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A psychological account of the unique decline in anti-gay attitudes

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ABSTRACT

Anti-gay attitudes have declined in the U.S. The magnitude, speed, and demographic scope of this change have been impressive especially in comparison with prejudice against other marginalized groups. We develop a philosophically-informed psychological account of the unique decline in anti-gay bias in the context of important cultural and political conditions. We highlight two key psychological mechanisms: interpersonal connection and social category classification. First, many people have discovered that a close friend, family member, or admired individual is gay, motivating them to identify the harm and discrimination faced by the individual they know, and catalyzing moral consistency reasoning such that they generalize this interpersonal insight to strangers. Second, many people have taken an essentialist stance toward social categories, including sexual orientation, leading them to infer that being gay is genetically determined and not subject to free choice or moral responsibility, nor mutable and worth attempting to change. We contrast this with the relationship between essentialism and attitudes toward women and people of color, and provide an account of the difference. This psychological account has implications for the future decline of anti-gay attitudes, in the U.S. and other countries, along with the nascent decline of anti-trans attitudes.

1. Introduction

Over the last 50 years or so, and especially over the last few decades, the U.S. and many other societies have undergone a *large*, *rapid*, and *broad* decline in anti-gay attitudes. The magnitude, speed, and demographic scope of this change render it unique, distinguishing it from contemporaneous declines in negative attitudes toward other marginalized groups, such as racial/ethnic minorities and women. The historic societal shift in anti-gay attitudes is unprecedented, even profound, and demands detailed theoretical and empirical analysis. A sound analysis may also yield practical, policy-

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relevant insights into effective strategies for continuing to reduce the pre-
valence and intensity of anti-gay attitudes, in the U.S. and other countries,
along with analogous strategies for fostering progressive attitude change
toward other marginalized groups in the LGBTQ community. This is
particularly important in light of reactionary backlash during the last few
years: LGBTQ Americans have been targeted by hateful rhetoric and harm-
ful legislation, including false accusations of predatory sexual grooming and
"don't say gay" bills that forbid discussion of sexual orientation in public
schools. Understanding how progress occurred can guide further progress
and block nascent regress (Kumar & Campbell, 2022).

In this article we develop a new explanatory theory: we identify a pair of
complex psychological mechanisms that underlie the relatively large, rapid,
and broad decline in anti-gay attitudes among many Americans. Our theory
draws on existing psychological research on anti-gay attitudes, psychologi-
cal research on attitudes toward other marginalized groups, and philoso-
phical theory. The first step in this explanatory project is to characterize in
detail the decline of anti-gay attitudes and its unique features (section 2).
Next, we explain the decline by appealing to the collective force of psycho-
logical mechanisms that fall into two key categories: interpersonal connec-
tions (section 3) and social category classification (section 4). In the end, we
will be in a position to consider the extent to which our explanatory theory
can be projected into the future, extended to a broader range of societies,
and applied to other marginalized groups, especially transgender people
(section 5).

2. A unique decline

In the middle of the 20th century it was extraordinarily difficult to be gay in
America. Openly gay people were regularly disowned by their families,
ostracized by their religious communities, and fired by their employers
without any available legal recourse. Being gay was an invitation to stigma,
hostility, and violence. The best option, for some individuals, was still
abysmal: to lead a closeted life in which they are unable to express
a fundamental aspect of their identity to intimates and even to themselves.
For open and closeted gay people alike, rates of depression and suicide were
high, especially for vulnerable gay youth (Gibson, 1989).

Over the course of several decades, however, gay men and women have
experienced a dramatic improvement in their life prospects. To begin with,
medical discrimination against gay people has declined in the past 50 years.
After removing homosexuality from the DSM's list of diagnostic categories
in 1973 (Spitzer, 1981), the medical community has become far less prone to
pathologize homosexuality (Drescher, 2015). Nineteen U.S. states have
banned conversion therapy (Zaveri, 2020). Alongside these changes in the

medical field, many oppressive, anti-gay laws have been repealed or super-seded, for example, via Supreme Court rulings on adoption rights (Pavan, 2017; VL, 2016) and legislation that expanded the definition of hate crime to include actual or perceived discrimination or violence on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability (Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr Hate Crimes Prevention Act, 2015). In 2015 the U.S. joined other countries by legalizing marriage equality (Obergefell v Hodges, 2015). In addition to medicine and the law, there have been steps toward progress in traditionally conservative U.S. institutions. In 1993 the Department of Defense issued a directive that protected closeted gay people from discrimination; in 2011 "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was aban-doned, and openly gay people were permitted to serve in the military. Lastly, American religious institutions have become more welcoming to gay con-gregants, and some denominations have explicitly permitted gay people to serve as ministers (National Congregations Study, Chaves, 2002).[1]

Alongside the institutional reforms reviewed above, straight people have gradually reformed their behavior. A smaller proportion of openly gay people face explicit ostracism and discrimination. For instance, the use of anti-gay slurs on social media is less common (Wells, 2012), and homo-phobic slurs are also culturally less acceptable in other contexts. On the whole, behavioral reforms have accumulated, leading to broader cultural changes, for example, in the media and politics. LGBTQ characters are more common on TV, up to 10.2% in the 2019–20 season (GLAAD, 2019). Between 2019 and 2020, there has been a 21% increase in the number of LGBTQ representative officials (Victory Institute, 2020).[2] Indeed, a leading contender for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination, Pete Buttigieg, publicly identified as a gay man.

Nevertheless, hate crimes against gay men and women saw a slight *increase* in the past decade (US DOJ FBI, 2019). It is possible that this is due to gay people being in an environment where they are more comfortable reporting hate crimes and where those reports are better documented. Regardless, this recent uptick also serves as a crucial reminder that legal and cultural progress does not always result in consistent material improve-ment in the lives of marginalized communities. Furthermore, progressive changes are often fragile. For example, many US states are currently enact-ing regressive laws that discriminate against gay people. Despite Congress passing the Respect for Marriage Act in late 2022, it is possible that the US Supreme Court will reverse course on marriage equality (Totenberg, 2020). In addition, institutional and behavioral reforms have not gone far enough, especially for many Black, Indigenous, and trans populations of gay people. For example, Black gay and transgender people experience higher rates of housing insecurity and lower access to healthcare than both straight Black people and gay White people because of institutionalized racism and anti-

gay/anti-trans discrimination in the housing and healthcare sectors (Moodie-Mills, 2012). Nonetheless, changes like those we have listed arguably represent one of the most significant episodes of moral progress in living memory.

Progressive improvements in behavior and institutional structure are important in their own right, but they are also entangled with the decline of anti-gay attitudes. Fewer straight people nowadays feel antipathy toward gay men and women. Americans are less likely to believe that being gay is immoral. Furthermore, they are less likely to support anti-gay positions on various social issues. For example, a majority of Americans (63%) believe that gay couples should be allowed to adopt children (Gallup, 2014), and 58% of Americans think that the military should welcome gay soldiers within its ranks (Pew Research Center, 2010). The decline of anti-gay attitudes spans a wide range of emotions, beliefs, and other psychological attitudes.

In this article, we focus on *attitude change*, in the broadest sense, rather than behavioral and institutional reforms that are also essential to and signatures of moral progress. Attitudes can be thought of as general evaluations, measured by beliefs, behaviors, self-reports, and affective states. Before developing a psychological theory that helps explain the historic change in attitudes, however, we need a characterization of its unique features.

