

Role theory and contact theory sociology essay

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2. 0 Introduction

In this study, the role theory and contact theory has been used. Role theory explains the reasons why heterosexuals are prejudiced toward gays and lesbians focusing on heterosexuals' belief that homosexuals breach expected social roles. On the other hand, contact theory clarifies positive attitudes towards gays and lesbians developed by heterosexuals' interpersonal contact with homosexuals. To illustrate the power relationship between heterosexuals and homosexuals, the approach of heterosexism from radical feminism theory and the way homosexuals are abused in society are being discussed. Further, role theory and contact theory is being integrated into the concept of heterosexism.

2. 1 Role Theory

" Role theory is a science that study behaviors which are characteristic of individuals within context and within distinct processes that apparently produce, describe, or are influenced by those behaviors" (Biddle, 1979). Biddle (1979) defined roles as " a behavioral repertoire characteristic of an individual or a position; a set of principles, descriptions, norms, or concepts existed and maintained for the behaviors of an individual or social position; or (less often) a position itself. In other words, individuals are assigned to play specific roles and behave appropriately based on their personal characteristics or the positions they occupy. Some examples of personal characteristics are age, race, and sex. Indefinitely such personal characteristics are generally fixed, compared to certain behavioral characteristics or positions which are regularly more malleable (Biddle, 1979). This is why; physical characteristics may delineate power

relationships. There are certain expectations that are essential for individuals to satisfy their roles. These expectations are shared by many individuals and are learned through socialization. These expectations are learned from parents, family, and colleagues and can be taught by social institutions such as schools and religious institutions (Eagly 1987). Like expectations, reactions are also shared. Individuals who adopt the expected behaviors are expected to be rewarded, while those who violate them are anticipated to be punished. Social behavior expectations lay great emphasis on sex and gender categorizations (Eagly, 1987). He classified gender roles as "those shared expectations (that is those suitable behaviors and qualities) that apply to people on the basis of their socially identified gender." Especially, women are expected to take care of others and to do household chores more than men, while men are considered to be more autocratic and more suitable as breadwinners (Eagly, 1987). Nevertheless, overtime women's roles have changed. Twenge's (1997) investigation found that both women's and men's masculinity scores have speed up since 1973, even though women's scores have altered more rapidly than men's. On the other hand, men's and women's femininity scores have changed fairly. As a result, there is a decreasing pattern on men's and women's masculinity scores. That is, women possess more masculine attitudes and are becoming more androgynous. This implies that women have fewer social constraints in the acquisition of masculine characteristics, whereas men continue to go through strong negative reactions from others if they attain feminine traits (Feinman 1981; Twenge 1997). Kite and Deaux (1987) analyzed the stereotypes associated with homosexuals. Their study showed that the heterosexuals associated gay men with heterosexual female traits and

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lesbians with heterosexual male characteristics. For example, lesbians are have more a masculine characteristic such as short hairs, while gay men walk femininely and talk in a high-pitched tone and wear jewelry. Moulton and Adams-Price (1997) carry out an analysis about heterosexual and homosexual men's behavior towards heterosexual cross-dressers, homosexual cross-dressers and homosexual non-cross-dresses. Heterosexual men did not differentiate the degree of masculinity between the three groups and expressed negative attitudes towards them. These results illustrate that heterosexual men point gay men as feminine, much like cross-dressers. Further, gar men are considered to be violating traditional male sex roles instead of expressing traditionally female traits. Due to the fact that feminine gay men and masculine lesbians breach or are thought to breach traditional gender roles, heterosexuals expressed negative attitudes towards them. However, recent research concludes that images of homosexuals are becoming more complicated. According to Clausell and Fiske (2005), respondents when asked about images of gay men, identified both masculine and feminine traits, even though they described feminine traits such as cross dresser and flamboyant more frequently than masculine characteristics such as hyper masculine, physically fit and straight acting. In their research of stereotypes about lesbians, Geiger, Harwood and Hummert (2006) found that their respondents' attitudes consist of both positive and negative images. The positive stereotypes involved so-called lipstick lesbians that is they are beautiful, sexy, attractive and career-oriented feminist, while the negative stereotypes involved hypersexual, sexually deviant (for example dirty, disgusting immoral) and angry butch. Heterosexuals not only possess images of gender inverted homosexuals but also gender confirming <https://assignbuster.com/role-theory-and-contact-theory-sociology-essay/>

homosexuals. Hence, heterosexuals may show more negative attitudes towards feminine gay men and masculine lesbians compared to masculine gay men and feminine lesbians. Schope and Eliason (2004) research focused on whether heterosexuals' attitudes varied towards feminine and straight-acting gay men. Their respondents were asked what would be their reactions in twelve different situations such as studying in the respondent's room, hanging out at bar, and introducing to the respondent's parents. Even though they find that homosexuals who behave in cross-gender ways received some negative judgments, the final results did not hold those patterns. Instead than the violation of traditional gender roles, the authors debated that homosexuality itself developed negative attitudes among heterosexual respondents. These findings contrast previous studies, but Schope and Eliason (2004) did not control for the traditional gender role beliefs of their respondents, which illustrate their anomalous results. Heterosexuals are likely to perceive homosexuals as gender-inverted and consider that they violate traditional gender roles. Hence, heterosexuals who have almost traditional gender role attitudes may disclose negative attitudes toward homosexuals as they believe that homosexuals deserve to be punished for not following shared roles.

