

Sexual Orientation, Gender Role Expression, and Stereotyping: The Intersection Between Sexism and Sexual Prejudice (Homophobia)

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Components contributing to prejudice against gay, lesbian, and bisexual people include the effect of minority status and out-group processes, religious belief, the tying of one sexual “deviance” with others (i.e. homosexuality/pedophilia), belief about environmental causes of homosexuality, sexist attitudes, and gender role expectations (Herek, 2003; Schneider, 2004). It is our proposition that gender role expectations play a more significant and complex role in prejudice than has been the focus of previous research. As a research team we hold varying opinions on the interaction of gender role and sexual orientation. Some of us believe that being lesbian, gay, or bisexual is seen as an extreme gender role violation (the prejudice originates in sexism) while others believe that sexual orientation is an independent basis of prejudice (homophobia is a separate prejudice). Others view gender role and sexual orientation as inexplicably intertwined. Support exists for each of these views, but in general a great deal of research intertwines sexual orientation with gender roles, and consequently reinforces stereotypes. Our line of research uses qualitative and quantitative methods to clarify the role that gender role expression and sexual orientation play in attitudes and beliefs about others. This paper provides a brief summary of the literature related to our research. Those attending our ACA presentation will view a demonstration of our research website to facilitate self-awareness and discussion. For those not in attendance, website access and results of our research may be obtained by contacting the first or second author.

Cultural Gender Belief System and Inversion Theory

Much of the specific research on the interaction of gender role and sexual orientation contains two significant underlying assumptions. Both of these assumptions are based on cultural belief and are frequently unrecognized. Furthermore, both assumptions represent an essentialist rather than socially constructed view of gender and they place traditional gender role conformity and heterosexuality as the “norm” with violations of these the “effect” to be studied. These two assumptions are the cultural gender belief system and inversion theory of sexual orientation.

The cultural gender belief system underlies the stereotype that is often used by others to presume that someone is gay, lesbian, or bisexual: gender role non-conformity (Kite & Deaux, 1987; Madson, 2000). The cultural gender belief system is defined as “a set of beliefs and opinions about males and females and about the purported qualities of masculinity and femininity” (p.97, Deaux & Kite, 1987). The cultural gender belief system suggests that masculine and feminine gender roles are distinct, stable, and tied to biological sex. The concepts of masculinity and femininity are viewed as polar opposites. People who

have some traits of a prescribed gender role are expected to hold other traits of that gender role as well. The cultural assumption then becomes that if someone is gender role non-conforming in some manner (i.e. appearance, interests, personality traits) then that person must hold other traits of the opposite sex (i.e. sexual attraction). People who are non-conforming to traditional gender role expectations (i.e. “sissies” and “tomboys”) are presumed to be gay or lesbian.

Originally, inversion theory was offered as an explanation for homosexuality in psychoanalytic theory. Gays and lesbians are said to be “inverted” because they do not conform to the expectation of opposite sex attraction. Inversion theory and the cultural gender belief system have had a significant impact on the way in which gender and sexual orientation have been researched. Research questions have been posed that assume that gay men are like women and that lesbians are like men in some manner.

Assumptions in Research

Inversion theory has implicitly influenced biological research looking for correlates and causes of homosexuality. For instance, the study of neuroendocrine “masculinization and feminization of the brain” and studies of brain anatomy hypothesize similarities between the brains of heterosexual females and homosexual males. Children with non-traditional gender role interests have been used as subjects in studies of biological causation and familial genetic influence. Studies that link childhood gender non-conformity with later sexual orientation have been used to support a predictive and/or causal link between gender role behavior and sexual orientation despite caution by authors on methodological and theoretical grounds (for full literature review see Rees, Doyle, Holland, & Root, 2005).

The cultural gender belief system has influenced the ways in which difference and sameness has been studied in men and women. Early researchers’ conceptualizations of masculinity/femininity conformed to a bipolar view. The more contemporary plethora of research on masculinity/femininity and expressivity/instrumentality has created a body of knowledge that accepts these as coherent and measurable constructs. There are many definitions and instruments developed to measure them. The most widely used descriptions of the constructs of masculinity and femininity are conceptualized as separate dimensions. People scoring high on both masculinity and femininity are described as androgynous. Researchers have conducted numerous studies on masculinity and femininity in gays and lesbians. The primary question in many studies is some form of “Are gays or lesbians more/less/same in masculinity

or femininity as heterosexuals? ” Reviews of studies of masculinity/femininity in gays and lesbians reveals that often when measuring masculinity/femininity in relation to sexual orientation, lesbians are more likely to have higher masculinity scores but not lower femininity scores (androgyny) than heterosexual women. Furthermore, gay males are more likely to rate higher on femininity or androgyny (not necessarily lower on masculinity) (for review see Rees, et al 2005). However, the research questions and results in many studies are written, and cited by others in a way that supports the stereotype that gay males are feminine and lesbians are masculine, not that they demonstrate androgynous characteristics. Furthermore, in a direct test of the impact of stereotypes on interpretations of research, Hegarty and Pratto (2004) found that people were more likely to judge research that supported stereotypical views on sexual orientation and gender role as more significant than studies that did not support stereotypical views.