One well-studied proxy for the decline in anti-gay attitudes is the shifting number of people who *favor or oppose same-sex marriage*. For example, the Pew Research Center conducts yearly polls in which they ask Americans whether their society should accept same-sex marriage (Pew Research Center, 2019). In 2001, 57% of adults opposed same-sex marriage; this number dropped to 31% by 2019. Conversely, in 2001, only 35% of adults favored same-sex marriage; this number rose to 61% by 2019. The data from Pew are corroborated by other polls, which collectively illustrate three features of the decline in anti-gay attitudes (CBS News, 2020; Gallup, 2017; Public Religion Research Institute, 2020). First, the change has been *large*. The proportion of Americans who opposed same-sex marriage dropped from roughly 57% to 31%. Second, the change has been *rapid*. Opinions changed in less than 20 years. Third, the data from Pew illustrate that the decline in anti-gay attitudes has been *broad*. That is, over approximately the same period of time, Pew found that more Americans accept same-sex marriage across demographic groups related to political party, religious affiliation, race, gender, and age. From 2001 to 2019, the proportion of Democrats who accept same-sex marriage increased (45% to 75%), but the proportion of Republicans also increased (23% to 44%). Religiously unaffiliated people became more accepting (61% to 79%), but so too did White mainline Protestants (38% to 66%), Catholics (40% to 61%), Black

Protestants (30% to 44%), and White evangelical Protestants (13% to 29%). Same-sex marriage was accepted by a higher proportion of White people (34% to 62%), Black people (32% to 51%), and Hispanic people (42% in 2006 to 58%). Women became more accepting (38% to 66%), as did men (32% to 57%). Finally, acceptance climbed among Millennials (51% to 74%), Generation X (49% to 58%), Baby Boomers (32% to 51%), and the Silent Generation (21% to 45%). Therefore, and, perhaps, contrary to expectations, Americans' increasing support for same-sex marriage has not been driven exclusively by change among a limited subset of people, such as those who are left-wing, irreligious, or young (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2021).

Another well-studied proxy for the wide-ranging decline in anti-gay attitudes is *implicit bias*. Implicit biases began to be studied decades ago. The implicit association test (IAT) was launched in 1998 (Greenwald et al., 1998) to study implicit attitudes connected to race, gender, age, and other social categories (Nosek et al., 2002), including sexual orientation (Jellison et al., 2004; Steffens, 2005; Steffens & Buchner, 2003; Westgate et al., 2015). At the time, anti-gay implicit biases were among the strongest of those studied. However, relying on data from over three million American respondents, Charlesworth and Banaji report that these biases are now among the weakest (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019b, ; Charlesworth & Banaji, 2021). The magnitude and breadth of anti-gay implicit bias in the U.S. has shrunk more quickly than any other implicit bias studied, shifting by 33% just over the last decade. Furthermore, Charlesworth and Banaji (2021) report that implicit *and* explicit anti-gay attitudes have declined within diverse demographic groups, e.g., for both men and women, Whites and Blacks, young and old.

These findings on implicit and explicit anti-gay bias align with the polling results on same-sex marriage reviewed above. The findings on implicit and explicit bias also enable a precise characterization of the magnitude, speed, and scope of the decline in anti-gay attitudes; anti-gay implicit biases can be directly compared to other implicit biases. For example, Charlesworth and Banaji (2019a, Charlesworth & Banaji, 2021) report that implicit biases associated with race and gender have also declined over the same period of time but, in addition to these changes being less linear, they have declined only by about half as much.

At this stage, it is important to register a qualification about the decline of anti-gay attitudes. Overall, the decline has benefited many gay people who are no longer targets of prejudice and discrimination. However, progressive changes have not benefited everyone equally. In particular, gay people who are white, upper-class, cisgender, and straight-passing have enjoyed a disproportionate share of the benefits. Gay people who are members of other marginalized categories have not gained as much approval and acceptance from society. In short, the shift in anti-gay attitudes reflects a general

pattern of *intersectional* disadvantage. Gay people who are members of multiple minority groups (e.g., gay people of color) experience increased stigmatization, discrimination, and worse health outcomes (Cyrus, 2017). Thus, relatively privileged members of a marginalized group have benefited the most from progressive attitude change. One possible reason for this disparity is that cultural representations of gay people in television and film tend to be White, upper-class, and cisgender (GLAAD, 2020). Another dimension of this phenomenon is that the gay people who have benefited the most from these changes in attitude are those whose lifestyle approximates widely-held, traditional American values of family and comportment (Puar, 2018). Many people have not accepted gay individuals who are polyamorous, or who are sex workers, or whose lifestyles are otherwise non-conforming. (It may also be worth noting that, while the same people may not accept straight individuals who are polyamorous, or who are sex workers, biases in the domain of sexuality may interact multiplicatively to increase bias, or else obscure bias, e.g., someone may claim that they dislike the fact that a gay individual is polyamorous and not that they are gay.) Thus, while progress has been made, it also has not gone far enough. In spite of the decline in anti-gay attitudes, more thoroughgoing eradication of anti-gay prejudice is clearly necessary.

The explanation for the dramatic (if selective) decline in anti-gay attitudes, implicit and explicit, is sure to be multi-factorial. One important set of mechanisms is *political*: activism, protests, and identity politics. Another set is *cultural*: public relations, pro-gay spokespersons, and popular culture in music, film, and fashion. Various political and cultural mechanisms have played (and continue to play) an important role in the decline of anti-gay attitudes. For example, consider events like Stonewall, Pride Parades, the election and subsequent assassination of Harvey Milk, the 1980s AIDS crisis, the Second National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights in 1987, protests of mainstream politicians by ACT UP, the overturning of sodomy laws in Lawrence v. Texas, and the establishment of marriage equality in Obergefell v. Hodges. All of these events elevated gay people from taboo subject to worthy political cause (see Ofosu et al., 2019). Prejudiced attitudes across many domains are hard to change (Craig & Richeson, 2014; Lai et al., 2016), and yet anti-gay attitudes have declined precipitously in recent decades. Numerous factors could be at play. For example, its possible that anti-gay attitudes were simply stronger than other prejudices, at the beginning of this period, and therefore were more liable to decline. Or, perhaps there happened to be a greater number of impactful political and cultural events connected to sexual orientation (like those mentioned above). Or, perhaps anti-gay prejudice rested on foundations that were easily toppled, such as outdated medical ideas about sexuality, archaic religious traditions, and religious belief itself. Another possibility

concerns the extent to which the expansion of freedoms for gay people impinges (or does not impinge) upon the entitlements of straight people. Yet another possibility relates to the socioeconomic and educational status of gay people as depicted in film and television. Evolving expectations surrounding masculinity/femininity, and academic progressivism may also be important.

All of the hypotheses above are worth exploring. Nonetheless, in the following sections we will argue that a pair of interrelated *psychological mechanisms* help explain the unique features of the decline. In general, psychological changes unfold in concert with political and cultural changes (see Bronfenbrenner, 1992). For example, psychological changes likely allowed people to be more receptive to the progressive messages in major political and cultural events – to take seriously the contention that gay people are deserving of equal rights. Various political and cultural factors serve as necessary conditions in our explanatory theory; they help explain why anti-gay attitudes unfolded recently, after centuries of stasis. But our principal focus will be on psychological factors.

