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Respectability Politics and Straight Support for LGB Rights

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Abstract

Marginalized groups frequently adopt a respectability politics strategy, presenting themselves as adhering to dominant norms to gain public support. The LGBTQ movement, for example, has consciously portrayed same-gender relationships as exemplifying heteronormative values to win over straight Americans. But how effective *is* this strategy? Two survey experiments show that presenting LGB people as adhering to, or violating, norms of monogamy and exclusivity has null to minimal effects on straight respondents' views of them or support for their rights. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the effects are moderated by (1) respondents' political predispositions; or (2) the race, ethnicity, or gender of the LGB people being highlighted. Emphasizing the respectability of same-gender relationships is not as effective as the movement has assumed. More broadly, these results call into question the assumption that highlighting "respectable" members of marginalized groups is an effective way to change public opinion.

Keywords

respectability politics, LGB rights, public opinion

In mass democracies, marginalized communities must typically find ways to appeal to majority opinion to secure their rights. One common strategy is respectability politics, whereby groups portray themselves as adhering to mainstream norms of "proper" behavior. The hope is that dominant groups will then come to perceive similarities with marginalized people and view them as deserving of equal rights (Harris 2014; Higginbotham 1993; Kennedy 2015; Strolovitch and Crowder 2018). As such, movements representing stigmatized groups frequently choose to highlight their most respectable members and emphasize how they exemplify dominant values (see, for example, Fackler 2016; Miller 2004; Sharpless 2016).

This has certainly been the strategy adopted by the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) movement over the past several decades.[1] To try and win support from straight Americans, advocacy groups consciously portrayed LGBTQ people as adhering to dominant heteronormative values. While respectability can take many forms, the movement has particularly focused on relationship norms of exclusivity and monogamy (Beam 2018; Hindman 2019; Hunter 2017; Levit 2010; Moscowitz 2013; Pascar 2018; Woodly 2015). Activists sought to "drive home the message that gay people are essentially just like everybody else" by emphasizing how their relationships fit "traditional American values" of "stability, commitment, and family" (Carpenter 2012, 188, 193). Communication memos encouraged the use of words like "long-term, lifelong, stable, permanent" to portray same-gender relationships as similar to straight ones (Freedom to Marry 2010; Harrison and Michelson 2017b). And groups scoured the country for "perfect plaintiffs" and media figureheads whose relationships exemplified these norms (Godsoe 2015; O'Neill 2018; Robinson and Frost 2018).

This approach has had non-trivial costs for the LGBTQ community. It sidelined those members who would not or could not present themselves in respectable ways (Cohen 1997; Murib 2018), casting "other forms of gay identity (*not* being part of a monogamous, married, child-rearing couple) to the margins" (Moscowitz 2013, 133, italics in original). It further stigmatized those whose relationships were deemed less than proper, as declaring one segment of the community respectable implicitly casts judgment on others (Cohen 1999). And the interests of

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those relatively disadvantaged community members got overlooked as strategists focused on the "good gays" whose relationships would be seen as "normal" by straight America (Beam 2018; Levit 2010; Strolovitch and Crowder 2018). The costs of these respectability appeals have been significant.

What of the benefits? Research on public opinion toward LGBTQ rights has flourished in recent years, highlighting the importance of interpersonal contact (e.g., G. B. Lewis 2011), endorsements from in-group members (e.g., Harrison and Michelson 2017a), media exposure (e.g., Garretson 2015), and core values (e.g., Jones et al. 2018), among other factors. But despite it being a core strategy of the modern movement, there is no research that directly assesses the effectiveness of portraying LGBTQ people as respectable in this way. Does emphasizing how same-gender relationships adhere to heteronormative values *actually* improve straight people's attitudes toward them and their rights?

To answer this question, I designed two survey experiments that manipulated the portrayal of LGB people in a news story. Straight respondents were shown articles that described a (fictitious) legal dispute involving LGB rights, with the plaintiff's relationship depicted as either aligning with, or violating, norms of monogamy and exclusivity. Contrary to the expectations of respectability politics, the type of relationship had almost no effect on attitudes.

In Study 1, respondents were shown a story about a gay man denied service by a business because of his sexual orientation. Feelings of similarity with him, support for his case, and attitudes toward LGB rights more broadly were unaffected by whether he was portrayed as in a two-person relationship or an open three-person relationship. Study 2 extends this to a more sensitive context, featuring a story about a teacher fired for revealing their sexual orientation to their students. Attitudes were again unaffected by the teacher being in a committed relationship, although there are some marginally positive but inconsistent effects of describing the relationship as monogamous. Throughout, there is no evidence that these minimal-to-null effects are moderated by respondents' predispositions (in Study 1) or other characteristics of the LGB people being foregrounded (in Study 2).

Overall, highlighting those same-gender relationships that conform to "respectable" values of monogamy and exclusivity does not substantially improve straight attitudes. More broadly, these results call into question the efficacy of respectability politics for marginalized groups seeking to win over public opinion. I begin by discussing the general strategy of respectability politics, before turning to its specific use by the LGBTQ movement, and the research questions guiding the experiments.

Respectability Politics

The terminology of "the politics of respectability" was first coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her study of the women's movement within the Progressive Era Black Baptist Church (Higginbotham 1993). Believing that "'proper' and 'respectable' behavior proved blacks worthy of equal civil and political rights" (Higginbotham 1993, 203) and hoping to "earn their people a measure of esteem from white America" (Higginbotham 1993, 14), movement leaders policed the community's behavior to ensure "blacks' conformity to the dominant society's norms of manners and morals" (Higginbotham 1993, 187).

More generally, respectability politics is rooted in the "conviction that marginalized groups must demonstrate that they adhere to normative values before they will be accepted or granted rights by dominant groups" (Strolovitch and Crowder 2018, 340; see also Lopez Bunyasi and Smith 2019; Cohen 1999; Harris 2014; Kennedy 2015). As Lopez Bunyasi and Smith (2019, 185) put it in the context of modern Black respectability politics, the assumption is "that if Blacks assimilate and behave more like Whites, equal treatment will follow." This assumption is particularly prevalent in contexts of what Cohen (1999) calls "advanced marginalization," when dominant groups at least superficially adopt rhetoric of greater inclusion, but marginalized groups are internally stratified and only "those who demonstrate adherence to dominant norms of work, love, and social interaction" are granted rights (Cohen 1999, 64). Facing such constraints, group leaders frequently turn to emphasizing respectability, hoping that they will be seen as similar to, and thus worthy of the same rights as, those in the dominant majority.

As a result, groups are particularly strategic about which members they highlight in public appeals. Perhaps the most famous example is of Rosa Parks, selected by leaders in the Civil Rights Movement as the face of the Montgomery bus boycott. Other Black women had been arrested for refusing to give up their seats prior to Parks. However, movement leaders deemed them insufficiently respectable and thus unlikely to appeal to White audiences: Claudette Colvin was unmarried and allegedly pregnant; Mary Louise Smith had an alcoholic father and came from an untidy home (Adler 2009; Fackler 2016; Kennedy 2015). Instead, movement leaders settled on Parks, "a respectable woman who adhered to the ideals of White middle-class femininity" (Fackler 2016, 274), believing that Whites would empathize with her and shift their racial attitudes.