A couple of recent studies illustrate the inversion assumption. Haslam (1997) used the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory – 2 (MMPI-2) Masculinity-Femininity scale as “an indirect but empirically reliable indicator” of male homosexuality. In a study of attitudes toward gays and lesbians and gender role behavior, Schope & Eliason (2004) labeled the targets in their vignettes “gay acting” to indicate gender role incongruence and “straight acting” to indicate gender role congruence.

As these examples illustrate, the cultural gender belief system and inversion theory are pervasive. These beliefs also have a significant impact on attitudes toward people who violate gender roles - gay or straight. In addition, as the large body of social psychology literature on person perception demonstrates, attitudes toward others is often formed based on relatively little information, including brief views of appearance.

Judging others and perception of sexual orientation

Researchers have evaluated with mixed results whether it is possible to reliably identify the sexual orientation of another based on observation. Some have found accurate judgments of sexual orientation based on speech samples, video clips and pictures (See Rees, et al., 2005 for full review) Presumably, there is nothing inherent in appearance (e.g. a particular shape of nose) that allows one to identify another’s sexual orientation. Yet, with the exception of a few studies, most of this research has not explored the influence of variables such as masculinity/femininity on these perceptions. However, a

number of recent studies have explored this relationship and found support for the assertion that the gender belief system and inversion theory influences people's perceptions.

For example, Dunkle & Francis (1990) studied the effect of facial masculinity/femininity on attributions of sexual orientation and found that masculine female faces and feminine males faces were more likely to be judged as lesbian/gay. Furthermore, Madson (2000) found that androgynous appearing people were more likely than others to be assessed as gay/lesbian. Wong, McCreary, Carpenter, Engle, & Korchynsky (1999) found a significant link between perceived masculinity/femininity and assumed sexual orientation consistent with the gender belief system.

The Impact of Gender Role Conformity/Sexual Orientation on Attitudes

The effect of sexism and expectations for women's behavior is well documented in the literature. In addition, some researchers have begun to focus on the effect of expectations for men to adhere to traditional male gender roles (e.g. journal Men & Masculinities). Historically, the "rules" have relaxed somewhat from the time period when gender role adherence was more rigid and sexism was more blatantly institutionalized. However, gender role expectations are still pervasive and continue to be documented in contemporary research. Also, although attitudes toward LGB people have improved in recent history, sexual prejudice is still widespread (Herek, 2003). While there are a number of studies that have found a link between sexism and sexual prejudice (homophobia) in individual's attitudes, scant research has been conducted that specifically explores the relationship between gender role expression and sexual orientation on attitudes toward others.

Schope & Eliason (2004) used vignettes of two gay men and two lesbians, and varied their masculinity/femininity to evaluate whether people held more negative attitudes toward gender role non-conforming targets. Although they conclude that the mere knowledge that the target was gay/lesbian was the most important predictor, they did not use straight, gender non-conforming targets in their design. Their conclusions are based on negative evaluations of all the targets. They further found that gender role had a significant impact on ratings of some variables with non-conforming targets being rated more poorly. Only one study was found that incorporated the use of sex, masculinity/femininity, and sexual orientation to determine the impact of each variable on attitudes. Horvath & Ryan (2003) used resumés where the three constructs varied and all other information was kept comparable across targets. They also

gathered information from the participants on a number of personal attitudes (gender role beliefs, belief about controllability of homosexuality, beliefs about employing homosexuals, and others). They evaluated a complex set of variables, but overall, they found that heterosexual male applicants were rated the highest, lesbian and gay applicants second, and heterosexual women last. They also identified a number of variables that mediated ratings (e.g. religiosity, beliefs in traditional gender roles).

Further research is needed on the intersection between sexism and sexual prejudice. A greater understanding of the role that gender role expectations may play in homophobia/sexual prejudice could lead to more effective educational programs in support of gender and sexual diversity. Our current line of research is designed to address this gap in the literature by using interviews, surveys, and a website with brief video clips and pictures to explore the topic from multiple perspectives. Early results will be available in 2006, will be outlined in our ACA presentation, and can be obtained from the first or second author.

Summary

The gender belief system is prevalent within the worldview of many, and impacts our expectations for women and men. Gender is viewed as a stable construct, and those who have aspects of a particular gender are expected to have other characteristics of that gender as well. This leads to the assumption that people who are gender role non-conforming (masculine women, feminine men) are gay or lesbian, and that lesbians are masculine and gay men are feminine. Although these beliefs may be recognized as stereotypes, this literature review has provided examples of how this underlying belief system may remain unrecognized and lead to bias. The reader is challenged to evaluate her/his own beliefs with the following questions: What is the basis of my “gaydar?” Do I expect my gay/lesbian clients to be gender non-conforming? Do I wonder if my gender non-conforming clients are lesbian/gay? Have I developed a research project that assumes that sexual orientation and gender are highly correlated or synonymous? Finally, if you find that these beliefs underlie your worldview, spend time in the LGBT community and witness the diversity within it. If you are a member of the LGBT community and you find yourself applying gendered expectations to others, specifically watch for instances of the fluidity of gender.

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