Some researchers believe that the decline of anti-gay attitudes is driven largely by generational turnover. There is some truth to this idea. Available evidence suggests that younger generations are less likely to have negative attitudes toward gay people and related issues. For example, Pew data show that 79% of people under the age of 30 support same-sex marriage, while only 52% of people who are 50 years or older share this view (Pew Research Center, 2017). However, the polling and implicit bias findings reviewed above show that older generations have also changed their minds. The psychological mechanisms that we will identify explain attitude change among both younger and older populations, illuminating a truly widespread shift in the attitudes of society. We will argue that the decline of anti-gay attitudes has been larger, faster, and broader than other progressive attitude changes in virtue of interpersonal connections (section 3) and social category classification (section 4). Over the next two sections, we will go through each mechanism in turn.

3. Psychological mechanism I: interpersonal connections

We propose that *interpersonal connections* have played an outsized role in the decline of anti-gay attitudes. By this, we simply mean relationships that involve intimacy or admiration, such as between parent and child, siblings, friends, or celebrities and fans. In fact, many of the intervention strategies recommended to reduce bias involve favorable intergroup contact that fosters interpersonal connections (Dovidio et al., 2017; Onyeador et al., 2020). We will argue that interpersonal connections have driven a relatively large, rapid, and broad change in attitudes due to differences

between sexual orientation and other social identities, such as race and ethnicity. Because homosexuality is a diffuse, invisible (or at least easily concealable) trait, straight people are likely to have friendships, family links, and other interpersonal connections, with people whom they initially did not know are gay. By contrast, for example, White Americans are less likely to have interpersonal connections with people who are members of marginalized racial or ethnic outgroups. In addition, it is unlikely for a person's racial and ethnic identity to be unknown at the outset of a relationship. Put simply, then, the first psychological mechanism at play in the decline of anti-gay attitudes implicates the large and growing number of individuals with interpersonal connections to gay people (Pew Research Center, 2016). We propose that these individuals are better equipped, and more motivated, to reform negative attitudes directed toward close and admired others ("local changes," described in 3.1). Some of these individuals then reformed their attitudes toward a wider range of gay people via moral reasoning and generalization ("general changes," described in 3.2). We note that past research also suggests that closer interpersonal connections between straight and gay people predict lower anti-gay prejudice (Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Herek & Glunt, 1993; Lewis, 2011; MacInnis et al., 2017; Wittlin et al., 2019), but this research does not identify the explanatory psychological mechanism that we unpack in this article. In the rest of this section we will dig into the details of the underlying psychological mechanism, first describing local changes in attitudes toward close and admired others, and then turning to general changes in attitudes toward strangers.

3.1. Local changes

Unfortunately, many gay people have been forced to conceal their sexuality. An important catalyst in the decline of anti-gay attitudes is the growing number of gay Americans who chose to live open and candid lives during the second half of the 20th century and early decades of the 21st century, beginning in major urban centers. Consequently, more and more people discovered a valued family member or friend to be gay. In general, people are disposed to empathize and sympathize – more easily and intensely – with people they are in close interpersonal relationships with (Krienen et al., 2010; Zaki, 2014). They are better able to appreciate that their gay family member or friend is harmed, that their liberty is needlessly curtailed, that their dignity is threatened, etc. This does not always happen. Sometimes, tragically, the discovery that a family member or friend is gay leads to violence or rejection. However, through attending to the impact on their family member or friend, many straight people started to notice and care that formal laws and informal norms are anti-gay, that many people exhibit anti-gay behavior through overt discrimination and more subtle

microaggressions, and that gay people face prejudice from religious organizations, medical professionals, the media, schools, and other social institutions. Just as important, as we explore further below, people are likely to have strong positive beliefs about close others, e.g., that they are good, moral people. In this way, interpersonal relationships highlight individuals as having both "patiency" or great potential for experience, specifically, suffering and "agency", specifically, moral agency or the capacity for good (Gray et al., 2012; Schein & Gray, 2018; Yam et al., 2019).

But why exactly did interpersonal connections help bring about, in relative terms, a large, rapid, and broad change in attitudes? One reason is that sexual orientation, whatever its putative genetic causes, has a similar distribution across human lineages. Being gay is a "horizontal" identity, rather than a "vertical" one (Solomon, 2012). So, it is more-or-less randomly distributed across the human population. Consequently, people with different political leanings, different religious affiliations, and different racial/ethnic identities are approximately as likely as one another to be gay, and, likewise, to develop a close relationship with someone who is gay. Gay and straight people are therefore likely to find themselves in close interpersonal relationships with one another. Compare the situation for Black and White people in America, where de facto segregation remains intense in neighborhoods, schools, and employment. Black and White people are far less likely to find themselves in close interpersonal relationships; this sustains anti-Black prejudice (Anderson, 2010; Kunst et al., 2019). An especially notable contrast with race is that many straight people discover that family members are gay. Furthermore, in recent decades the age at which gay people come out to their family has drastically declined (Dunlap, 2016). Not all gay youth receive the celebration they deserve. Nonetheless, gay youth may be afforded greater acceptance, on average, because their vulnerability evokes more compassion, especially (thought not always) from their parents.

Another important reason that interpersonal connections have driven a unique decline in anti-gay attitudes is that being gay is largely an invisible trait and can be effectively concealed in the face of social pressure, though concealment can be forced and often has negative psychological and social consequences. A prejudiced straight person can therefore get to know a gay person and build a relationship with them without realizing they are gay. In addition, the concealability of a person's gay identity is associated with reduced anxiety around and improved quality of intergroup interactions (Le Forestier et al. 2020). The invisibility of outgroup status is far less likely for relationships that cross divisions of race and gender, since individuals' membership in these social categories is typically highly visible and difficult to conceal (Davies et al., 2011; Herek, 2016). Unlike anti-gay attitudes, then, racist attitudes can preempt the development of close interpersonal connections that initiate acceptance of marginalized people and collapse of

negative attitudes. Of course, men and women are highly interdependent, and thus sexist men have always had plenty of interpersonal connections with women. Sexist attitudes do not preempt close interpersonal connections so much as distort them, by leading men to perceive the women in their lives – mothers, siblings, daughters, friends, partners – through a sexist lens from the outset of their relationships. Some men think that they have an obligation to protect women, but that the proper roles for women are to serve as faithful wives and mothers rather than any authoritative roles outside the home. Their sexism is often "benevolent" rather than "hostile." Research in intergroup contact theory suggests that the key difference is the relative invisibility of sexual orientation, especially compared with race and gender, allowing many people to develop close interpersonal connections with gay people despite latent anti-gay attitudes (Herek, 2016). So, the unfortunate fact that gay people were forced to conceal their sexuality was a precondition for progressive attitude change. If gay people had not been closeted, fewer close interpersonal connections would have been made.

Being gay is largely an invisible trait in the sense that gay people can look like straight people. Sexual orientation can of course be signaled in observable ways, but this signaling is largely under an individual's control. Put another way, gay people can "pass" as straight. Invisibility and "straight-passing" may seem like the very same feature, but straight-passing is relevant in an additional way. Previous work suggests that bias is often easier for people to overcome when they share attributes, including superficial appearance (e.g., features like age and weight) (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019b; Essien et al., 2020). Therefore, people may more easily rid themselves of their biases against others if they both at least look like they belong to the same group. Conversely, easily observable differences may amplify bias (Zebrowitz, 1996), either because appearances serve as automatic affective cues, or because people infer that individuals are intentionally signaling their membership in a different group (e.g., Krakauer & Rose, 2002). The significance of straight-passing as such can also explain why anti-gay attitudes are not likely to have declined as much for gay people whose appearance and behavior do not conform to traditional values and expectations, as noted at the end of the previous section.

