

## Illuminating Societal Stereotyping of Bisexuals and the Need for Strategies to Reduce Stigmatization

**Author :** Ann E. Tweedy

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Brian Dodge et al., [\*Attitudes Toward Bisexual Men and Women Among a Nationally Representative Probability Sample of Adults in the United States\*](#), 11 **PLoS ONE** (2016).

Despite the fact that bisexuals are, by most counts, the largest sexual minority group in the United States, they remain woefully under-researched and under-theorized. This invisibility in the realm of research and scholarship may be tied to the fact that bisexual programs and organizations receive only a minuscule amount of funding compared to either gay or lesbian organizations. As one study noted, over a forty-year period, bisexual programs and organizations received less than 0.3% of the funding awarded to their gay or lesbian counterparts. See Anthony Bowen, [\*Forty Years of LGBTQ Philanthropy: 1970–2010\*](#) 33 (2012). Furthermore, bisexuals face alarming physical and mental health disparities—including higher levels of mood and anxiety disorders and of suicidal ideation—compared to individuals of other sexual orientations, which may well be a consequence of the fact that bisexuality is stigmatized by both heterosexual and homosexual communities.

This background of invisibility and stigmatization helps illustrate the importance of Brian Dodge et al.'s *Attitudes Toward Bisexual Men and Women Among a Nationally Representative Probability Sample of Adults in the United States*, published in the journal *PLoS ONE*. The article—and the study on which it is based—fills an important gap in the existing research on bisexuality as to prevailing societal attitudes toward bisexuals and the persistence of common stereotypes of this group, despite the considerable advances in societal attitudes towards gays and lesbians.

Prior to the publication of this article, the only published research to address such attitudes that was based on a nationally representative probability sample was a 2002 article by Gregory Herek in which he found that heterosexuals rated bisexual men and women lower than any of the other fourteen named political, racial, ethnic, and religious groups identified in the study—except for injecting drug users. See Gregory M. Herek, *Heterosexuals' Attitudes Toward Bisexual Men and Women in the United States*, 39 **J. Sex Res.** 264, 268 (2002). While compelling, Herek's findings have become outdated, particularly given the known advances in societal attitudes toward gay men and lesbians over the past decade and a half. Moreover, unlike the work of Brian Dodge and his colleagues, Gregory Herek was able to assess only heterosexuals' attitudes toward bisexuals because the number of gay and lesbian respondents in his study was too low. *Id.* at 267. Because bisexuals are known to face prejudice from both the straight and LGBT communities and because this intra- and inter-group prejudice is thought to contribute to bisexuals' poorer health outcomes, the information that Dodge and his colleagues obtained about gay and lesbian attitudes is crucial.

Dodge and his colleagues, who specialize in public health, medicine, and social work, asked their respondents to rate the extent to which they either agreed or disagreed with five stereotypes of bisexuals, relating to perceptions of confusion, perceptions of HIV/STI "riskiness," perceptions of non-monogamy, perceptions of promiscuity, and perceptions of bisexuality as temporary. Because attitudes toward bisexual males are known to be more negative than those toward bi women, the researchers asked about attitudes toward each gender group separately, without separating out transgender men and women from either group.

Across all of the stereotypical statements regarding bisexual men and women, the authors found that the largest proportion of respondents—over one-third—neither agreed nor disagreed with each stereotype. Although it may appear on the surface that this result reflects neutrality toward bisexuals, in fact the result is quite concerning in that it appears to evidence a widespread unwillingness to disavow such stereotypes, whereas, with better-understood groups, one

would expect respondents to readily recognize the perniciousness of stereotypes. Instead of recognizing the stereotypes as such, the largest proportion of respondents could be viewed as expressing indifference or perhaps lack of knowledge or understanding of bisexuals. Another cause for concern is that the authors found that attitudes toward bisexual men were in fact more negative across the board than those toward bisexual women. Although, for most of the stereotypical statements, these differences were slight, the negative attitudes were significantly stronger toward bisexual men on the question of the riskiness of contracting HIV or STIs from having sex with bisexuals. While, as the authors point out, there are several factors relating to the behavior of bisexual men that suggest that they are in fact less likely than members of other groups to transmit HIV, the study demonstrates that this stereotype of bisexual men as a bridge for HIV transmission is unfortunately alive and well. Finally, the study indicates that heterosexuals harbor more prejudice toward bisexuals than do gays and lesbians. Those who identified themselves as “other” or “asexual,” by contrast, demonstrated the least prejudice toward bisexuals.

While studies that utilize convenience samples are also valuable, the fact that the Dodge et al. study is based on a nationally representative probability sample is important because it means that the study provides generalizable information about our societal outlook as a whole. In an era when the United States government is dropping questions about sexual orientation from its own surveys and even forbidding agencies from mentioning some sexual minorities in their budget requests, the information uncovered in the Dodge et al. study will undoubtedly prove all the more valuable. See, e.g., Lena H. Sun & Juliet Eilperin, [CDC Gets List of Forbidden Words: Fetus, Transgender, and Diversity](#), **Wash. Post** (Dec. 15, 2017). Moreover, this trend in the federal government is highly likely to lead to less research funding being available for the study of LGBT communities, which in turn will make studies based on nationally representative probability samples more difficult to conduct because of the expense of obtaining such samples.

In short, this study will serve as an indispensable resource for legal scholars who conduct empirical work or who engage in normative scholarship on bisexuality. It provides a much-needed lay of the land as to prevailing attitudes regarding bisexuality, demonstrating that, although attitudes have improved somewhat over the past fifteen years, perceptions of bisexuals still lag behind those of gays and lesbians. Moreover, the study particularly highlights the need for strategies to reduce stigmatization of bisexual men.

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