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Hate propaganda: Right Wing Authoritarianism and attitude change towards Homosexuals

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Abstract

This paper will explore how hate propaganda changes the attitude towards homosexuals for people who vary along the individual difference RWA. The effects of using a website, audio-visual and audiotape to propagate hate will also be determined. For high RWA's, it is predicted that attitudes change in the negative direction and in the positive direction for low RWA's. The magnitudes of these changes are largest for audio-visual, followed by audiotape. The discussion will focus on the implication for government interventions on hate propaganda.

In contrast to the United States, Canada's Criminal Codes contain specific provisions prohibiting hate propaganda (319(2) of the Criminal Code, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-46). These laws come with some controversy because it interferes with freedom of speech. According to Rosenthal (1978), there are two contrasting positions.

The *libertarian* view holds that freedom of speech takes precedence over all other rights because all rights depend on the existence of an effective right to dissent. From this view, the harmful effects of hate propaganda are not deemed to be sufficiently grave to justify the imposition of restrictions on freedom of speech.

The opposing *egalitarian* view, however holds that restrictions on hate-mongering are necessary in order to protect minority groups from pain and suffering and in order to promote inter-group harmony in the society. From the egalitarian view, all persons and groups must be protected equally against the promotion of hatred and against defamatory attacks that deny their right to human dignity. Additionally, hate propaganda has no redeeming social value and is inherently harmful both to target groups and the societal order. Therefore restrictions on freedom of expression explicitly designed to curb the hate-mongering represent "reasonable limits." Let us examine some studies that have been done in regards to this debate.

Earlier work has focused significantly on hate propaganda in terms of hate speech. Critical race theorists Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado and Crenshaw (1993) use the term *assaultive speech* interchangeably with hate speech to define "words that are used as weapons to ambush,

terrorize, wound, humiliate, and degrade.” (p.1). Two major areas of research are the perceptions and the harms of hate speech.

Previous Research on the Perceptions of Hate Speech

Rodin, Price, Bryson, and Sanchez (1993) found that derogation of members of less empowered groups is seen as more prejudiced than such behaviour directed toward more empowered groups.

In a study by Cowan & Hodge (1996), twelve vignettes were presented to college students and a community sample in a within-subjects design that varied in the target of speech (ethnic minorities, women, and gays), whether the speech was public or private and the behavioural response of the target (target responds or ignored the speech). In regards to participant variables, Caucasian men found the speech less offensive and the message sender less accountable than did Caucasian women and non-Caucasian women and men. In the public setting with a response occurring, the speech was perceived as more offensive than when no response occurred. Conversely, in the private setting, no response by the target lead to higher offensiveness rating than when the target responded. In regards to accountability in the public condition, the speaker was rated more accountable when the speech lead to a behavioural response than when it did not. However, the accountability ratings were not different for response versus no response in the private condition.

Cowan & Mettrick (2002) conducted similar studies on the perceptions of hate speech by adding in the emotional response of the target – e.g. either by being fearful and upset or calm – as an independent variable. When the target responded to the hate speech and was afraid, e.g. either by bringing charges against the speaker or by changing his or her own behaviour at some cost to him- or herself, the speech was seen as more offensive and harmful and the speaker was rated to be more accountable than when the target did not respond or was calm. The harm and accountability rating were highest when the target fearfully avoided the speaker and lowest when the target calmly ignored the speaker. A fearful avoidant response was perceived as more offensive and harmful and less appropriate than a calm response of filing a complaint. A calm response involved action that was rated as the most appropriate response to hate speech; more appropriate than running away and doing nothing. When taking the setting into consideration, public speech was generally viewed as more offensive than private speech. These findings show how the target's response affects an observer's reactions to hate propaganda.

According to Leets & Giles (1997) and Leets, Giles & Noels (1999), European-Americans perceive racist utterances directed at Asian Americans as more harmful than Asian Americans themselves. Leets (1999) extended her studies on the perceived harm of racist messages by adding epithets aimed at African- and Hispanic Americans. Consistent with the previous two studies, whites perceived the racist messages to be more harmful than the ethnic minorities. Leets (2001a) explained these results in terms of social identity theory which postulates that such behaviour is an attempt to heighten the position of the speaker's in-group status relative to the out-group. Deprecating speech is "old-fashioned" racism (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1998) and is no longer acceptable in our society. Hence when white people are asked

to evaluate an explicit hostile statement uttered by an in-group member, one way they may try to protect or restore their positive social identity is through dissociation from the threatening behaviour (Marquez & Paez, 1994). This represents a self-enhancing bias that distances a deviant group member who negatively contributes to the group's social identity. Leets (2001a) also found that Asian American students' previous exposure to racist speech mediated their perceptions of harm and levels of desensitization. Leets (2001b) examined the perceived harmfulness and persuasiveness of white supremacist websites and concluded that the communicative value of the expression was low, while people perceived them as an indirect, insidious threat rather than approaching lawless action.