When two people are in a close relationship, it is common for each to experience positive affect toward the other and hold strong beliefs that they are good people (Fatfouta et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2020). This predisposition can overwhelm any negative information about someone's being gay. A similar dynamic is found in one-way relationships with celebrities, such as musicians, film and TV stars, and social media personalities, as well as people in positions of status or authority, such as politicians, teachers, and business leaders (e.g., Chung & Cho, 2017; Gabriel et al., 2018). For example, consider a widely admired actor who has accumulated status while

being closeted. When she reveals herself to be gay, even those fans with anti-gay attitudes may retain an overall positive orientation toward her. What matters are people's strong positive priors, whether they are built on experiences within close relationships or other interpersonal connections developed from afar. Social affect and prior beliefs can be similar across these different kinds of relationships and influence attitudes in similar ways (Kim et al., 2020).

Broadly speaking, anti-gay attitudes can be ameliorated via interpersonal connections in two different ways, which lie on a spectrum. At one extreme are individuals who have long been anti-gay, perhaps because they are older and were raised in deeply homophobic cultural environments (e.g., Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation). After discovering that a family member or friend or celebrity is gay, they may experience an "epiphany." This insight-based experience can destabilize otherwise resolute attitudes. At the other extreme are individuals who are still forming attitudes about sexual orientation and its ethical significance, often because they are younger and less likely to have undergone anti-gay enculturation or extensive exposure to anti-gay ideology (e.g., Millennials and Generation Z). These people form relationships and imbibe more recent culture (that is more pro-gay than before), shaping attitude formation before anti-gay prejudice has had a chance to develop.

So far in this section, we have identified features of sexual identity that enable interpersonal connections between straight and gay people. Random distribution, invisibility, and straight-passing have each allowed a wide range of individuals to reform their attitudes toward the gay person (or gay people) in their lives. Initially, empathy and sympathy motivated people to reason about a close/admired person and care about the harm they experience. Beliefs may have changed first, while affective attitudes lagged behind (Campbell & Kumar, 2012). Thus, in some cases, feelings of disgust and aversion can persist in the face of conflicting beliefs, evincing a dissociation between explicit and implicit attitudes (Nosek & Smyth, 2007). For example, someone may claim to have no moral qualms about their daughter's sexual orientation but still exhibit automatic discomfort toward public expressions of her sexuality. Nonetheless, as we have argued so far, interpersonal connections initiate a local change in attitude toward close and admired others.

3.2. General changes

A local change in attitudes toward particular gay people, whether partial or complete, does not suffice to alter general attitudes toward gay people as a whole and the issues that impact their lives. People have had to *generalize*. Many people have engaged in one or another form of "moral consistency

reasoning" (Campbell & Kumar, 2012). In this kind of moral reasoning, generally, people reason that their moral attitudes are inconsistent with one another. They revise their attitudes by "treating like cases alike," as philosophers sometimes put it, which can spur progressive attitude change (Kumar and Campbell, 2016, Kumar & Campbell, 2022). Thus, people have reasoned that if there is nothing wrong with their daughter's sexual orientation, for example, there must be nothing wrong with the sexual orientation of so many strangers with whom they do not have interpersonal connections. Or they have reasoned that if they did not want their college friend to be treated with hostility and disgust, they could not treat strangers that way either. Another way of thinking about this psychological process is that people have experienced cognitive dissonance between their attitudes toward particular individuals and their attitudes toward gay people in general. Some of these people, though not all, have resolved this dissonance by changing their general anti-gay attitudes.

The first psychological mechanism in our theory is triggered when people have found themselves connected interpersonally with someone who is gay. Emotions like empathy and sympathy shine a spotlight on a gay family member or friend and motivate people to care about the various harms inflicted on them; for example, neurological evidence indicates that experiences of empathy are modulated by social closeness (Fareri et al., 2012; Krienen et al., 2010). Empathy may also provide people with the motivation to change their minds and thereby sustain the relationship. A motivated framework suggests that people feel empathy for socially close others even when it is painful to do so, in order to strengthen social bonds (Zaki, 2014). People even selectively discount ingroup members' negative behaviors, for the sake of maintaining close relationships (Kim et al., 2020; Park & Young, 2020, 2020). On the basis of such evidence, critics have argued that empathy or sympathy is irredeemably biased (Bloom, 2017; Prinz, 2011). However, this bias can be mitigated when people also engage in moral consistency reasoning or dissonance reduction. In some cases people endorse "special obligations" to kin; but in other cases people recognize a "general obligation" to kin and strangers alike (McManus et al., 2020). Thus, empathy and sympathy are valuable because they can act as a catalyst, initiating moral consistency reasoning that leads to generalization.

Importantly, however, a common strategy is available that can block moral consistency reasoning and prevent it from spurring progressive attitude change. Specifically, people often engage in "subtyping." That is, they treat their family member or friend as a special case, accepting that person but refusing to accept others. Or, when presented with a stereotype-inconsistent example, they maintain the previously held stereotype by deciding that the example is an exception to the general rule (Maurer et al., 1995; Richards & Hewstone, 2001). For example, someone may insist

that his gay daughter, whom he adores, is nothing like other people who are gay. He may think that his daughter's romantic behavior is based on love, while other people act on "deviant" sexual impulses. In addition, he may be willing to accept a minority of gay people who are similar in relevant ways to his daughter, perhaps those in chaste or monogamous relationships or other members of dominant groups. (Subtyping may help explain patterns of intersectional disadvantage.) Or his subtype may have only a single member (his daughter). Subtyping may be spontaneous or it may be actively pursued to avoid an uncomfortable generalization. In any case, subtyping can prevent moral consistency reasoning that would have led this father and others like him to generalize and develop more progressive attitudes. Some people create subtypes that exclude gay people who are people of color or transgender or polyamorous, resisting a more general change in attitude and contributing to intersectional disadvantage. One solution to the problem of subtyping may be for people to develop interpersonal connections with a more diverse range of people, challenging the validity of previous subtypes.

We have argued that many people have undergone a local change in attitudes by discovering that a family member or friend or celebrity is gay and then generalizing their attitude to strangers. One lingering puzzle, however, is why this process happened when it did. Why did interpersonal connections produce a decline in anti-gay attitudes over the last 50 years rather than earlier, say, in the first half of the 20th century, or rather than later, say, in the second half of the 21st century? The solution to this puzzle requires identifying other recent changes. A range of important cultural and political conditions were also necessary to generate the effect, and these conditions began to emerge only during the last 50 years or so. We will highlight three of the most important such conditions, but we are confident that others were also necessary.

First, the HIV/AIDS crisis erupted in the early 1980s. This introduced new stigmas against gay people, but it also forced many to be open to their friends and family, which spurred concern for thier plight. As a result, the psychology of interpersonal connections, as reviewed above, effected a change in attitudes (albeit only for those who *had* interpersonal connections with gay people). Evidence in support of this idea is that anti-gay attitudes actually exhibited a greater decline in U.S. states with higher rates of HIV/AIDS (Fernández et al., 2019).

A second important condition was the development of gay subcultures in many urban centers, enabled by high levels of freedom and mobility in the U.S. starting in the late 1960s (Hanhardt & Hanhardt, 2013). In these cities it was finally possible for gay people to be open about their identity, avoid prejudice, and find like-minded peers. Critically, many gay people retained ties to family members and friends outside their gay communities, which

enabled those with interpersonal connections with gay people to change their minds. These subcultures would eventually expand and spread to other locations, including not just cities and towns but communities organized online. As a consequence, far more gay people were able to live openly than in the past, enough to produce a cascade in attitude change. Importantly, changes to the broader culture also fed back into psychology, through a kind of positive feedback loop (Kumar & Campbell, 2022). Put succinctly, the feedback loop is that communities that welcomed gay people made it easier for them to live openly, which changed the attitudes of close others, which changed the broader culture, which then made it easier, again, for gay people to live openly, and so on. This positive feedback loop helps explain why the decline of anti-gay attitudes was so large and fast.