Direct tests of this respectability politics strategy are elusive, although indirect evidence supports some of its conjectures. Certainly, perceptions of a group are linked

to views of their political demands. The more warmly one feels toward out-group members, the more likely one is to endorse policies that benefit them (e.g., Achen and Bartels 2016; Conover 1988; Nelson and Kinder 1996). Feeling empathetic toward other groups leads to greater support for their rights (Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos 2016). And actively taking the perspective of an out-group member reduces prejudice (Broockman and Kalla 2016)—something that is presumably more likely to happen when they are perceived as likable and similar to oneself (see Frantz and Janoff-Bulman 2000). Although indirect, this evidence would seem to support the respectability strategy: highlighting group members, like Parks, who adhere to the same values as the dominant majority might well improve public attitudes. For marginalized groups, the benefits of respectability politics could be substantial.

At the same time, there are significant costs to the strategy. For one, it places responsibility on individuals' behavioral choices, taking attention away from systemic discrimination (Harris 2014). Its calls for change are aimed at those being discriminated against, not those doing the discriminating. And perhaps most significantly, the strategy entails what Cohen (1999) calls "secondary marginalization"—when more privileged members of a marginalized group police the behavior of relatively disadvantaged members. Higginbotham (1993, 194), for example, documents the Baptist women's movement's "scathing critiques" of those Black people who did not conform to "proper values." This constant policing further stigmatizes "those who either do not want to conform to those dominant paradigms or those who are unable to do so for various reasons" (Murib 2018, 668; see also Lopez Bunyasi and Smith 2019; Cohen 1997; Sharpless 2016; Strolovitch and Crowder 2018).

Despite these costs, appeals based on respectability remain a common tactic for marginalized communities seeking to shape public opinion. Advocates for immigration reform (Sharpless 2016), international human rights (Miller 2004), and domestic abuse laws (Balos and Fellows 1999), among others, have all highlighted those members of their groups who most closely adhere to social norms, hoping they will be seen as similar to, and thus deserving of rights from, dominant majorities. This can be seen particularly clearly with the LGBTQ movement, as detailed in the next section.

The LGBTQ Movement's Strategy: "Be Normal"

Like other movements before them, mainstream LGBTQ groups have chosen to emphasize their members' respectability in an attempt to win support from straight Americans (Godsoe 2015; Hindman 2019; Murib 2018; Strolovitch and Crowder 2018). Although respectability can be construed in many ways, movement appeals have focused particularly on relationship structure. LGBTQ people have long faced stereotypes about promiscuity and polyamory, and so advocates took pains to portray same-gender relationships as instead adhering to norms of monogamy and exclusivity (Beam 2018; Hindman 2019; Hunter 2017; Levit 2010; Pascar 2018; Woodly 2015).[2] The strategy was familiar: to "soften and normalize gay identity for straight audiences," the movement emphasized LGBTQ people's adherence to "conventional ideological norms and often heterosexist notions of partnering, monogamy, marriage, family, and parenting" (Moscowitz 2013, 52, 62). As one news story put it, the way to appeal to straight Americans was simple: "be normal" (Hall 2014).

Strategy memos thus instructed activists to portray same-gender relationships as monogamous and exclusive, recommending the use of words like "longterm, lifelong, stable, permanent" to describe them (Freedom to Marry 2010; see also Harrison and Michelson 2017b). Groups argued that the most effective public appeals were those that "stressed the commonality of shared values across sexual orientations and that tapped the capacity of ordinary Americans to empathize with those who might seem different" (Frank 2017, 275). Likewise, legal briefs pitched same-gender relationships as aligning with "traditional American values" of "stability, commitment, and family" (Carpenter 2012, 193).

In an echo of the Civil Rights Movement's tactics, particular attention was devoted to choosing "perfect plaintiffs" that could represent the movement in media blitzes and lawsuits (Godsoe 2015). Those whose relationships aligned with heteronormative expectations were particularly prized. For example, Edie Windsor—whose case led to the Defense of Marriage Act being ruled unconstitutional in 2013—was considered "ideal" by movement insiders because she was

> a widow, which meant she could not be caught in an affair, nor could her partner leave her during the litigation; (2) a woman, which made her less likely to trigger stereotypes of gay promiscuity; and (3) in her 80s. (Robinson and Frost 2018, 224)

Even so, before agreeing to take the case, attorneys made Windsor promise not to publicly discuss the sexual "escapades" she and her late wife had enjoyed, for fear of alienating straight Americans (Levy 2013). This tactic echoed legal groups' approach to dealing with *im*perfect plaintiffs in previous cases. Rather than acknowledging that the dispute in *Lawrence v. Texas* involved casual sex, movement lawyers "tried to make our best story out of it" and created a narrative around committed, monogamous

relationships (Carpenter 2012, 194). To this end, the men were prevented from talking to the media and their public activity monitored, to ensure "the story of a booze-soaked quarrel was repackaged as a love story" (Lithwick 2012).

Instead of trying to make over existing plaintiffs, groups involved in later marriage equality cases aggressively sought out sympathetic figureheads. Nationwide searches looked for couples "in long-term, committed relationships," with extensive vetting questions focusing on their monogamy and any histories that might be seen as risqué (Becker 2014, 22–35). Only those who were "in a stable, good relationship" and thus "generically appealing, especially to a predominantly straight audience" were chosen (Godsoe 2015, 138; O'Neill 2018). Throughout, groups avoided centering those whose relationships violated norms of monogamy or exclusivity, for fear that this would make straight Americans view LGBTQ people as less similar to themselves, and thus less deserving of equal rights.

But how effective *is* this strategy? Does portraying same-gender relationships as respectably monogamous and exclusive actually change straight Americans' views? Despite being the central strategy of the LGBTQ movement, there is no direct evidence for its efficacy.[3] To correct this omission, I designed two studies to test the following hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 1 (H1):** Portraying same-gender relationships as monogamous and exclusive increases straight people's feelings of similarity with LGB people and support for their rights.

Although H1 represents the main expectations driving the LGBTQ movement's central strategy, there are reasons to think that the effects of such portrayals might be moderated by two other factors.

First, not all citizens are equally open to persuasion on LGBTQ issues. Previous research shows the importance of various predispositions: those with negative feelings toward LGBTQ people, conservatives, and Republicans are all more likely to oppose LGBTQ rights (Brewer 2003; Jones et al. 2018). As such, it seems plausible that any effects of different relationship portrayals would also vary with these predispositions.