In a study by Boeckmann & Liew (2002), Asian American university students judged hate speech directed at Asian- and African Americans to have greater societal impact and deserving more severe punishment than petty theft. Participants were also more supportive of suspension for hate speech than for petty theft. Derogatory speech also results in more extreme emotional responses and in the case of an Asian target, has a depressing influence on collective self-esteem.

Previous research on the harms of hate speech

Matsuda (1989) suggested that hate messages cause emotional distress and a restriction on people's personal freedom. Targets have quit jobs, forgone education, changed residences, avoided public places and modified their behaviour. Furthermore, hate messages lead to lower personal self-esteem and a lessened sense of security.

Leets (2002) studied the perceptions of targets related to the reception of anti-Semitism and antigay speech. She discovered that hate speech lead to short- and long term consequences which are similar in nature to the effects of other types of traumatic experiences. Participants in her study attributed the hate comments to ignorance, repressed hostility and social learning. They described these motives as enduring and not situational states. The most common responses participants had to the source of the message were passive e.g. being silent. In addition, participants often sought social support as a result of the hate messages.

Nielsen (2002) documented the experience of being the target of hate speech in public places by focusing on racist and sexist hate speech. The targets faced a range of experiences involving subtle derogatory speech and the victims were unaware of its occurrence. Such experiences occur regularly and leave targets harmed in significant ways. Racist speech caused targets to reflect on the subordinate social status, to fear their safety and sometimes engage in violent behaviour. Furthermore sexist speech caused women to be uncomfortable and afraid to be in public. Thus, unwanted sexually suggestive speech is an effective mechanism for reinforcing the dominant position of men over women in public.

Calvert (1997) separated the harms of hate speech into two forms based on Carey's (1989) transmission and ritual models of communications. The transmission model involves the direct harm of hate speech to the target and ritual model refers to the harm of societal subordination of minorities as a group.

Hate speech can also affect the observer of the speech. In an experiment, Greenberg and Pyszczynski (1985) found that white participants returned lower evaluations of the black debater's skills after hearing a confederate describe him using an ethnic slur when that black debater had lost the debate. This finding suggests that in the context of poor performance, the presence of an ethnic slur can cue negative judgments in observers.

Hypothesis

The current research will explore how hate propaganda changes the attitude of people who vary on the individual difference variable Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) (Altermeyer, 1981, 1988). High-authoritarians are extremely self-righteous individuals who maintain a strong acceptance of traditional values and norms, possess a general willingness to submit to legitimate authority and display a general tendency to aggress against others, especially those who threaten their conventional norms and values. High-authoritarians are characterized as being most committed to maintaining the traditional family structure as well as being threatened by "liberalization" and individuals who challenge their conventional and traditional ways. In addition, Schwartz (1992) found that high-authoritarians rate their values as more important in guiding their everyday lives compared to low-authoritarians. According to Haddock, Zanna & Esses (1993), high-authoritarians' negative attitudes or prejudice towards homosexuals were best predicted by symbolic beliefs. Symbolic beliefs are beliefs that social groups violate or promote the attainment of cherished values, customs, and traditions. Hate propaganda towards homosexuals focuses on such symbolic beliefs. For example, the following homosexual slur, provided by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (1995), is based on an actual situation: "Homosexuality is biologically incorrect and morally wrong! Homosexuality is a threat

to our environment and a threat to our innocent children! Damn you sick fucking bastards and bitches. Damn you.” As a result, the individual difference variable RWA was chosen for this research paper.

The main question is whether hate propaganda polarizes negative attitudes of high-authoritarians towards homosexuals. Hopefully, this project will start a new area of research on hate propaganda by determining its effects on various types of individuals including potential hate-mongers. This will provide another perspective to the hate propaganda law debate.