A third possible condition, much more general, was the emergence of the civil rights movement and women's rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s. These movements were associated with intense political activism and heightened consciousness about socio-cultural restrictions. Arguably, they helped lead to the emergence of a more pluralistic and tolerant "counter-culture," which fostered greater acceptance of gay people and other oppressed groups. Thus, earlier movements toward social justice for Black people and women may have had far-reaching, secondary consequences.

Let us summarize our discussion of the first psychological mechanism identified by our theory. A wide range of people are likely to have an interpersonal connection with someone who is gay – more likely than someone from a racial/ethnic outgroup – because homosexuality is a hidden or otherwise concealable trait, associated with a "straight-passing" appearance, that is randomly distributed across the population. Emotions that sustain interpersonal relationships can prompt acceptance of gay family and friends. At one extreme, longstanding anti-gay attitudes among older people vanish, either slowly or suddenly. At the other extreme, incipient anti-gay attitudes among younger people never develop at all. The next step is for people to engage in moral consistency reasoning, treating like cases alike and generalizing their acceptance. If they can resist the temptation to subtype, some people reason that there are no morally relevant differences between their gay friend or family member and other gay people, i.e., that prejudice against the former is also wrong when directed against the latter. The collective and cumulative result of all of these small-scale, interpersonal events is a large-scale, societal shift.

4. Psychological mechanism II: social category classification

We propose a second psychological mechanism that involves *social category classification*. People tend to "essentialize" social groups. That is, to a first approximation, they tend to believe that all members of a given social group

share a hidden, genetic essence that explains the surface-level features they have in common. We will argue that this widely present and deep-seated psychological disposition helps explain the relatively large, rapid, and broad decline of anti-gay attitudes, in comparison with negative attitudes toward other marginalized groups including women and people of color. On the one hand, essentialism about sexual orientation tends to reduce anti-gay attitudes because it leads people to believe that individuals do not freely choose to be gay and lack the power to change their sexual orientation (i.e., "born this way" narratives). On the other hand, essentialism about race and gender tends to amplify racist and sexist attitudes because it leads people to discount the role of structural oppression in generating inequality and also to accept the inevitability of racial and gender differences. In the rest of this section, we will develop this explanation surrounding accessible counterfactuals across these different cases alongside a key difference in the moral status of the cases. We will begin with a review of work on psychological essentialism.

A large body of empirical work suggests that essentialism is a common stance in folk psychology (Bastian & Haslam, 2006; Dar-Nimrod & Heine, 2011; Gelman & Gelman, 2003; Heine et al., 2017; Levy et al., 2001). From a very young age, people tend to believe that animals, people, and certain objects have hidden essences. These essences are regarded as discrete, immutable, biological, shared by all members within a relatively homogenous kind, and underlying other, surface-level traits they have in common. Important for the present theory, people are disposed to essentialize not just natural substances and biological taxa but also social categories. That is, those who essentialize tend to believe that all men or all Asian people, for example, share a hidden, immutable, and biological essence that can never be changed and that plays an important role in causing all men or all Asian people to act and appear the way they do. When it comes to animals and people, in contrast with inanimate objects, essentialism typically has a genetic aspect (Dar-Nimrod & Heine, 2011; Heine et al., 2017), though not always (Heiphetz et al., 2017). That is, this research finds that the essence of a given biological and social category is often thought to lie in genes that are shared by all members.

It has been widely thought that gay people choose their sexual orientation. Indeed, some people who understand themselves to be straight may choose to be in a gay relationship. Increasingly, however, many people believe that whether a person is attracted to individuals of the same or opposite gender is fixed by a biological (genetic) essence (Haslam & Levy, 2006). While some activists and critical theorists reject this idea, it is nonetheless common in popular culture. Many pro-gay cultural figures often repeat the slogan that gay people are "born this way." That gay people are coming out much earlier in their lives compared to previous generations

(Dunlap, 2016) may reinforce "born this way" narratives. These narratives, we believe, reflect a powerful psychological mechanism. Studies indicate that people who are essentialists about sexual orientation are more likely to have positive attitudes toward gay people and the issues that affect them (Heine et al., 2017). Manipulations of perceived etiology, by emphasizing genetic explanations for sexuality, increase support for LGB causes among American and European populations (Falomir-Pichastor & Mugny, 2009; Frias-Navarro et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2017). Perceptions of the increased immutability and naturalness of sexual orientation reduce perceptions of culpability and lead to less assignment of blame (Cheung & Heine, 2015).

Interestingly, this pattern stands in contrast to perceptions of biological predispositions for body weight. People tend to discount the role of biology in body weight (preferring, instead, to explain body weight with reference to personal, controllable characteristics like diet or exercise), which may also explain why anti-fat bias has actually increased in the past two decades in spite of the greater visibiliyt of self-defined fat people today (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019a). In fact, recent work reveals that biological explanations reduce children's anti-fat bias, hinting at the power of essentialist attitudes for prejudice reduction during a time when both essentialism and explicit prejudice are at their peak (Carvalho et al., 2021).

Notably, precisely characterizing the components of essentialism is an ongoing empirical project that has not yet achieved consensus (e.g., Dar-Nimrod & Heine, 2011; Haslam & Levy, 2006; Heiphetz et al., 2017; Noyes & Dunham, 2019). Here we focus on two distinct but related components of essentialism that both appear to reduce anti-gay bias: biology, as discussed above, and immutability (Heiphetz et al., 2017). That is, when people essentialize a group of people they tend to think that their traits and behavior are rooted in their biological (genetic) inheritance and also highly stable and not subject to change over time. In the context of essentialism about sexual orientation, people tend to think that being gay is both biologically (genetically) determined and something that cannot be changed. Of course, these two components are related. People may reason that being gay is immutable *because* it is biologically determined. We propose, however, that the two components have complementary but separable consequences for attitudes toward gay people. Our own ongoing experimental work tests these ideas, including whether gay men are essentialized differently from gay women.

In general, people have had a tendency to moralize being gay. Essentialism counteracts that tendency via two routes. First, people may reason that if being gay is *biologically determined* then it is not freely chosen. In general, people tend to believe that biological determinism preempts free choice and moral responsibility (Nahmias, 2011). Philosophers sometimes articulate the principle as follows: free choice and moral responsibility

require the ability "to do otherwise" (Clarke, 2009; Locke, 1690). Thus, people have reasoned that, if your genes caused you to be gay, then being gay was not up to you, and you cannot be held morally responsible for being gay. There is no sense in blaming someone, much less loathing them, for something that they have no control over.

Second, people may reason pragmatically that if being gay is *immutable* then gay people must be accepted. This reasoning rests, likewise, on a more general principle. As philosophers put it, "ought implies can." More precisely, someone is morally obligated to do something only if it is possible for them to do it (Kant, 1781). Given the present state of research, it is not clear whether the general public believes ought implies can (Kurthy et al., 2017; cf.; Chituc et al., 2016). However, what seems to be more clear is that "blame implies can" (Buckwalter et al., 2015). Now, remember that essentialism entails that being gay is immutable. Thus, people have reasoned that if it is not possible for a gay person to change their sexual orientation, then they cannot be blamed for being gay, and one might as well accept them for who they are.