Second, the characteristics of those in same-gender relationships, beyond their sexual orientation, might matter. Being seen as respectable frequently rests on "proximity to white, male, middle-class heterosexuality" (Joshi 2012, 433). Emphasizing adherence to heteronormative expectations may thus not be as available a strategy to those facing additional marginalization along racial, ethnic, or gender lines. Certainly, critics have noted that the LGBTQ movement has disproportionately centered White men and their interests over those who face intersectional marginalization (Godsoe 2015; Murib 2018; Strolovitch 2007). It is possible that any effects of relationship type vary with other attributes of the LGB people being highlighted.

As the overall strategy has gone untested to date, I pose these potential moderators as a Research Question rather than a directional hypothesis:

> **Research Question 1 (RQ1):** Are the effects of portraying same-gender relationships as monogamous and exclusive moderated by (a) the predispositions held by straight people and/or (b) other characteristics of the LGB people being portrayed?

To be clear, H1 and RQ1 involve just one manifestation of respectability. Relationship structure is not the only way in which someone may be judged (dis)respectable, and movement leaders have encouraged "proper" appearances, demands, and behaviors from their figureheads (see, for example, Cohen 1997; Strolovitch and Crowder 2018). As described above, groups have been particularly concerned with dispelling stereotypes about same-gender relationships, however, and so this research focuses solely on that dimension of respectability. To do so, I designed two survey experiments that manipulate whether LGB people were portrayed as adhering to norms of monogamy and exclusivity or not.

Study 1

Study 1 embedded an experiment in a module of the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). Respondents were shown a short news article "about a court case in a different state." The story described a lawsuit filed by a gay man against a local baker, who had refused to serve him due to religious opposition to homosexuality (to enhance realism, the fictional story was based on real-life cases, which usually included such religious freedom claims). Descriptive statistics about the CCES sample are in Online Appendix A1; full experimental stimuli are shown in Online Appendix A2.

The description of the gay man's relationship was manipulated across two conditions. In the *two-person condition*, he was described as part of a "couple," and an accompanying photograph showed two men in an affectionate pose. In the *three-person condition*, he was described as part of a "threesome" in an "open relationship," with a photograph of three men together.[4] As shown in Online Appendix A2, the photographs are of the same men, who are in real life part of a throuple; one was edited out of the original photograph to create the two-person image. To isolate the effect of the men's relationship type precisely, all other information in the story was held constant across conditions.

A common concern with this kind of experiment is that respondents could infer additional information from the manipulation. For example, those shown the three-person condition might assume that (1) the baker's objection was to the men's polyamory; (2) the case concerned expanding marriage rights to threesomes; and/or (3) the men's relationship was a casual one. To pre-empt this, I adopted a "covariate control" design (Dafoe, Zhang, and Caughey 2018) and included explicit information to equalize such inferences across conditions. Both versions of the news story noted that (1) the baker refused service due to his belief that "homosexuality is a sin"[5]; (2) the men were requesting a cake to celebrate a housewarming, not a wedding; and (3) the men had been together for two years. Although this cannot stop other information from being inferred, these background attributes were made explicit and held constant across conditions.

Dependent variables: Following the story, a battery of items assessed evaluations of the men, their legal case, and views on LGB rights more generally. Full question wording is in Online Appendix A3. To simplify presentation of the results, each item is coded to range between 0 and 1; higher values indicate more support for the gay men and for LGB rights.

Respondents were asked if they *felt similar to the gay men* in the story. Responses were captured with a seven-point slider, from feeling "not at all" similar (coded as 0) to "extremely" similar (coded as 1). *Support the gay men's case* measures how the respondent would decide the case. Response options were definitely side with the baker; probably side with the baker; probably side with the gay men; and definitely side with the gay men, recoded to range from 0 to 1.

Attitudes on broader rights were also assessed. As the key issue in the case, *support required service* was measured on a six-point scale, ranging from feeling strongly that business owners should be allowed to refuse to serve people if it violates their religious beliefs (coded as 0) to feeling strongly that businesses should be required to serve everyone (coded as 1). *Support LGB rights* is an average of three items tapping support for laws that allow LGB people to get married, adopt children, and serve in the military. Response options for each item were strongly oppose, somewhat oppose, somewhat support, and strongly support, recoded to range from 0 to 1. Cronbach's alpha for the three items is .91, indicating that they form a reliable index when averaged together.

Several items also tapped immediate affective reactions to the case. Respondents were asked whether they *felt angry*, *disgusted*, or *proud* when reading the story, captured on a seven-point slider ranging from "did not feel this at all" (coded as 0) to "felt this very strongly" (1).

Prior predispositions: *LG thermometer ratings* measure how the respondent felt toward gays and lesbians as a group, captured on a 100-point scale running from most cold (coded as 0) to most warm (1). Respondents' *ideology* ranges from very liberal (0) to very conservative (1), and their *party identity* from "Strong Democrat" (0) to "Strong Republican" (1). All were asked prior to the experimental stimuli.

Manipulation and attention checks: At the end of the battery, respondents were asked about the information that was manipulated across conditions. A majority of respondents were able to identify the men's relationship: 86 percent of respondents in the two-person condition identified the gay men as being in a couple, with 13 percent unsure. In the other condition, 61 percent correctly identified the men as being in a three-person relationship (17% thought they were in a two-person relationship and 20% were unsure).

As an attention check, respondents were asked the religion of the baker in the case (information that was not manipulated). Attention was equivalent across conditions: 80 percent of those in the two-person condition, and 75 percent of those in the three-person condition, correctly identified the baker as Christian. This suggests that there were similar levels of attentiveness to the story across conditions. Further details can be found in Online Appendix A2.

Debriefing: By design, the experiment included deceptive information. A debriefing at the end of the study informed respondents the case was fictitious and explained the reasons for including it.

Total *N* and weights: Those who identified as LGB are excluded from the analysis, leaving a total *N* of 880 straight respondents. As H1 and RQ1 are focused on sexual orientation, I retain the small number of transgender respondents who identified as straight ($n = 7$). Throughout, the analyses use CCES-provided weights.

Results

Average treatment effects (ATEs) of showing the gay men in a two-person, rather than a three-person, relationship are shown in Figure 1, with 95 percent confidence intervals (mean values for each condition are shown in Online Appendix A4; to simplify presentation, I show the difference between conditions throughout).

