

“Attitudes on Sex:” Measuring Implicit Attitudes Toward Casual Sexual Relationships and Respect

Kara Hurlebaus

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Kevin Zabel, Department of Psychology

ABSTRACT

The primary objectives of this study were to examine the general and respect-oriented attitudes that individuals have toward casual sexual relationships (CSRs). Research measuring implicit attitudes toward CSRs is limited, although research has evaluated self-reported attitudes towards CSRs, research on implicit attitudes specifically to these concepts has not been done. Measuring these prejudices towards CSRs, allows for possible insights about potential specific sources of stigma that individuals in CSRs experience. Undergraduate students and non-students ($N = 94$) from a midwestern public institution completed this study and either received credit toward their undergraduate course or a \$10 cash incentive. Participants responded to two separate Implicit Association Tests measuring implicit attitudes of CSRs and respect towards individuals who participate in CSRs in an in-person, lab-based study. Participants were found to have negative implicit general and respect-oriented attitudes toward CSRs. Possible future areas of research could examine how individuals' implicit attitudes predict behavior toward individuals in CSRs and instances in which these behaviors are most likely to occur. Future research should examine the distinction between negative implicit bias and respect-oriented attitudes against CSRs, with a focus on which situations predict prejudice-based behaviors.

INTRODUCTION

Reports of young adults, aged 18-25, having a regular sexual partner or spouse have declined in comparison to earlier eras (Monto & Carey, 2014). Indeed, research indicates that between 67 and 75% of students have engaged in a casual sexual relationship (CSR) at some point while in college (Heldman et al., 2010). CSRs are defined as a sexual interaction between individuals that often takes place outside of a committed relationship and does not involve the expectation of a romantic relationship (Heldman et. al, 2010). These relationships are not to be confused with consensual non-monogamy (CNM), or “romantic relationships that are negotiated between two or more people and are therefore nonexclusive, either sexually, emotionally, or in combination” (Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016, pp. 45) or where “all parties agree that it is acceptable to have additional romantic or sexual partners” (Muisse et al., 2019, pp. 1918).

Rather, CSRs are a part of hook-up culture, which is defined as casual sexual contact between non-dating partners without an (expressed or acknowledged) expectation of forming a committed relationship (Heldman et al., 2010). Although CSRs are prevalent within college students (Heldman et. al, 2010), monogamy is still viewed as optimal within Western cultures (Kipnis, 2003; Perel, 2008). Non-monogamous relationships in general (including CSRs) are seen as taboo in society at large (Conley et al., 2013). This cultural view likely causes individuals to have negative associations and views toward those who engage in non-monogamous relationships, specifically those who engage in CSRs.

Prior research has tended to measure attitudes towards sexual behavior explicitly, using self-report measures, as opposed to implicit measures, where a participant is often unaware of the measurements being taken. An important explicit measurement trend has emerged known as the halo effect, or when a specific trait positively influences perceptions of other, non-related, characteristics of an individual. Conley et al. (2013) found that a halo effect encompasses monogamous relationships such that individuals in monogamous relationships were perceived as being more kind, caring, law-abiding, and well-educated compared to individuals in CSRs. These perceptions may negatively influence actions toward those who engage in CSRs and be detrimental in interpersonal interactions.

In addition to the halo effect and self-reported attitudes toward CNM compared to CSRs (e.g. Conley et al., 2013), self-reported attitudes of respect, defined as the equal moral standing of persons and their demands (Mattias, 2019), have been studied. Respect is conceptualized in the US along 4 dimensions; social rules, personal attributes, caring and loving, and equality and acceptance (Langdon, 2007). The importance of respect is demonstrated

throughout history, as marginalized and minority groups were viewed as incapable of directing and influencing societal norms and establishments of their communities (Iser, 2019). Using a self-report questionnaire, it was found that women, younger adults, conservative religious individuals, heterosexuals, and those of higher education self-reported reduced respect for those who engage in frequent CSRs compared to other identities (Allison & Risman, 2013).

As previously mentioned, past research has focused on measuring individuals' explicit, self-reported attitudes toward individuals in CSRs, with a focus on measuring attitudes relating to monogamy. However, little research has been done analyzing implicit attitudes toward those who engage in CSRs or attitudes of respect towards those individuals in comparison to individuals engaged in monogamous relationships. Implicit attitudes influence judgements and behaviors through the spontaneous attitude-to-behavior process (Fazio, 1990), and these attitudes indirectly influence how an object or individual is perceived in an immediate situation without any conscious reflection. Attitudes of respect towards another can influence if a person treats another being as an equal, take them seriously, share information with them, and involves them in decision making processes (Beach et al., 2006; Jones, 2002; Purnell, 1999; Ryan et al., 1991; Wiklander et al., 2003). These attitudes have been found to influence behaviors in settings such as the healthcare system (Beach et al., 2005; Blanchard & Lurie, 2004), especially when individuals lack motivation or opportunity to control their attitude on their behavior (Fazio, 1990). Implicit attitudes have been specifically found to affect non-verbal behaviors in individuals' interactions with people they have implicit bias towards (Dovidio et al., 2002), and negative implicit attitudes towards CSR participating individuals and negative attitudes of respect towards them may lead to discrimination and negative outcomes for those in CSRs (e.g. in receiving equal healthcare services). However, there is little research pertaining to what the nature of implicit attitudes toward individuals in CSRs is.