In the previous section we introduced a puzzle about timing: why did interpersonal connections cause a decline in anti-gay attitudes over the last 50 years rather than earlier or later? A similar puzzle arises in the context of social category classification: why did an essentialist stance come to be applied to gay people and cause a decline in anti-gay attitudes when it did? Our solution to this puzzle depends on the hypothesis that the two mechanisms are interrelated. One reason that people have found it difficult to subtype gay people, failing to create exceptions that block generalization through moral consistency reasoning, is that they tend to see all gay people as having a shared biological essence and therefore members of a single social kind. Conversely, interpersonal connections also supported the mechanism of social category classification. As gay people formed communities in which they could live openly, more individuals lived open and candid lives, which, in turn, changed the attitudes of close others, changed the broader culture and (in a full circle) made it easier for gay people to live openly, creating a positive self-reinforcing cycle. Thus, we hypothesize that it is because gay people gained greater visibility as a relatively homogeneous or entitative group that straight people began to essentialize them. In addition, pro-gay activists and cultural figures have initiated an active push to essentialize gay identities – via "born this way" narratives and increased use of generic labels for gay people – which has led others to passively adopt an essentialist stance (Peretz-Lange & Muentener, 2020; Rhodes et al., 2012). That gay people are coming out much earlier in their lives compared to previous generations (Dunlap, 2016) may reinforce "born this way" narratives, especially if it is less likely for people to think that children are coerced by a pro-gay "agenda." More youth are openly gay

because of greater public acceptance. For the reasons given here, however, this is likely not just an outcome of but also a contributor to greater acceptance. All of the factors discussed above may be why essentialism was operant during the last 50 years, leading straight people to infer that sexual orientation is not freely chosen or mutable.

We have argued that the increasing prevalence of essentialism about sexual orientation can account for the decline in anti-gay attitudes. However, it is less clear why essentialism about sexual orientation should lead to a decline in anti-gay attitudes, whereas essentialism about gender and race has been shown to have the *opposite* impact in the case of sexism and racism, reinforcing anti-women and anti-Black attitudes. Indeed, past research suggests that essentialism about social categories is a broadly regressive force. For example, studies find that essentialism is tied to negative attitudes toward Black people (Jayaratne et al., 2006; Mandalaywala et al., 2018), women (Brescoll & LaFrance, 2004), Aboriginal people (Bastian & Haslam, 2006), members of lower classes (Kraus & Keltner, 2013), immigrants (Bastian & Haslam, 2008; Zagefka et al., 2013), and criminals (Martin & Heiphetz, 2021). The puzzle of why essentialism tends to lead to more bias against some marginalized groups (e.g., gender and race) but less anti-gay bias is worth exploring in future empirical work. We present a speculative hypothesis below.

Our hypothesis involves both alternative or counterfactual explanations accessible across the cases alongside the moral status of the cases, i.e., people tend to moralize being gay in a way that they do not necessarily moralize being a woman or a person of color. For example, some people think it is wrong for men to have sex with other men. These people moralize being gay. This is different from thinking that disparities in outcomes are morally justified, such as when people think that women or Black people deserve to occupy subordinate roles. The key point here concerns the different states/traits that essentialized social identity is invoked to explain. When it comes to race and gender, there are clear and salient disparities in material resources and/or social standing – between Whites and Blacks, men and women. Essentialism suggests that these disparities are natural and immutable – and therefore seems to justify them. On the contrary, what's salient for those with anti-gay attitudes is the sexual behavior of gay people and whether it can be reformed. Some infer that because this sexual behavior stems from a natural and immutable essence that gay people cannot be held responsible. So, what's different is not the presence/absence of an excuse (born that way) but the different behaviors or outcomes that are the object of prejudiced thought (sexual behavior vs. material/social disparities).

So, when it comes to sexual orientation, people believe that same-sex sexual attraction or behavior can be explained by either biology or free choice; essentialism leads people to explain same-sex sexual attraction in

terms of biology and to discount free choice. Since the trait is thought to be due to a fixed essence and cannot be changed, blame is reduced and so is the motivation to change the behavior. (Note that this appears to be the case for body weight as well, as discussed above; people tend to think of body weight as a product of either biology or free choice. Most people would struggle to accept that the amount one eats is an essential aspect that cannot be controlled and, in that case, would blame people for their weight. But if the perspective is shifted to be about the baseline metabolic processes being uncontrollable, they might accept that this is essential and beyond control and reduce blame.) When it comes to gender and race, people believe that group differences can be explained by either biology or social structure; essentialism leads people to underplay structural sexism and racism. For Black people and women, there is not a single, specific trait or behavior that is essentialized. But disparities in outcomes are attributed to essential differences in identity. People may not blame Black people or women for those different outcomes, but there is also no motivation to rectify the disparate outcomes. Thus, essentialism itself may or may not be the causal factor in initially determining attitudes and prejudice, but it can be used as a way of justifying existing hierarchies and sustaining belief in their acceptability (Haslam & Whelan, 2008). Essentialist attributions may be a way of ignoring structural explanations for group differences, especially in social outcomes (Peretz-Lange & Muentener, 2019, 2020). Thus, in the case of sexual orientation, essentialist beliefs might result in removing culpability for being gay, but in the case of race, essentialist beliefs might function as legitimizing ideologies for enforcing or allowing the subordination of Black people (Jayaratne et al., 2006).

We can illustrate this idea with some examples. Black people are underrepresented in academia, both as professors and university students (Ashkenas et al., 2017; Supiano, 2015). Some people argue that this disparity exists because Black people are biologically different from White people and other racial groups. Essentialism thus leads people to discount the role of systemic racism in generating educational disparities between Whites and Blacks. Parallel ideas apply to women. Many STEM fields also have a disproportionately low number of female full professors (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019b). Some academics argue that the disparity exists because women are biologically different from men. On average, it is alleged, women have inferior mathematical abilities at least along some dimensions (Pinker, 2005; Summers, 2005), or they have a stronger interest in people and a weaker interest in objects and abstract ideas (e.g., Damore, 2017). Insofar as people believe this hypothesis about the biological differences between men and women, they are likely to discount the role of systemic sexism in generating the group disparity. For race and gender, biological explanations contained within essentialism lead people to underplay

structural causes of racial and gender inequality. In the case of anti-gay bias, however, biological explanations replace free choice, mitigating attributions of responsibility and driving acceptance. Again, inherent in this proposed solution to the puzzle is another key difference: people tend to *moralize* being gay (e.g., the question of culpability is on the table) in a way that people do not necessarily moralize gender or race. Exactly why people moralize being gay in the first place is a separate puzzle we leave for further empirical investigation.

Let us summarize our discussion of the second psychological mechanism described by our explanatory theory. In section 3, recall, we argued that people develop positive attitudes toward particular individuals and then modify their opinion about homosexuality in general. In this section our model depicts attitude change unfolding in the opposite direction. A general attitude toward homosexuality occurs first and results in attitude change toward individuals. People have tended to essentialize social categories, more recently including sexual orientation. Thus, people have come to believe that women, racial minorities, and gay people are "born that way," as a result of a hidden, immutable, genetic essence. This stance has had a number of consequences, but several are important for the present theory. First of all, people have tended to infer that gay people are not morally responsible for their sexual orientation and that they cannot become straight in the future, which implies that there is little choice but to accept them for who they are. So, essentialism has led many people to abandon anti-gay attitudes. However, essentialism has not had the same effect on racist and sexist attitudes. From an essentializing stance, people have tended to infer that racial and gender inequality is the result of immutable, biological differences rather than racism and sexism, respectively. Essentialism has justified and reinforced racist and sexist attitudes. Thus, essentialism interacts with bias differently depending on the alternative explanation accessible for the bias: in the case of sexual orientation (and body weight), the alternative to essentialism is free choice, but in the case of inequalities due to race and gender (and other forms of marginalization), the alternative to essentialism is structural racism and sexism. In brief, alongside interpersonal connections, essentialist classification of the social category of being gay has helped bring about a relatively large, rapid, and broad decline of anti-gay attitudes.