Across each of the dependent variables, the conclusion is the same. Contrary to H1, straight respondents' attitudes were the same whether the gay men were portrayed as part of a couple or a throuple. Take the attitudes most directly related to the substance of the news story, shown in the top panel of Figure 1. Feelings of similarity toward the gay men did not vary by condition (the ATE of showing the men in a two-person relationship rather than a three-person relationship was .02; 95% confidence intervals = [−.02, .05]). Nor were respondents more likely to

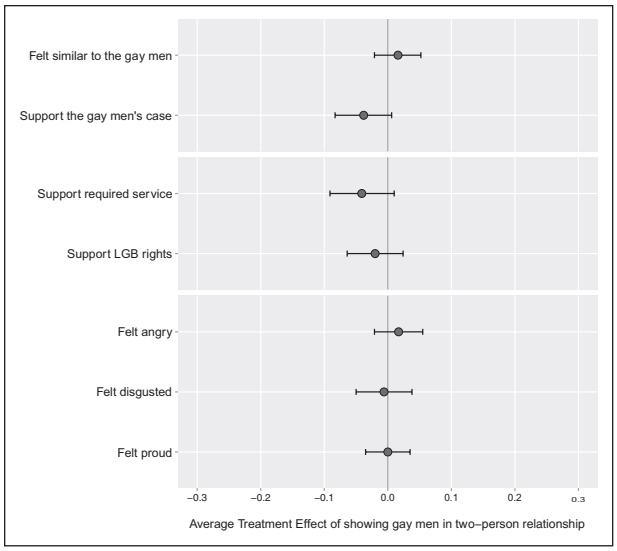

Figure 1. Average treatment effects of two-person relationship (Study 1).
Average treatment effects of showing gay men in a two-person, rather than three-person, relationship, with 95% confidence intervals. All dependent variables coded on 0–1 scale, with higher values indicating greater feelings of similarity, support for the gay men's case, support for LGB rights, and feeling each emotion more strongly. Straight respondents only.

support them in their legal case (ATE = −.04 [−.08, .01]). Views of the men and support for their case remained the same no matter how their relationship was described.

There is no evidence that the manipulation affected views on LGB rights more generally. Respondents shown the story about the gay couple were no more likely to say that businesses should be required by law to serve LGB people than those in the three-person condition (ATE=−.04 [−.09, .01]). And they held indistinguishable views on the battery of LGB policies (ATE=−.02 [−.06, .02]). Whether the men in this case were portrayed as adhering to, or violating, heteronormative relationship expectations had no effect on support for LGB rights.

Finally, the manipulation did not trigger different affective responses, either, as shown in the lowest panel of Figure 1. Respondents in the two-person condition were just as likely to feel angry or proud as those in the three-person condition. And of particular note, portraying the men as part of an open threesome did not provoke greater disgust, which other studies show reduce support for LGBTQ rights (e.g., Gadarian and van der Vort 2018).

In summary, there is no support for H1 here. Portraying the gay men in a two-person relationship, rather than an open throuple, did not change straight respondents' feelings about the men, their case, or rights for the broader LGB community. This is *not* to say that respondents were particularly positive on these items: as the means for each condition in Online Appendix A4 show, opinion was sharply divided. On the 0 to 1 scales, respondents scored an average of 0.28 on feeling similar to the gay men, 0.47 on supporting their case, and 0.52 on supporting required service. The null findings are not due to ceiling effects amid high support for LGB rights. Rather, the results show that portraying the gay men's relationship as monogamous had no causal effect on straight people's attitudes.[6] So far, however, the analysis has only explored ATEs. It is possible—as RQ1(a) suggests—that respondents' prior predispositions moderated the effects of these portrayals of same-gender relationships.

Do respondents' predispositions moderate these effects? I fit regression models that interact the experimental condition with three potential moderators (respondents' affective ratings of lesbian and gay people, ideology, and party identity). In the interests of concision, I focus on the three most conceptually central dependent variables: feelings of similarity with the gay men, support for their case, and support for laws requiring businesses to serve LGB people. Coefficients are shown in Online Appendix A6; Figure 2 shows the simulated effect of the men being portrayed in a two-person, rather than three-person, relationship across the range of each potential moderator. As before, positive values indicate that respondents in the two-person condition held more supportive views than those in the three-person condition.

There is no evidence of any significant heterogeneous treatment effects here. Take respondents' prior attitudes toward lesbian and gay people. As the overlapping confidence intervals indicate, the effect of showing the gay men as a couple on feelings of similarity with them was not significantly different among those with the coldest and warmest ratings of LG people (effects of .07 [.01, .13] and −.00 [−.06, .06], respectively). That was also the case for support for the men's case (an effect of −.00 [−.07, .07] for those with the coldest views toward LG people; −.04 [−.11, .04] for those with the warmest views) or support for requiring that businesses serve LGB people (an effect of −.04 [−.13, .05] compared with −.02 [−.10, .06]). Across each of these dependent variables, how warmly respondents felt toward LG people prior to the experiment did not moderate the effect of their relationship status.

Similar results obtained for ideology and party identity. Showing the gay men in a two-person, rather than three-person, relationship did not generate different responses from liberals and conservatives, or Democrats and Republicans. Additional analyses—shown in Online Appendix A7—show that the type of area respondents lived in, and the size of the LGB community in their state, did not moderate these effects either. Even among subgroups we might expect to be particularly receptive to the two-person portrayal, there is no evidence of strong effects here.