The predicted results are based on the Social Judgment Theory pioneered by Muzafer Sherif and Carolyn Sherif (1967). The theory emphasizes that the receivers do not evaluate a message purely on the merits of the arguments. Instead, the theory stipulates that people compare the advocated position with their attitude and then determine whether they should accept the position advocated in the message. The theory articulates several core concepts including latitudes of acceptance and rejection. The latitude of acceptance consists of all positions of an issue that an individual finds acceptable. For high authoritarians, arguments against homosexuality fall within their latitudes of acceptance causing them to polarize their negative attitudes. As for the low authoritarians, the arguments fall within their latitude of rejections, which includes all the positions that they find objectionable. In addition, low authoritarians generate counter-arguments when confronted with arguments that are divergent from their own. This results in self-persuasion and attitude change in the opposite direction.

This study will also determine whether different communication modalities of hate propaganda such as websites, live (i.e. videotaped) and oral (i.e. audio) effect the attitude changes differently. Chaiken & Eagly (1978) conducted an experiment where subjects were presented with either easy- or difficult-to-understand messages in either the written, audiotaped, or videotaped mode. The subjects' opinions change after being exposed to a persuasive message and their level of distraction was measured. The results showed that when the message was easy, opinion change was greater in videotape over audiotape over written conditions, because nonverbal cues, which decrease in number from videotaped to audiotaped to written modalities, diminish a receiver's critical abilities. Supporting this interpretation, subjects in the written conditions reported less distraction from the message contents than did subjects in audiotape conditions, who, in turn, reported less distraction than did subjects in the videotape conditions. Since the messages used in the present study are chosen to be easy-to-comprehend, it is predicted that the most change in attitude happens when subjects view a videotape and the least attitude change happens when subjects view a website.

Method

Subjects

University students from a few introductory psychology classes will be asked to fill out an evaluation questionnaire on social groups and policies in class. Students can then participate further in the experiment in return for partial credit.

Design

The design would be 3 (communication channels: website, audio-visual, audio) X 2 (message: homophobia material, neutral material) X 2 (RWA: high, low) between-subjects factorial. The dependent variable would be the change in attitude towards a typical homosexual male.

Communication channels

Subjects in the website condition will be asked to view a website for ten minutes, in the audio-visual condition will be asked to view a video of a person speaking for ten minutes at a rate of 154 words per minute. In the audio condition, participants will be asked to listen to a recording of the same person.

Messages

Subjects in each of the website communication channel conditions will either view a homophobia website or a website about relationships in general that is neutral in regards to sexual orientation. Both websites will be similar in features such as the layout, fonts and colours. Subjects in the audio-visual and audio condition will either listen to a person speak against homosexuality or relationships in general, being neutral in relation to sexual orientation. All messages will be the same in terms of conclusion drawing, order of argument presentation, number of arguments, the use of powerful speech and intense language. Message sidedness certainly would be different for the homophobia and neutral messages. Two people working for the experimenter make sure that all the material is easy to comprehend.

Assessment of RWA

The RWA will be assessed using a short form of the RWA scale (Altemeyer, 1988). The RWA scale has 30 items and 9 points with higher scores representing higher level of authoritarianism. Subjects will be asked to indicate how much they agree with statements like "In these troubled times laws have to be enforced without mercy, especially when dealing with the agitators and revolutionaries who are stirring things up" and "People should pay less attention to the Bible and the other traditional forms of religious guidance and instead develop their own personal standards of what is moral and immoral" (this item is reversely scored). In this experiment, a shortened 10-item version will be used. Subjects will be divided into two groups (high vs. low RWA) using the median RWA score to split the subjects.

Assessment of Attitudes

On a series of 11-point scales, subjects will be asked to indicate their overall evaluation of statements including "A typical homosexual male". On the extreme ends of the scale, 0 is labelled *extremely unfavourable* and 10 *extremely unfavourable*, with adjectives *very*, *quite*, *fairly*, and *slightly unfavourable* or *favourable* marked at each increment.

Procedure

The evaluation questionnaire includes the attitude assessment. When some students return to participate in the experiment, they will be asked to complete the 10-item RWA scale. Afterwards, they will be randomly assigned to one of the six communication channel-message conditions. Later on, in what appears to be another experiment for another researcher, they will be faced with the attitude assessment again while evaluating things and giving demographic

information, to ensure that the direction of their attitude change can be determined. Finally, subjects will be fully debriefed about goal of the study.