5. Extensions to other societies and to other marginalized groups

We have developed a detailed psychological explanation for how two mechanisms have fostered a large, rapid, and broad decline of anti-gay attitudes. One reason for pursuing an explanatory theory about anti-gay attitude change, aside from its inherent worth, is that it can offer

a basis for predicting how prejudiced attitudes might decline in the future. From an ethical and policy perspective, furthermore, the theory can also be used to identify conditions that can engender further progressive attitude change and counter regressive attitude change. In this section, we will extend the theory to three domains: from American history to its future (section 5.1); from America to other societies that have not yet experienced a similar decline (section 5.2); and from gay people to other marginalized groups such as transgender people (section 5.3).

5.1. The future of anti-gay attitudes in America

Our explanatory theory is intended to explain a decline in attitudes that began, roughly, in the late 1960s, continues into the present day, and is currently provoking intense backlash. An important question is whether the decline will continue, despite obstacles, and what shape it will take. As mentioned in section 2, younger generations have more positive attitudes toward gay people. It seems unlikely that the children of Millennials and Generation Z will revert to anti-gay positions. That being said, we hypothesize that both mechanisms will continue to erode anti-gay attitudes, but that future attitude change will depend on the persistence of allied institutional changes of the sort discussed briefly in section 2. Alongside progressive changes in attitude and behavior, Americans have also reformed political, legal, religious, military, and medical institutions. Further reform would create an even more welcoming environment, making it easier for gay people to live open and candid lives, which would likely facilitate further attitude change through both of our proposed mechanisms. First, as more gay people live openly, more straight people are likely to encounter gay people and essentialize the social category of being gay. Many of these people will draw the inference that sexual orientation is not under a person's control and cannot be changed. Second, and more obviously, as more gay people are open about their sexual identity, a greater number of straight people will discover that close or admired others are gay. Thus, empathy and sympathy will continue to act as a moral wedge that initiates a series of local and general changes in attitude. One negative force is the Supreme Court, which has added conservative justices. Another is the introduction of anti-gay legislation, such as "don't say gay" bills in various US states (Jones & Franklin, 2022). However, an important locus of reform is in media institutions, including social media. Echo chambers may sustain prejudice, particularly if hate and misinformation are permitted. But anti-gay attitudes are likely to continue declining as a result of increased diversity, such that more gay men and women are represented in film

and television and given prominence on emerging social media platforms. In both cases, the consequence is greater visibility that encourages interpersonal connections and essentialist classification.

However, we speculate that both of the mechanisms identified in this article may eventually bump up against two counteracting forces. In particular, essentialism about sexual orientation may rest on errors that will increasingly be brought to light. As some biologists and critical theorists argue, it may simply be false that gay people are "born that way." Essentialism may be true in physics, but its application to social categories is far more tenuous. Even if sexual orientation is influenced by biology, it is also likely to be influenced by culture; it may be a "bio-cultural" trait. As more people discover this (putative) fact, they may abandon their essentialist stance toward sexual orientation, and therefore may refrain from inferring that gay people have no free choice over their sexuality. They may also discover that sexuality is fluid and plastic, and therefore not immutable in a way that preempts (moral) responsibility.

A second counteracting force on the continuing decline on anti-gay attitudes in America is related to the first. Remember that interpersonal connections can initiate a cascade of further changes in attitude. A general change in attitudes unfolds when people reason that if discrimination against a close other is wrong, then so is discrimination on the same basis against strangers. As we argued in section 3.2, moral consistency reasoning is likely to be disrupted when people are more easily able to subtype. As gay people become increasingly visible in American society, more people may become aware of diversity within gay communities, in particular, gay individuals who are polyamorous or transgender, or who otherwise do not exhibit traditional identities and lifestyles. A consequence of an increase in the perceived heterogeneity and reduced entitativity within this social category is that people may be more likely to engage in subtyping, that is, revise anti-gay attitudes about some individuals or subtypes but not others. Relatedly, straight people's attitudes may undergo a backlash as they discover more gay people who do not fit the mainstream mold.

One possible solution is for Americans to discover more enlightened reasons for accepting gay people. First, people should ideally be able to reason about the unacceptability of anti-gay discrimination without needing to have an interpersonal connection with someone who is gay. Put simply, it is wrong for someone to face discrimination whether or not they are your friend or family member. Second, adults should have the freedom to pursue romantic relationships with whomever they desire; whether or not their desires are essential to their identity (or biological or immutable) is immaterial. One day, more Americans might internalize arguments against anti-gay prejudice that are not catalyzed by gay close others, and that do not assume that being gay is a genetic trait, for example. Interpersonal

connections and essentialism might eventually become a ladder that Americans can kick away after they have already climbed it.

5.2. Anti-gay attitudes in other societies

In this article we have focused on the decline of anti-gay attitudes in the U.S. The reason is not that social change in America is more important than social change in other countries; rather, much of the data that we draw upon – including polling data and empirical studies of bias – are derived exclusively from research on American populations. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to infer that the trends we documented in section 2 and the psychological mechanisms we identified in section 3 and section 4 are also present in other countries that are culturally similar to the U.S., including Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, and other countries in Western Europe. Attitude change in the U.S. has lagged behind many of these countries. For example, in The Netherlands, the first country to legalize same sex marriage, in 2001, one survey finds that 92% of the Dutch population thinks that homosexuality should be accepted by society (Pew Research Center, 2020b). It is possible that the reason anti-gay attitudes declined earlier in The Netherlands, compared to the U.S. and other countries, is that visible gay communities emerged there earlier, catalyzing interpersonal connections and essentialist reasoning, though further research is needed to support this idea.

Notably, all of the countries mentioned above are WEIRD, that is, western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (Henrich et al., 2010). Here, we ask about non-WEIRD countries. First of all, it is somewhat misleading to group all non-WEIRD countries together into a single category; there is enormous diversity among them. Consider again one of our proxies for the decline of anti-gay attitudes, that is, the shifting proportion of people who favor or oppose same-sex marriage. According to Pew surveys of global opinion, several non-Western countries have exhibited a similarly large and rapid shift in attitude, including Mexico, Argentina, Japan, South Korea, India, South Africa (Pew Research Center, 2020a). In fact, Argentina and South Africa legalized same-sex marriage years before the US. By contrast, acceptance of same-sex marriage is moderate, with populations being roughly split, in most countries within Eastern and Central Europe (excluding Russia and Ukraine, where acceptance is low). Acceptance in most countries in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle-East is low (excluding South Africa and Israel, where acceptance is high). Within Asian-Pacific countries, there is a great deal of variation (e.g., 73% of people in the Philippines and only 9% of people in Indonesia).