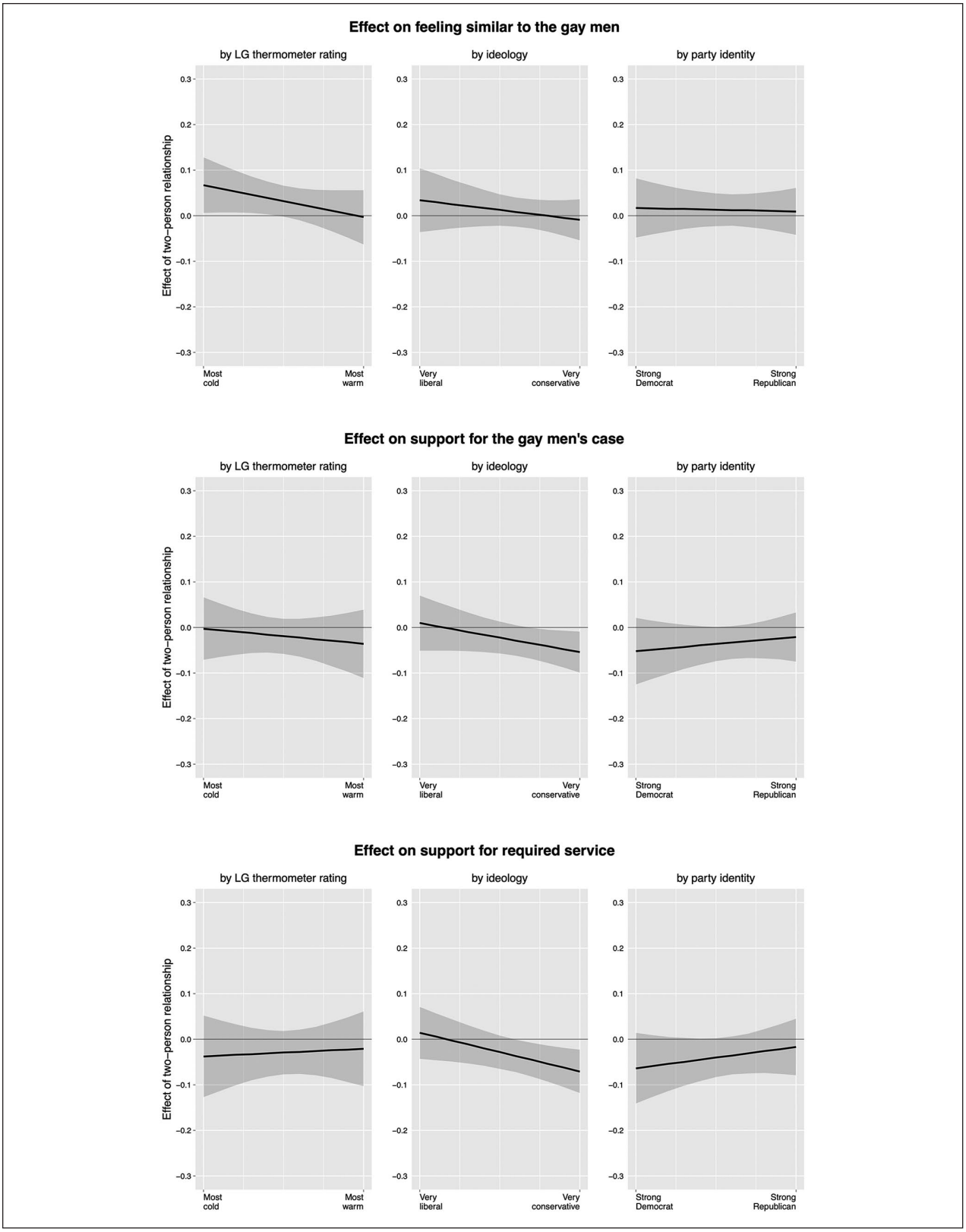

Figure 2. Treatment effects of two-person relationship by respondents' predispositions (Study 1).
Effect of portraying gay men in a two-person, rather than three-person, relationship, given different values of potential moderators, with 95% confidence intervals. Simulated from regression models shown in Online Appendix A6. Straight respondents only.

Discussion

Study 1 shows the limits of portraying same-gender relationships as adhering to respectable norms. Whether gay men were shown as part of a monogamous, exclusive couple or not did not change feelings of similarity with them, support for their legal case, attitudes on LGB rights, or affective responses to their situation. As such, there is no support for H1 here. Nor is there any evidence that respondents' predispositions significantly moderated the effect of relationship status, as suggested by RQ1(a). The average null effects do not appear to mask heterogeneous responses based on ideology, party, or views of LGB people.

Critics of the LGBTQ movement have noted its tendency to exclude those who face intersecting lines of marginalization based on race, ethnicity, and gender (Godsoe 2015; Murib 2018; Strolovitch 2007). The manipulated news story in Study 1 follows this pattern: the gay people portrayed are White men. But as suggested by RQ1(b), the effects of relationship type might be greater for some LGB people than others. To extend Study 1 and assess this possibility, a second survey experiment was fielded.

Study 2

Participants were recruited from an online opt-in panel managed by Qualtrics. This is not a random sample and not representative of the U.S. population. Respondents were, however, demographically diverse, and resemble the CCES sample in political leanings (summary statistics for both studies are in Online Appendix A1).[7] The experiment was embedded in four separate cross-sectional surveys fielded between December 2019 and May 2020. Each had around 1,000 unique respondents. Results did not vary by wave and so I pool the surveys here.

Similar to Study 1, respondents were shown a short news story about a case involving LGB rights. To assess the effects of LGB relationships in a different, potentially more sensitive, context, this time the (fictitious) story concerned a gay school teacher who was fired for revealing their sexual orientation to their students (full stimuli are shown in Online Appendix A2).

This study used a full factorial design that varied multiple elements of the story. As in conjoint experiments, this allows for the causal effect of several factors to be estimated simultaneously (see Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). The design randomly manipulated the following factors (levels of each are shown in brackets):

- The number of people in the teacher's relationship [two or three]
- The exclusivity of the teacher's relationship [described as "committed" or open]
- The teacher's gender [female or male]
- The teacher's race/ethnicity [via names linked with White, Black, or Latinx identities[8]]
- The length of the teacher's relationship [three, six, or ten years]
- The age of the children in the school [elementary, middle, or high school students]

This design has two advantages over Study 1. First, it allows me to estimate the independent effects of adherence to norms of monogamy and exclusivity. And second, it allows me to estimate the interactive effects of such portrayals and other characteristics of the teacher—their gender, race, and ethnicity.[9] In addition to these factors, I also manipulated the length of the teacher's relationship and the age of their students, to see whether the effects of relationship type varies across these contexts.

As in Study 1, the experiment adopts a covariate control design. The story made clear the teacher had been fired for their sexual orientation, and not their relationship type: in all conditions, the school was quoted as saying that "homosexuality is against the Bible's teaching" and the story reiterated their "religious belief that homosexuality is a sin." To the extent possible, respondents were again encouraged to view this as a case of anti-gay discrimination rather than punishment for failing to act respectably.

Dependent variables: As in Study 1, all dependent variables are coded to range from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating more support for the gay teacher and their rights. *Felt similar to the gay teacher* was measured using a seven-point slider, ranging from feeling "not at all" similar (coded as 0) to "extremely" similar (1). *Support the gay teacher's case* measures how the respondent would decide the dispute. Response options were definitely side with the school, probably side with the school, probably side with the gay teacher, and definitely side with the gay teacher, recoded to range from 0 to 1. As the key policy issue in the story, respondents were asked if they *support LGB job protections*. Response options were strongly oppose, somewhat oppose, somewhat support, and strongly support, recoded to range from 0 to 1.[10]

Manipulation and attention checks: The manipulations reached most respondents: 75 percent of those in the two-person condition identified the number of people in the relationship correctly, as did 54 percent of those in the three-person condition. Attention to the details of the news story were almost identical across conditions: 74 percent of those in the two-person condition, and 71 percent of those in the three-person condition, correctly identified the school in the news story as Christian-affiliated (more details are shown in Online Appendix A2).