Predicted Results

Overall Attitude Change

Using ANOVA, it is predicted that there will be a main effect of RWA, type of message (i.e. homophobic vs. neutral) and communication channel. There will also be an interaction of the three factors.

High RWA Subjects and Attitude Change

It is predicted that there will be a main effect of the type of message (i.e. homophobic vs. neutral) and a main effect of communication channels. However, there is a type of message or material and communication channel interaction. Attitude towards a typical male homosexual does not change across communication channels for material that is neutral about sexual orientation. However, it is predicted that attitudes do change for the material that is against homosexuality in the negative direction with the largest change for the audio-visual condition followed by the audio condition, which can be found using post hoc tests.

Low RWA Subjects and Attitude Change

As with the high RWA subjects, ANOVA will be performed on the data, which represents attitude change. It is predicted that there will be a main effect of message (i.e. homophobia, neutral) and a main effect of communication channels. There will also be a message or material type and communication channel interaction. For the message or material

against homosexuality, the attitude change is in a positive direction with the audio-visual condition having the largest change and the website condition having the smallest, which will be tested using post hoc tests. There will be no attitude change across different communication channels for the message that is neutral towards sexual orientation.

Discussion

It is predicted that high authoritarians' negative attitudes towards homosexuals become polarized when they are exposed to hate propaganda in regards to homosexuality. The most attitude change would occur when the message is presented live followed by when it is presented orally and then in writing such as in newspapers, books and websites. Having seen the harms of hate propaganda from previous research and the predicted results for high authoritarians, it is clear that the evidence is in favor of the egalitarian view when it comes to the hate propaganda debate.

One short-coming of the current research deals with the issue of generalization or representation. Homosexuals are the only targets of hate propaganda involved in this study. The predicted results may not be able to be generalized to other groups that face prejudice and discrimination. Thus, additional research is necessary to determine the effects of hate propaganda on attitude change towards other minority groups such as ethnic- and religious minorities. Plus, the convenient sample of university students constrains the applicability of these predicted results. Hence, future research may also want to examine how people in different life stages such as adolescence or middle adulthood are effected by hate propaganda, because ethnic identity

development research suggest individuals' attitudes are manifested in different stages of their life span (Cross, 1991; Plummer, 1996).

In the present study, the messages were categorized as either being homophobic or not. The level of hate in the messages that are in the real world vary in various ways. For example, they vary in the frequency of anti-homosexuality arguments, the use of powerful versus non-powerful speech and the characteristic of the message sender. To get around this limitation, a pilot study could be conducted where a huge number of participants rate the level of hate involved in messages. Then, messages with various ratings should be used instead to determine the effect of hate level on attitude change.

It would be handy to categorize hate propaganda along many other dimensions such as communicator characteristics, message structure, message content and language to determine the type of propaganda that should be criminalized. The Canadian laws do not protect certain groups that are exposed to hate propaganda on a regular basis like former Muslims due to the following defence in the Criminal Code: "if, in good faith, he expressed or attempted to establish by argument an opinion on a religious subject" (319(3)(b) of the Criminal Code, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-46). For example, the URL <http://muslim-canada.org/apostasy.htm> has been reported to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police for inspiring violence, which is a form of hate speech, but it has not been subsequently shut down. It states that "According to Muslim Law, a male apostate, or *murtadd*, is liable to be put to death if he continues obstinate in his error." Thus, it would be crucial to do a study on the effects of hate propaganda which contain religious arguments versus those that do not to determine whether the above defense is reasonable.

The only individual difference variable examined in this study is Right Wing Authoritarianism. There are many other individual difference variables that have been found to be related to prejudice and it would be interesting to see the effects of hate propaganda on the attitudes of people that vary along these variables. Some of these are: committed versus consensual religiosity (Allen & Spilka, 1967), extrinsic versus intrinsic religious orientation (Allport & Ross, 1967), religion as a quest (Batson, Naifeh & Pate, 1978), need for cognition (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982), need for structure (Jamieson & Zanna, 1989), need for cognitive closure (Kruglanski, 1990) and social dominance orientation (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994).

In conclusion, evidence seems to favor the existence of hate propaganda laws. However, more studies need to be conducted in this area.

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