward to a future in which individuals can reach their personal, social, and professional potentials, regardless of their sexual orientations.

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