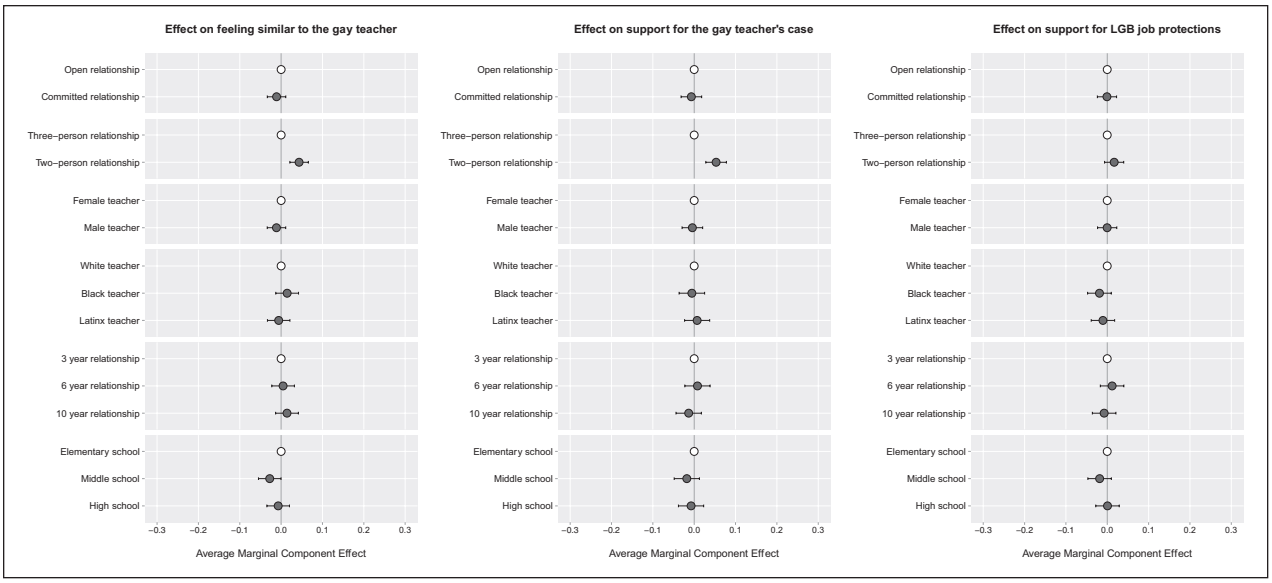

Figure 3. Average marginal component effects (Study 2).
Dark gray bullets represent the average marginal component effect of each element, with 95% confidence intervals, relative to the base level conditions, shown as white bullets. All dependent variables measured on 0 to 1 scale, with higher values indicating greater feelings of similarity, support for the gay teacher's case, and support for LGB job protections. Straight respondents only.

Debriefing: As in Study 1, a debriefing at the end of the study informed participants the story was fictitious and explained its purpose.

Total *N*: As the sample is not intended to be representative of the population, I do not present weighted estimates here. The total *N*, after LGB respondents are excluded, is 3,541.

Results

Following Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2014), I calculate the average marginal component effects (AMCEs) for each of the manipulated factors in the news story (see also Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley 2020). Figure 3 presents the marginal effect of each manipulation, represented by dark gray bullets, measured relative to the base level conditions which are shown as white bullets.

The effects of the gay teacher's relationship type were either indistinguishable from zero or substantively minor. Take the effect of the teacher being in a committed relationship, shown in the top row of each plot in Figure 3. The AMCEs are all statistically insignificant: the teacher being in an exclusive (rather than open) relationship had an average effect of −.01 [−.03, .01] on feelings of similarity; of −.01 [−.03, .02] on support for their case; and of −.00 [−.02, .02] on support for LGB job protections. As in Study 1, whether the LGB person was shown as in a committed or open relationship had no discernible effect on responses to the story.

There is some minor evidence for H1 here, however. Presenting the teacher as in a two-person (rather than three-person) relationship did increase feelings of similarity with them (by .04 [.02, .07]) and support for their case (by .05 [.03, .08]). There were, however, no significant effects on broader attitudes toward job discrimination laws in general (AMCE = .02 [−.01, .04]).[11] Even though statistically significant, the substantive effects here are minimal.

As a point of comparison, take the impact of respondents' political predispositions. Based on simulations from bivariate regressions, the most liberal respondents were .39 [.35, .43] points more supportive of the gay teacher's case than the most conservative, and Strong Democrats .26 [.22, .29] more supportive than Strong Republicans. In contrast, the teacher being in a two-person relationship had an effect only between one-fifth and one-eighth the size. Adhering to the norm of monogamy mattered for views of the case, but far less than the predispositions respondents brought to bear, and not at all for more general attitudes on LGB rights.

Aside from relationship status, the factorial design used here allows us to assess whether other features of the case had direct effects on respondents' views. Although the LGBTQ movement has tended to center relatively privileged White men in its campaigns, the AMCEs in Figure 3 show that the gender, race, and ethnicity of the teacher did not affect respondents' views. Likewise, the age of the students in the story did not significantly shape how respondents evaluated the teacher or their case. Whether

the teacher was described as male or female; Black, Latinx, or White; teaching elementary or high school students, had no bearing on respondents' attitudes.[12]

These analyses thus provide more evidence that LGB people's relationship structure has little effect on straight respondents' attitudes. While there is some support for H1—in that views of the teacher and their case were more positive in the two-person than three-person condition—overall, the effects of relationship type are inconsistent across dependent variables and substantively minor. The factorial design of the experiment allows us to assess whether those effects vary with other characteristics of the LGB person being highlighted, as suggested by RQ1(b).[13]

Do other attributes of LGB people moderate these effects? To answer this question, I first calculate average marginal interaction effects (AMIEs), which represent the causal effect of the combination of conditions, beyond the sum of their independent effects (see Egami and Imai 2019). I calculate the AMIE for the interaction of each relationship factor and all the other factors in the experiment. From these, I estimate the average conditional effect of relationship type, given a particular level of another factor. For example, while Figure 3 tells us the independent effects of the teacher being in a two-person relationship, of being Black, and so on, average conditional effects tell us the causal effect of being in a two-person relationship, *conditional* on being Black, and so on.

I calculate the effects of the teacher being in a committed (rather than open) relationship and being in a two-person (rather than three-person) relationship, conditional on each of the other factors in turn, for each of the three dependent variables. Figure 4 presents these conditional effects: for being in a committed relationship in plots (A)–(C), and for being in a two-person relationship in plots (D)–(F). Thus, the first panel of Figure 4(A) shows the average effect of the teacher being in a committed relationship on respondents' feelings of similarity, conditional on them being described as a woman (.00 [−.03, .03]) or as a man (−.02 [−.06, .01]). The second panel of the plot shows the average effect of being in a committed relationship on feelings of similarity, conditional on them being White (−.01 [−.05, .03]), Black (−.02 [−.06, .02]), or Latinx (−.00 [−.04, .04]). And so on for each of the other factors across each dependent variable.

Figure 4 presents a large array of causal estimates. The overall conclusion, however, is simple: none of the other factors of the story moderated the effect of the teacher's relationship. Within every panel of every plot, the conditional effects of relationship structure at each level of the factor are not statistically distinguishable from one another.

Take, for example, plot (E), which shows the effect of the teacher being in a two-person relationship on support for their legal case. The second panel of the plot shows this effect conditional on different values of the teacher's race and ethnicity. When the teacher was portrayed as White, the effect of a two-person relationship was .07 [.03, .11]. When portrayed as Black or Latinx, the effects were .03 [−.01, .08] and .05 [.01, .10], respectively. Crucially, these conditional effects are not statistically distinguishable from one another: the teacher's race and ethnicity did not significantly moderate the effect of them being in a two-person relationship. Adhering to the norm of monogamy did not affect attitudes on the teacher's case in significantly different ways when they were portrayed as White, as Black, or as Latinx.

The same pattern repeats across Figure 4: within every panel of every plot, the average effects conditional on different levels of the other factors are not significantly different from one another. Substantively, this indicates that the effects of being in a two-person or a committed relationship did not vary systematically with the teacher's race, ethnicity, or gender, nor with the age of the school children they were teaching or the length of their relationship. Rather, the effects of relationship type remained consistently minimal across different characteristics of the teacher and their situation.