2. 2 Contact Theory

Gordon W. Allport (1954) in *The Nature of Prejudice* proposed contact theory, where majority group members' prejudice toward a minority group is reduced through communication with members of the minority group. In order for contact theory to work adequately, four conditions must be met. First, the contact needs to take place between groups with equal status. If

one group has higher reputation than the other, the interaction does not contribute to the reduction of negative attitudes. Second, group members have to work on trying to achieve the same objective, which creates solidarity among the members in the group. Third, cooperation not competition is essential. Fourth, institutional supports can raise the effect of contact. Researchers have been carrying out studies on whether contact theory is appropriate to different group settings, such as the interaction between Whites and Blacks (Fine, 1979), the general public and homeless people (Lee, Farrell and Link 2004), and many other groups. These researches showed the effectiveness of contact theory in explaining and reducing prejudice. At the same time, many researchers have reconstructed contact theory and they have offered many important challenges to the theory. First, Pettigrew (1998) proposed that personalized interaction should be an essential condition for contact theory to successfully minimize prejudice attitudes. One of the major problems associated with contact theory is causal order. It is uncertain whether those who have had previous contact with individuals from the prejudiced groups then have more positive attitudes or whether those who have more positive attitudes than have more contacts with group members (Baunach et al. n. d.; Van Dick et al. 2004; Herek and Glunt 1993; Pettigrew 1998). According to Pettigrew (1998), there are three ways to resolve the causal order; these are to study situations where respondents cannot make a voluntary decision to clarify with members of prejudiced groups, to use special statistical means and to carry out a longitudinal study designs. Van Dick et al. (2004) conducted two studies utilizing the first and second methods to see whether the causal order from contact to prejudice correspond well than that from prejudice to

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contact. They believed that students could not avoid the interaction with racial minorities when they were in the racially mixed work places, schools and neighborhoods. Their results showed that contact increased acquaintances and colleagues and then diminish the antipathy toward racial minorities. The statistical tests found that the effect of contact to positive attitudes was greater than that of positive attitudes to contact. Longitudinal analysis performed by Eller and Abrams (2004) found that contact with prejudiced members positively altered positive attitudes. As these results showed, it may be appropriate to summarize that the causal order from contact to prejudice is the major causal ordering, instead of the opposite order from prejudice to contact. Another limitation of contact theory is the "problem of generalization." Contact theory believes that contact with members in a prejudice group influences the attitudes toward the whole group. But, it is ambiguous as to how individual can generalize their experience with a particular person or a small number of people to all of the prejudiced group members (Pettigrew 1998; Rothbart and John 1985). Hewstone and Brown (1986) presented one generalization process, while Brewer (1984) and Miller (1988) two generalization processes. Pettigrew debated that these three generalization processes can be efficient when they are used in the suggested order; (i) decategorization, (ii) high group status salience, and (iii) recategorization. Brewer (1984) and Miller (1988) and Brewer (1996) advocated "decategorization" to be a possible generalization process. Individual "considers information at the individual level that replaces category identity as the most effective basis for categorizing respondents" (Brewer, 1996). Ideally, individual must develop their friendship through interpersonal communication. As the prejudiced

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membership status is a barrier to develop a close friendship, the prejudiced membership status should not be recognizable. In the process of interaction with gays and lesbians, homosexuals may develop friendship with heterosexuals without revealing their sexual orientation. Hewstone and Brown (1986) pointed out that individual can generalize the interaction with members from a prejudiced group to the whole group when the group salience obvious, as it keeps remembering respondents of their membership differences. Once a certain degree of friendship is built, the high group salience encourages the reduction of prejudice toward the whole group members. The respondents pay attention that they belong to different groups and can value their differences. Specifically, heterosexuals must be aware that their colleagues are homosexuals during the interaction. When the heterosexuals consider their homosexual friends as distant friends or colleagues, friend's homosexuality may be salient as homosexuality can be a master status. Lastly, "recategorization" implies that by stressing "subordinate category identification that surrounds both the in-group and out-group in a single social group representation," individual show less attention to the different membership status (Brewer, 1996: 294). In this stage, the participants point that member of minority group and themselves appertain to the same larger group. As such, heterosexuals might categorize their homosexual friends based on the larger category like human beings and then they share distinct membership reputation. Hence, the prejudiced membership status, which is homosexuality in this case, does not become an obstacle to interactions. Eller and Abrams (2004) studied Britain's' prejudice toward French people and Mexican people's prejudice toward Americans by making use of contact theory. They also take into consideration whether the <https://assignbuster.com/role-theory-and-contact-theory-sociology-essay/>

levels of categorization reconciled the effects of contact on prejudice reduction. Mexican and British participants who had contact with American and French people consequently categorized their friends either in the interpersonal category, which is equal to " decategorization" or in the super ordinate category which equals to " recategorization". These two variables did not act as mediators of contact. Instead, each variable had a direct and independent effect on prejudice reduction toward out group members. The participants who categorized their friends either in the interpersonal level or in the super ordinate level depicted a more positive attitude toward the whole out group members. Eller and Abrams (2004) determined that the levels of categorization show the quality of friendship. Heterosexual who maintain close relationship with homosexuals either classify their homosexual friends in the interpersonal level such as classmates and colleagues or on the super ordinate level for e. g. human beings. In either way, heterosexuals lay emphasis on the membership status which is shared with their homosexual friends.