Famously, there is a great deal of psychological variation more generally between people who were raised in WEIRD vs. non-WEIRD countries

(Henrich et al., 2010). However, we are not aware of evidence indicating that people from non-WEIRD countries are less likely to undergo processes implicated in our proposed psychological mechanisms. And, for example, children tend to be even more essentialist than adults, which suggests low cultural variation (Heiphetz & Young, 2017; Heiphetz et al., 2017, 2018; Wright, 2012). More likely, the differences are due to cultural and political conditions that we have proposed are also necessary to drive the decline in anti-gay attitudes. In particular, some non-WEIRD countries do not enjoy the same freedom and mobility that enable communities of gay people to arise and, more recently, to express themselves in media. In addition, political forces in these countries have not mobilized to engender reform of social institutions. In some cases, this may be due in part to the colonialist imposition of Western values that disrupted preexisting acceptance (Hoad, 2007; M'Baye, 2013). In other cases, Western countries enact policies that empower local political movements seeking to liberate gay people. Yet, if the regressive turn in American politics deepens, it is possible that some countries will no longer perceive any humanitarian pressure to reform anti-gay laws and policies. Further research is needed to shed light on why interpersonal connections and social category classification have not caused a similar decline in anti-gay attitudes around the world. We should expect divergent explanations across different countries and regions. We should also be aware that other cultures possess different gender and sexuality categories that do not line up with those in WEIRD countries that our theory has relied on (Parker, 2009).

5.3. Anti-trans attitudes

We have been careful to specify that the prejudiced attitudes that have declined are largely targeted toward gay men and women rather than the broader LGBTQ community as such. That is, there has not yet been a similar decline in prejudiced attitudes toward bisexual, transgender, and queer people, more broadly. It is important to examine why. One likely reason has to do with intersectionality, and specifically with "respectability politics" (Strolovitch & Crowder, 2018). In the case of many progressive social changes, initial benefits are accorded to only a proper subset within a given marginalized group. For example, first and second wave feminism were mobilized primarily to advance the rights of White, upper-class women. Feminists rallied to advance the ability of women to join the workforce; the problem for Black and Indigenous women was not that they could not work outside the home but that they were allowed to fulfill only subordinate roles where they risked exposure to physical violence. Similarly, early progress within the movement toward LGBTQ equality benefited (some) gay men and women, while sidelining the interests of

bisexual, transgender, and queer people who experienced greater marginalization (Finley, 2020). The latter groups enjoyed even less "respectability," i.e., their appearance and behavior conformed less with traditional values. This is analogous to other social changes. For example, in the 20th century, Polish, Irish, Italian, and other immigrant groups gained the status of Whiteness, while Latinx and Asian people continued to be othered (Roediger, 2005). Another factor is that, compared to gay people, a smaller proportion of the population is trans (The Williams Institute, 2016). Therefore, even under the assumption that these identities are distributed diffusely, a fewer number of straight people have been in a position to discover that a friend or family member is trans.

So far, progressive changes that improve the lives of trans people have been slow to accumulate. Anti-trans attitudes may now be at a level that compares to anti-gay attitudes several decades ago. Implicit and explicit anti-trans attitudes not only remain high but are also correlated with transphobia and support for anti-trans policies (Axt et al., 2020). A record number of anti-trans bills have been passed by state legislatures in recent years (Jones & Navarro, 2022). In fact, it is possible that acceptance of gay people is partly a result of the public emergence of trans people and others who are subject to greater relative stigma, which has modified the anchors on rating scales. In addition, those who take an essentialist stance toward gay people may be social constructionists about gender presentation, and they may worry that unconventional gender presentation may be socially transmitted (including to children).

Optimistically, however, we hypothesize that both of our proposed psychological mechanisms have the ability to foster a decline in anti-trans attitudes. Pro-LGBTQ activists gain similar traction by arguing that trans people are "born that way." Seminal work by Kristina Olson and colleagues has revealed that children as young as 3 years old who are living as a gender different from their sex assigned at birth strongly identify with their current gender and display gender-typed preferences and behaviors in a way that is indistinguishable from their cisgender peers (Gülgöz et al., 2019; Olson et al., 2015). In addition, transgender children are as likely as cisgender children to essentialize gender, despite their social experiences of gender transition (Gülgöz et al., 2019). Trans children's gender identity does not vary as a factor of how long they have been out as trans, and, for children who eventually transition, their gender identity does not significantly differ before and after transition (Gülgöz et al., 2019; Rae et al., 2019). Given the robustness of gender identity so early in development, cisgender people may be in a position to infer that gender identity is not a matter of free choice and moral responsibility, and also not something that can be changed. While essentialism may have played a significant causal role in mitigating anti-gay attitudes, essentialism may also be deployed in a motivated fashion,

especially to change persistent anti-gay attitudes. Essentialism may play an even greater role now in shaping attitudes toward trans people, to the extent that support for trans youth and trans people more generally appears to draw from apparent evidence for the essential (biological, enduring) nature of transgender identity. By contrast, and, somewhat more pessimistically, we hypothesize that it is more difficult for people to take an essentialist stance toward bisexual and non-binary individuals, since non-discrete (non-binary) expressions of sexuality and gender conflict with components of essentialism. In addition, as mentioned in section 5.1, essentialism about all of these categories may become more tenuous as people discover the cultural influences on sexuality and gender and their fluidity.

In general, psychological changes unfold in concert with political and cultural changes. This is no less true for attitudes toward trans people. Thus, we expect that the reform of anti-trans attitudes will also require the reform of social institutions, especially in the face of backlash from people who think the movement is going too far and have been spreading far-right ideology and misinformation. If medical, political, and religious institutions can be made more welcoming to trans people, then a greater number of trans people would feel safe to live openly and candidly. This would increase the number of cisgender people who discover that a friend or family member is trans. Some of these people could be expected to revise their attitudes toward the trans people in their lives, and through moral consistency reasoning, trans people who are strangers. As with declining anti-gay attitudes, diversity in traditional and social media has the potential to act as a powerful catalyst (Kumar & Campbell, 2022), for example, as prominent celebrities announce their transgender identity and enjoy relatively warm public reception.

6. Conclusion

In this article, we have proposed a psychological account for why anti-gay attitudes (with some important exceptions) have declined in the U.S. over the course of several decades, in concert with other progressive changes related to the behavior of straight people and institutional structure. In section 2 we argued that this phenomenon is unique in that, compared to other negative attitudes toward marginalized groups, such as women and people of color, the decline in anti-gay attitudes has been larger, faster, and broader. After describing the phenomenon, we developed an explanatory theory. We explained why anti-gay attitudes have exhibited a unique decline via two related psychological mechanisms. In section 3 we argued that people have undergone a local change in attitudes within interpersonal relationships before generalizing their attitude change through moral

consistency reasoning. In section 4 we argued that psychological essentialism (including "born that way" narratives) has led people to withdraw blame from gay people and accept them for who they are. In section 5 we developed hypotheses about whether, and under what conditions, our two mechanisms might drive further progressive changes in attitudes in other countries and toward other marginalized groups, including especially trans people. Of course, more research is needed particularly at the intersection of psychology and politics and culture, and much more moral progress needs to be made on multiple fronts. Continued investigation of the phenomenon can launch future progressive change and, more generally, inform the psychology of moral progress.

Notes

1. The percentage of church congregations in the US that allowed openly gay people to hold full-fledged membership increased from 37.4% in 2006–07 to 48% in 2012, and the percentage that allowed them in positions of voluntary leadership increased from 17.8% to 26.5% within the same time period (National Congregations Study, 2012).
2. Of these, 54% are gay men and 30% are lesbians – and 94% are cis, and 77% are white (Victory Institute, 2020).

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