Past research that has focused on implicit attitudes regarding monogamous and non monogamous relationships uncovered that individuals held strong implicit preferences for monogamy over CNM, with 35% of participants demonstrating negative associations to CNM compared to 8% of participants who demonstrated negative associations with monogamy (Thompson et al., 2020). Similarly, participants in Kenyon et al.'s study were found to have implicit preferences toward monogamy (93.2%) rather than non-monogamous relationships when measuring attitudes with a concurrency implicit associations test (C-IAT). Both Thompson et al. and Kenyon et al.'s studies focused on measuring implicit attitudes toward CNM and MRs, though neither evaluated attitudes towards CSRs, which are outside the scope of a committed relationship unlike CNM and MRs. In general, prior research has been primarily focused on measuring attitudes relating to MRs and CNM, while little research has examined implicit attitudes of those who engage in CSRs or attitudes of respect towards those individuals. In the current study, I developed a new variation of Greenwald et al.'s (1998) IAT to measure general and respect-oriented implicit attitudes toward individuals who engage in CSRs.

Regarding respect attitudes, individuals tend to have negative respect implicit attitudes toward societal deviants (Mankoff, 1971). Individuals in CSRs are perceived as achieved rule-breaking deviants (Mankoff, 1971) who have committed a norm-breaking act (Mankoff, 1971). Because of this, it seems likely that individuals have negative implicit respect attitudes toward those in CSRs. Research performed on analyzing these attitudes will offer insight into the degree to which individuals in society automatically associate individuals in CSRs to negativity and disrespect. Thus, help better understand a contributing factor to stigma experienced by individuals in CSRs and facilitate future research on the types of individuals and situations in which individuals may be especially likely to act in a discriminatory way towards individuals in CSRs. It is hypothesized that participants will have negative implicit general and respect-oriented attitudes toward CSRs compared to monogamous relationships (MRs).

METHODS

Participants

Undergraduate students and non-student volunteers ($N = 94$) from a midwestern public institution participated in this study and either received credit toward their undergraduate psychology course or a \$10 cash incentive. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, and participants provided informed consent prior to their participation. Participants were aged 18 to 53 ($M = 19.87$, $SD = 4.78$). Regarding gender identity, 52.7% of participants identified as women, 43.6% of participants identified as men, and 3.6% of participants identified as non-binary. Ethnically, 90.9% of participants identified as White, 5.5% of participants identified as Asian, 1.8% of participants identified as Latino/Hispanic, and 1.8% as Black.

Procedure and Materials

Once IRB approval was obtained, participants completed the two IATs in a controlled laboratory setting. Two IATs were completed by participants, the IAT measuring general implicit attitudes first, and the IAT measuring respect attitudes directly after the first was finished. The IAT measures an implicit association between two concepts and an attribute (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). Each IAT was made up of five blocks, or categorization trials. Block 1 consisted of 12 trials of categorizing concepts (monogamous relationships and CSRs). Block 2 consisted of 12 trials categorizing attributes (positive and negative words or respect and disrespect words). Block 3 consisted of 12 practice trials of categorizing concepts and attributes (monogamous relationship + positive and CSR + negative or monogamous relationship + respect and CSR + disrespect). Block 4 consisted of 24 test trials of categorizing concepts and attributes, similar to Block 3. Block 5 consisted of 12 trials of categorizing concepts (monogamous relationships and CSRs). Block 6 consisted of 12 trials categorizing attributes (positive and negative words or respect and disrespect words). Block 7 consisted of 24 test trials of categorizing concepts and attributes (monogamous relationship + negative and CSR + positive or monogamous relationship + disrespect and CSR + respect). Each IAT was counterbalanced so participants took it as described above or where Blocks 4 and 7 were switched using a random number generator to assign each participant to either IAT condition. Both versions of the IAT were taken on a laptop computer with the MediaLab and DirectRT software (<https://www.empirisoft.com/directrt.aspx>), categorizing each word using the “A” and “5” keys of the keyboard. General positive and negative words were obtained from research on which words are best used in implicit association tests (Axt et al., 2021) and respect-oriented and relationship words were chosen from commonly used synonyms to monogamy and casual sex. See Table 1 for all words used as stimuli in the IATs. If participants categorized positive words with monogamous relationship words more quickly and with less error than their categorization of positive words with CSR words, it would be assumed that the participant has a more positive implicit attitude toward monogamous relationships compared to CSRs. Similarly, if participants categorized respect words with monogamous relationship words more quickly and with less error than their categorization of respect words with CSR words, it would be assumed that the participant has a more respect oriented attitude towards monogamous relationships compared to CSRs. Data from Blocks 4 and 7 were used in the analysis. Trials that were incorrect ($N = 932$) or for which the response time was under 300 ms ($N = 8$) or over 10,000 ms ($N = 17$) were deleted from the data set, and participants with an excessive amount of incorrect and short trials were removed from the data set ($N = 1$).

