

Certain moral values may lead to more prejudice, discrimination

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People who value following purity rules over caring for others are more likely to view gay and transgender people as less human, which leads to more prejudice and support for discriminatory public policies, according to a new study published by the American Psychological Association.

"After the Supreme Court decision affirming marriage equality and the debate over bathroom rights for [transgender people](#), we realized that the arguments were often not about facts but about opposing moral beliefs," said Andrew E. Monroe, Ph.D., of Appalachian State University and lead author of the study, published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.

"Thus, we wanted to understand if moral values were an underlying cause of prejudice toward gay and transgender people."

Monroe and his co-author, Ashby Plant, Ph.D., of Florida State University, focused on two specific moral values -what they called sanctity, or a strict adherence to purity rules and disgust over any acts that are considered morally contaminating, and care, which centers on disapproval of others who cause suffering without just cause—because they predicted those values might be behind the often-heated debates over LGBTQ rights.

The researchers conducted five experiments with nearly 1,100 participants. Overall, they found that people who prioritized sanctity over care were more likely to believe that gay and transgender people,

people with AIDS and prostitutes were more impulsive, less rational and, therefore, something less than human. These attitudes increased prejudice and acceptance of discriminatory public policies, according to Monroe.

Conversely, people who endorsed care over sanctity were more likely to show compassion for those populations, as well as support public policies that would help them.

"The belief that a person is no better than an animal can become a justification for tolerating and causing harm," said Plant. "When we believe that someone lacks self-control and discipline, we may make moral judgments about their life choices and behaviors, which can lead down a dark path of discrimination and hate."

The first experiment involved people who were generally moderate politically and religiously. They rated their agreement with five moral values (care, fairness, sanctity, loyalty and authority) and then read short descriptions of five different men: a gay man, a man with AIDS, an African-American man, an obese man and a white man. Afterward, the participants filled out questionnaires about their thoughts on each man's state of mind (e.g., "John is rational and logical") and emotions (e.g., "John is rigid and cold") and their attitudes and feelings of warmth toward each man.

"We found that people who placed more value on sanctity were more likely to believe that the gay man and man with AIDS had less rational minds than the obese, African-American or white men," said Monroe.

Experiment two focused on how political affiliation might affect responses. The researchers recruited an equal number of self-identified liberal and conservative participants and used the same morality survey as in the first experiment, but this time, participants rated their thoughts

on the state of mind for only four men: a gay man, a man with AIDS, an African-American man and a white man. The liberals and conservatives then assessed their feelings of prejudice for each man (e.g., "I would rather not have a [black person](#)/gay person/person with AIDS in the same apartment building I live in"), their attitudes about public policies that would help or harm gay people (e.g., conversion therapy) and people with AIDS and their willingness to help them by being involved with pro-gay/AIDS awareness activities.

Liberals tended to value care and fairness more while conservatives were more focused on loyalty, authority and sanctity. And the people who valued sanctity were more likely to discriminate against the gay man and man with AIDS but not the African-American or white men, according to the study.

Experiment three focused on perceptions of transgender people and found that participants who endorsed sanctity were more likely to hold prejudiced attitudes about transgender people and to support discriminatory public policies.

The fourth experiment tested whether temporarily increasing sanctity values, relative to care, increased dehumanization and prejudice. Experimenters collected survey responses on a college campus on two separate days -Ash Wednesday—a day associated with sanctity and spiritual cleansing in the Christian faith—and a non-religious day. Participants filled out a survey intended to assess their moral beliefs and attitudes toward a woman described as a prostitute.

Participants surveyed on Ash Wednesday reported much higher concerns about sanctity compared to care and this caused participants to become more likely to dehumanize and express negative feelings towards the prostitute, according to the study.

The final study explored whether heightening concern about care was an effective method of reducing prejudice about gay and transgender people. To prime care values, participants listened to a radio news clip about the importance of safe spaces for people of color, while in the control condition participants listened to a clip about Brexit. Afterward, the participants rated their moral values, made judgments of a transgender woman, a gay man and a white man and indicated their support or disapproval of three public policies that would either help or harm gay and transgender people (e.g., national legislation for marriage equality, banning transgender people from the military).

Participants who listened to the clip about safe spaces emphasized caring as an important moral value over those who listened to the clip about Brexit. Caring individuals showed less prejudice toward gay and [transgender](#) people and less acceptance of discriminatory policies against them.

"Our study suggests that a person's [moral values](#) can be altered, at least temporarily, and that highlighting certain values, like caring, can be an effective way to combat prejudice," said Monroe. "We hope that by showing the moral roots of bias and discrimination against sexual and gender minorities we encourage others to conduct further research to increase equity and inclusion."

More information: "The Dark Side of Morality: Prioritizing Sanctity Over Care Motivates Denial of Mind and Prejudice Toward Sexual Outgroups," by Andrew E. Monroe, PhD, Appalachian State University, and E. Ashby Plant, PhD, Florida State University. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*. Published Dec. 20, 2018.

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