

# The co-evolution of nativist beliefs and tolerant attitudes

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The paper by Newson and Richerson once again shows that theories of cultural evolution can throw a genuinely original light on the important societal changes of our time. We are therefore very curious to know how Newson and Richerson conceive of the relation between their hypothesis and other recent work on the cultural evolution of liberal and conservative values (see for example Acerbi, Enquist & Ghirlanda 2009 and Eriksson & Strimling 2015). That said, we will concentrate on another issue, namely how the changes in attitudes towards homosexuality go hand in hand with changes in our beliefs about the etiology and nature of homosexuality. Newson and Richerson already hint at this topic in their paper when they write:

“More discussion of homosexuality encouraged scientists to look for biological factors that may cause some people to have a same sex sexual orientation (LeVay, 1996). Their speculation was widely covered by the media and the suggestion that some people were innately homosexual (and therefore had no choice about whom to love) became, for many Westerners, justification for supporting what became the LGBT movement (Lewis, 2009).”

In this statement Newson and Richerson elaborate on Herek’s cultural evolutionary theory according to which societal changes in homonegativity are due to the introduction of the concept of ‘homophobia’ and the recognition by psychiatrists that homosexuality is not a disorder. They suggest that in addition to this information, it was new information about the etiology of homosexuality that has resulted in increased tolerance towards homosexuality in the West. Social-psychological research on anti-homosexual prejudice has revealed that there is indeed such a negative correlation between essentialist beliefs about homo-sexuality and homonegativity (Haider-Markel & Joslyn 2008). Yet this result is more surprising than it might seem at first sight.

Much of the social-psychological research that aims to get a grip on how homonegativity co-varies with personality traits, ecological variables, education and beliefs, is inspired by research on racism and sexism. Indeed, homonegativity seems to have many correlates in common with sexism and racism (Altemeyer 2002). One curious exception is the positive correlation between sexism/racism and psychological essentialism. Whereas racism and sexism seem to be strongly linked with psychological essentialism about race and biological sex (Haslam, Rotschild & Ernst 2002), homonegative people tend to be less essentialist about homosexuality than people who are (more) supporting of the LGBT cause (Haider-Markel & Joslyn 2008). To explain why essentialist beliefs correlate with decreased homonegativity, scholars have mainly relied on attribution theory, which is also echoed by Newson and Richerson’s statement. According to the attribution theory, the belief that homosexuality is innate is taken to imply that one’s sexual orientation is beyond a person’s control, and is therefore judged less severely. To explain why essentialist beliefs nevertheless correlated with increased racism and sexism, Prentice and Miller (2007) have developed a more sophisticated version of the attribution theory. They argue that essentialism about a social category (race for example), will result in a more negative attitude if the stigma is associated with the correlates of the category (for example low income, violence), because the essentialism intensifies the link between the category and the negative traits. However, if the stigma is associated with the defining property of the category, as seems to be the case with homosexuality, essentialism decreases the stigma because it suggests that one is less responsible for belonging to that category.

Note that the reasoning hypothesized by the attribution theory does not lead to an entirely positive conclusion about homosexuality. After all, the reasoning goes that homosexuality is to be accepted because it is innate and therefore beyond one’s control. This suggests that if it had been a choice, one should not have chosen it and it should not be accepted. Yet we do not want to focus here on the normative issues with the reasoning suggested by the attribution theory. Nor do we want to focus on

whether the ‘essentialist’ or ‘nativist’ view is really supported by the best science currently available, or whether this would imply that homosexual desires/preferences/orientations are not a matter of choice. Instead we will look at the extent to which the attribution theory can really explain how the cultural evolution of nativist ideas about homo-sexuality – partly spurred by scientific practice – relates to the cultural evolution of homonegativity.

While it is really well established that people who think that homosexuals are ‘born that way’ also tend to be more tolerant towards homosexuality than people who think that homosexuality is (mainly) determined by environmental factors, the causal mechanism that underlies this relation is still not well understood. It is safe to say that this causal mechanism will be more complex than even a sophisticated version of the attribution theory suggests. After all, informing people that ‘homosexuality is innate’ does not necessarily increase their moral acceptance of homosexuality. The findings of Boysen and Vogel (2007) suggest that already quite tolerant people become even more tolerant after learning that homosexuality is innate, but they also find that the nativist message makes homonegative individuals more homonegative. According to Boysen and Vogel, attitude polarization is driving this effect: human nature is such that people “view supporting evidence favorably and contradicting evidence unfavorably leading to increased confidence in their original attitude” (Boysen & Vogel, 2007). Their results are in line with other experimental studies showing that tolerant or intolerant attitudes determine the adoption of beliefs that are perceived to match these attitudes, rather than the other way around (Hegarty & Golden, 2008). In this light, it is interesting to compare the evolutionary explanation of Herek with Newson and Richerson’s broader account. Herek’s explanation is indeed an evolutionary one but almost exclusively homes in on how new information about the nature of homosexuality changed the attitudes, whereas Newson and Richerson seem to treat the role of nativist or other scientific views as less central to the attitudinal change, and thus more in accordance with the results of psychological experiments.

Of course, we are not arguing that the increasing popularity of nativist views cannot stabilize and to some extent even increase tolerance of homosexual orientation. For one, the nativist view seems to make tolerant people even more tolerant. Secondly, experiments in social psychology focus almost exclusively on the short term effects of certain interventions. So biological explanations of homosexuality might still have the long-term effect of leading to a decrease in homonegativity, even though the short-term effects are not what (naïve) adherents of the attribution theory would expect. Thirdly, to the extent that there is an effect of essentialist beliefs about homosexuality on decreased homonegativity, this need not be the result of the type of reasoning hypothesized by the attribution theory. The nativist message can also convey the impression that every heterosexual is safe from ‘contracting homosexuality’. Because the threat of contagion is an important trigger of disgust and because disgust is one of the most important emotional components of homonegative attitudes (Olatunji 2008), the spread of nativist beliefs may lead to a society in which there is less anti-homosexual prejudice. Note, however, that such belief-steered relaxation of homonegativity does not necessarily imply that there will also be more same-sex sexual behavior. In fact, sociological research in Germany found that less and less boys of 16 and 17 tend to experiment with homosexual behaviors (see <http://www.lsbk.ch/gibt-es-heterosexualitaet/>), possibly because more and more young people do think that homosexuality is something you are born with and that homosexual experiences would therefore immediately and irreversibly place them in the homosexual category.

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