Discussion

Study 2 provides only minimal evidence in support of H1. Describing the gay teacher as in an exclusive relationship did not affect respondents' attitudes, while portraying them in a committed relationship had only minor and inconsistent effects. Even in the potentially more sensitive context of a teacher coming out to their students, being in a "respectable" relationship did little to alter respondents' views of them, their legal case, or LGB rights.

These effects did not vary with other elements of the story, either. Women and people of color were not rewarded any more or less than White men for adhering to heteronormative relationship values. Contrary to the possibility raised by RQ1(b), the effects of different relationship types do not appear greater for some LGB people than others.

Conclusions: The Minimal Benefits of Respectability Politics

In seeking to win support from straight Americans, LGBTQ groups have consciously adopted a strategy drawn from respectability politics. Highlighting adherence to mainstream norms, the logic goes, should make

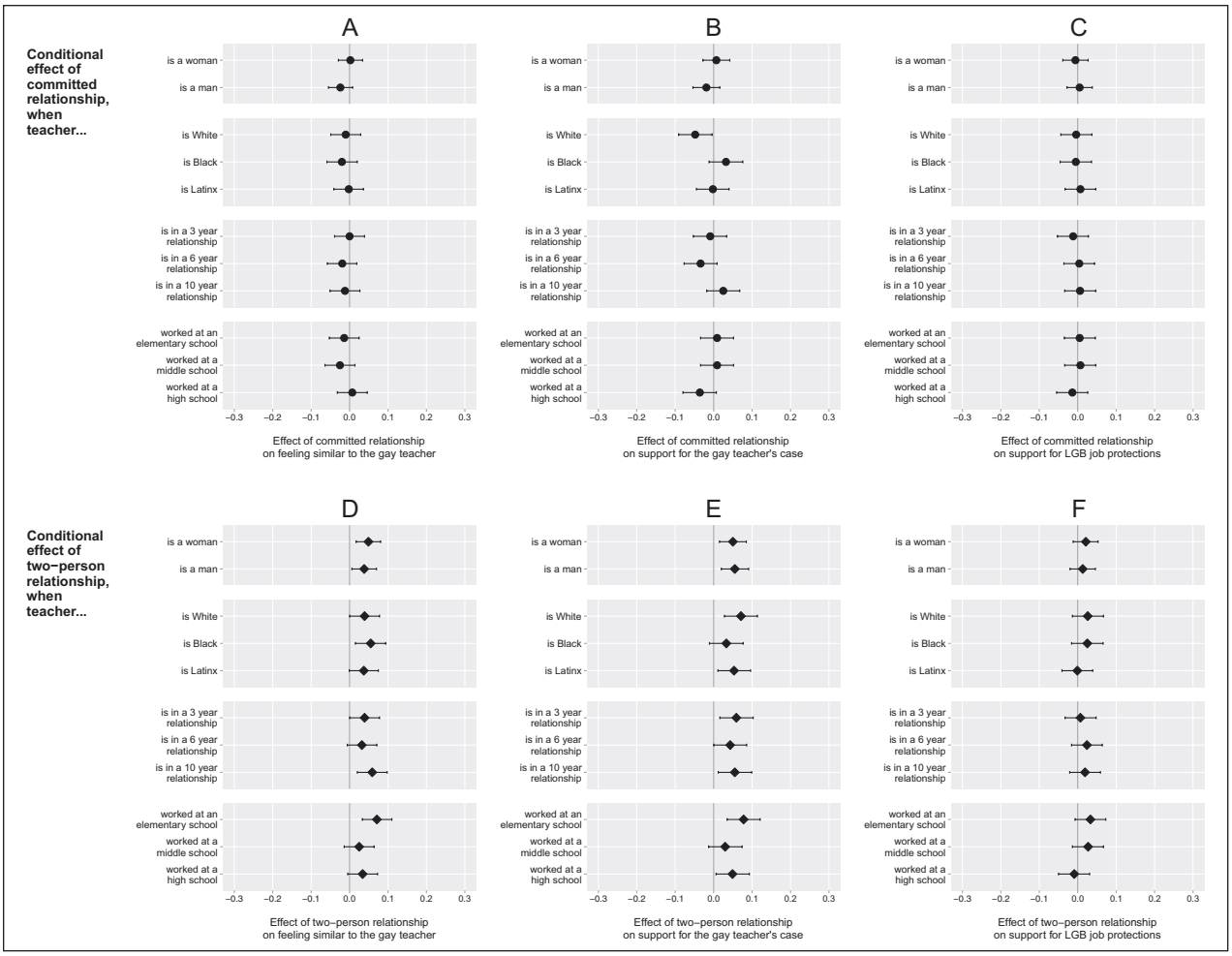

Figure 4. Effects of teacher's relationship status, conditional on other factors (Study 2).
Bullets represent effect of teacher being portrayed in a committed relationship—plots (A) to (C)—and of teacher being portrayed in a two-person relationship—plots (D) to (F)—conditional on other characteristics of the teacher shown on the y-axis of each plot. Calculated from average marginal interaction effects. All dependent variables measured on 0 to 1 scale. Straight respondents only.

dominant groups perceive similarities with marginalized communities and support their cause. In the LGBTQ case, emphasizing the "respectable" nature of same-gender relationships was seen as critical, and so the movement consciously highlighted those who were monogamous and exclusive.

In this regard, the movement has followed numerous other minority groups looking to win majority backing for their rights. As Kennedy (2015) argues, "any marginalized group should be attentive to how it is perceived." Furthermore, as his defense of the strategy notes,

> The politics of respectability is a tactic of public relations that is, per se, neither necessarily good nor necessarily bad. A sound assessment of its deployment in a given instance depends on its goals, the manner in which it is practiced, and the context within which a given struggle is being waged.

So what would a "sound assessment" of the LGBTQ strategy conclude? On one hand, its *costs* have been significant. Highlighting only those members whose relationships were deemed respectable magnified the stigma of those who do not conform to dominant norms (Murib 2018; Strolovitch and Crowder 2018), with marginalization this time coming from within the community. It muffled those voices that wanted to change oppressive institutions rather than join them (Cohen 1997). And it led to a misrepresentation of the community's actual experiences and interests (Beam 2018). In the push to win over straight opinion by centering those in heteronormative relationships, other members of the community almost inevitably got pushed to the margins and their interests off the agenda.

What has gone unassessed until now are the *benefits* of this strategy. Advocates have largely assumed that appeals

based on the respectability of same-gender relationships lead straight people to view the LGBTQ community and its rights more favorably. The studies in this article suggest that the benefits are in reality minimal to non-existent. Portraying LGB people as adhering to, or violating, norms of monogamy and exclusivity has strikingly little effect on straight attitudes.