RESULTS

Participant IAT scores were computed by subtracting the mean response time to block type 1 (positive + monogamous; respect + monogamous) critical trials for participants from the mean response time to block type 2 (negative + monogamous; disrespect + monogamous) critical trials for participants in each respective IAT. These scores were then divided by the response time standard deviation to each IAT to obtain each participant’s implicit attitude score used in primary analyses. A higher positive score in each IAT indicated a higher negative implicit bias towards CSRs or a higher disrespect bias towards CSRs.

A one sample *t*-test was computed to compare participants' general implicit attitudes toward CSRs to a test value of 0 (no implicit prejudice). This analysis indicated that participants had negative implicit attitudes towards CSRs ($M = 0.47$, $SD = 0.51$), $t(93) = 9.06$, $p < .001$.

A one sample *t*-test was computed to compare participants' respect oriented implicit towards CSRs to a test value of 0 (no implicit prejudice). This analysis indicated that participants had disrespect-oriented implicit bias towards CSRs ($M = 0.43$, $SD = 0.57$), $t(93) = 6.89$, $p < .001$.

There was no significant correlation between participants' general attitudes and respect attitudes toward CSRs ($r = -.09$, $p = .41$).

DISCUSSION

Results demonstrate statistical significance, indicating a negative general and disrespect-oriented implicit prejudice toward CSRs compared to monogamous relationships. Participants tended to categorize positive words with MR words and negative words with CSRs faster and more correctly than the opposite order. Participants also tended to categorize respect words with MR words and disrespect words with CSRs faster and more correctly than the opposite order. These results are consistent with previous research indicating a preference towards monogamy, whether that was implicit or explicit, and CSRs are aligned with CNM in relation to negative associations and preferences. However, this study demonstrates the preference is also occurring at the implicit level. Such

consistency is likely due to an overarching preference for monogamy, as both CSRs and CNM do not fit the ideal of Western culture.

General self-reported prejudice tends to be correlated with more specific self-reported emotions (Cottrell et al., 2010). However, there was no significant correlation found between general attitudes and respect attitudes toward CSRs, meaning there seems to be less consistency between general and more specific emotional prejudice. This could be due to technical restraints, such as the wording of one IAT being more confusing to participants than the other. The average response time to critical trials on the general implicit prejudice task was 2093.11, whereas the average response time to critical trials on the respect-oriented IAT was 1623.67 seconds.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Participants were all volunteer based, and random selection was not accessible to gather participants in this study. Age distribution of participants was skewed toward the younger side of the age range and participants were primarily White and located in La Crosse, WI, which may have influenced responses. Future researchers should attempt to collect data from a more diverse sample in the future. In this study, participants were gathered either from posters placed at local businesses, using a snowball sampling technique, or from signing up online for course credit. The population of those engaging in posters may have been skewed, as participants may have been in similar social circles, or in similar academic circles, which could have influenced results. Future researchers should recruit a more diverse sample, specifically related to age, race, and location, while maintaining a balance within gender demographics. This will allow researchers to properly analyze word choice, demographic influences, and increase external validity to make findings more generalizable.

Another limitation of this study was technological variances. Participants took the study on 3 different laptop computers and variance in technological response and location in the room could have affected participant responses. Additionally, there was some participant confusion on words used within the IAT. Some participants expressed at the end of the study that they had struggled with placing certain words in each category (eg., defiance to be placed in the disrespect category). Future researchers should have participants take this study on the same laptop computer one at a time. More research should also be explored into word choice on IATs, and do preliminary surveying on word choices with a small pilot sample. Due to the personal nature of sexual relationships and limited sample, any attempt to generalize these results may not be accurate. This study may provide a suggestive glimpse into bias towards CSRs and those participating in them, but any definitive conclusions about these attitudes are limited at this time.

Future research may also explore how implicit biases impact behavior towards those in CSRs using the MODE model (Fazio, 1990), and if there are certain predictors that provide insight as to when these biases are most influential on behaviors. The MODE model states that individuals' access to opportunity and motivation dictate the level at which implicit prejudices influence behavior. If given access to both, they can correct for the otherwise direct impact of prejudices, but in situations where they are not, these prejudices are the most likely to lead to prejudice influenced behaviors. This study shows that the default is to have negative implicit prejudices toward individuals in CSRs, and according to the MODE model, individuals with more implicit prejudices would have more discriminatory behavior toward individuals in CSRs. Researchers could test this by simulating different environments where participant access to these things are limited and see what behaviors are most prevalent.

Table 1. Words used in IATs.

MR Words	partnership, committed, dating, married, exclusive, and monogamous
CSR Words	hook up, non-exclusive, casual sex, one night stand, non-committed, and fling
Positive Words	cherish, excellent, fantastic, terrific, lovely, and happy
Negative Words	failure, hatred, nasty, dirty, negative, and selfish
Respect Words	regard, honor, value, recognition, appreciation, and esteem
Disrespect Words	rude, disregard, defiance, discourtesy, inconsiderate, and disagreeable

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