As shown in Study 1, describing a gay man in a news story as in a two-person relationship did not change feelings of similarity with him, support for his legal case, emotional responses to the story, nor support for LGB rights more generally. And these average null findings were not moderated by predispositions: the effects of relationship type did not vary systematically by respondents' prior affect toward LGB people, ideology, or partisanship.

Study 2 extended these findings to a new context and with a more complex factorial experiment. Portraying a gay teacher as in a committed (rather than open) relationship did not affect straight attitudes, while describing them as in a two- (rather than three-) person relationship had only minor and inconsistent effects. These null and minimal effects were not moderated by other attributes of the gay person foregrounded in the story. Their race, ethnicity, and gender did not affect the extent to which they were rewarded for adhering to heteronormative relationship expectations or punished for violating them. As in Study 1, showcasing the kind of monogamous and exclusive figureheads the movement has gone to significant lengths to recruit simply had little impact on straight attitudes.

Of course, there are important limitations to these findings, which highlight the need for more research in this area. First, these experiments only assess one form of respectability. The LGBTQ movement placed heavy emphasis on the monogamous and exclusive nature of same-gender relationships, suggesting they saw those as particularly important norms to adhere to. But there are many other ways of being (dis)respectable. Advocacy groups have also policed their members' appearance, rhetoric, and public behavior, among other things. This paper shines a light on one facet of respectability politics: more work needs to be done to understand the other ways in which it is manifested and how that might affect public opinion.

Second, the figureheads in the experiments are just one part of the LGBTQ community, those in same-gender relationships, who are likely presumed to be cisgender. Absent from these studies is an assessment of how highlighting transgender people could affect straight responses to violations of heteronormativity. Americans hold more negative views of transgender than LG rights (D. C. Lewis et al. 2017), indicating an urgency to understand if and how respectability appeals can improve public attitudes. Investigating how gender identity fits this strategy is an important next step in understanding the LGBTQ movement's use of respectability politics.

A third limitation—common to many survey experiments—is that these studies use only a brief treatment. The news stories used are short, and viewed only once, in comparison with the long-term and repeated messaging that groups engage in. The research design here is not well-suited to assessing the effects of that kind of communication. While resource intensive, our understanding of social movement framing would benefit significantly from studies that expose participants to more intensive messaging. Relatedly, these results could indicate that attitudes on LGB attitudes have crystallized to the point that simple framing has little effect. This again suggests the need to extend this research to other issues, such as transgender rights, on which public opinion may be more fluid. Understanding how appeals to respectability work for different marginalized groups, who face different challenges in public attitudes, is vital.

Finally, these experiments cannot tell us much about the benefits of respectability appeals in the past. They provide strong evidence that, in the 2018–2020 time period, portraying LGB relationships as adhering to dominant norms of monogamy and exclusivity does little to change straight respondents' attitudes. Whether doing so was an effective strategy when the LGBTQ community was less visible and straight Americans less supportive cannot be assessed given the lack of previous research.[14] It is important to note that the null effects here are *not* due to overwhelming support for the LGB plaintiffs and their rights in these experiments, however. Attitudes in both studies were sharply divided. Even if the movement's strategy was once effective, it is not the case that it has led us to a point where ceiling effects minimize its impact today. Support for LGB rights remains mixed; what these studies show is that respectability appeals based on relationship status are not an effective way to increase it.

Overall, the results here suggest that the benefits of emphasizing respectable same-gender relationships are marginal at best. Putting LGB people who adhere to norms of monogamy and exclusivity at the center of public appeals has little effect on straight people's views of them or their rights. Weighed against the significant costs of further marginalizing those whose relationships are deemed less proper by movement leaders, the minimal benefits of this form of respectability politics do not seem particularly justifiable.

More broadly, these results call into question the idea that marginalized groups must appeal to dominant majorities by behaving respectably and in accordance with mainstream norms. Respectability politics may not have the benefits both its proponents and critics often

assume. At the same time, groups should move cautiously. These studies show that one type of respectability for one marginalized group has little effect. Future research should build on them to further assess when, how, and for who these kinds of appeals work. While the costs of respectability politics are clear and well-documented, scholars should assess in more detail its benefits, so that a more sound assessment of the strategy can be made.

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Supplemental Material

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Notes

1. When discussing the movement generally, I follow most groups and use the full LGBTQ acronym. The studies in this concern sexual orientation; when discussing them, I refer to LGB people and rights specifically. I return to how well the findings generalize to other members of the LGBTQ community in the conclusions.
2. Recent polling confirms that these are dominant norms. Around 80 percent of Americans view polygamy as morally wrong (Brenan 2020) and around 70 percent say an open relationship is never or rarely acceptable (Brown 2020).
3. Harrison and Michelson (2017b) test marriage equality frames of either love or equal rights, reporting mixed results across studies. While their "love" frame echoes the movement strategy detailed here, their research is not designed to assess the effects of adhering to heteronormative relationship expectations directly.
4. I note that the three-person condition describes the relationship as both open *and* polyamorous. It is possible these have independent effects. Study 2 is designed to explore this possibility directly.
5. This design means we cannot assess the effects of norm violations in straight relationships, as the reason for discrimination is held constant across conditions. In line with Hypothesis 1 and Research Question 1, the study is designed to assess only the effects of relationship type on views of LGB people and their rights.
6. Further analysis in Online Appendix A5 shows that LGB respondents were likewise unaffected. Although average support for the men was higher than among straight respondents, as we might expect, attitudes did not vary by condition.
7. For example, 46 percent of the Qualtrics sample identified as Democrats, 39 percent as Republicans, compared with 42 and 40 percent of the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) sample; 26 percent of the Qualtrics sample said they were somewhat to very liberal and 41 percent somewhat to very conservative, compared with 31 and 45 percent of the CCES sample.
8. Based on Gaddis (2017a, 2017b), these were Jake/Katelyn McGrath; Tyrone/Tanisha Washington; and Alejandro/Mariana Hernandez, respectively.
9. The LGB person's socioeconomic status was not manipulated. To maintain comparability across conditions, they were described as being employed as a teacher in each version of the story.
10. The surveys were fielded before the Supreme Court's ruling in *Bostock* that extended employment protections to LGBTQ workers. Additional dependent variables were also measured: feelings of anger, pride, and disgust; sympathy for the teacher; and support for broader LGB rights, all showed similar effects. In the interests of concision, I present only these three main dependent variables here. Full results for all dependent variables are in Online Appendix A4.
11. Nor on support for other LGB rights, as shown in Online Appendix A4.
12. To be clear, this is *not* to say that those who do not fit the usual mold of a White, male figurehead are in some way violating norms. Rather, the analysis simply shows that there were no direct effects of the teacher's race, ethnicity, or gender on attitudes.
13. Additional analysis of the potentially moderating effects of partisanship and ideology can be found in Online Appendix A7. As in Study 1, neither had consistent effects on responses to the treatments.
14. There is still geographic variation within the United States on these dimensions. Additional analysis in Online Appendix A7 suggests there are no consistent moderating effects of the type of area respondents lived in nor the size of the LGB community in their state, however.

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