

Guessing Sexual Orientation: Heterosexuals' Ability to Accurately Estimate their "Gaydar"

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Abstract ~ We investigated whether heterosexuals are more accurate than they believe in their ability to guess sexual orientation and whether considering sexual orientation will influence heterosexuals' feelings of closeness toward pictured individuals. We found that a significant number of participants (76.7%, $p < .002$) overestimated their ability to guess sexual orientation and overall, participants rated heterosexuals higher on the closeness scale than homosexuals ($p < .001$). Thirty male and female, Caucasian, heterosexual participants between the ages of 25 and 35 were asked to guess the sexual orientation of twenty pictured individuals and rate each picture on a closeness scale. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions

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An extended version of this paper served as partial fulfillment for the requirements of Research Methods at New School University.

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(Group A = closeness scale first; Group B = closeness scale second). The researchers suggest additional study to determine the underlying processes involved in the findings.

Introduction

The pervasiveness of homophobia continues in our everyday surroundings even though it is considered by a vast majority to be "wrong" (Steffens and Buchner, 2003). Hate crimes against homosexuals and discrimination disputes remain a fixture in the legal system. Even the more recent battle over same-sex marriages can be attributed to homophobic beliefs. The fear and loathing of "the other" has illuminated the belief that two men or two women in marriage will compromise the basic family structure and that the only logical conclusion is that polygamy or marriage to animals will soon enter the battle arena. Like other victims of stereotypes, homosexuals are labeled (and discriminated against) based on outward appearances that are stereotypically "gay." Labels are assigned by individuals who firmly believe that they can accurately identify homosexuals; they are under the assumption that all homosexuals portray the stereotypical gay appearance. Homosexual men are flamboyant, maintain a higher level of hygiene and style than heterosexual men, and appear feminine in general. Lesbian women are unattractive and appear masculine in general. It is obvious that these stereotypical beliefs are dangerous to human rights policies and are in need of further examination.

The purpose of this study was twofold. We were primarily interested in the ability of heterosexuals to distinguish homosexuals from heterosexuals and identify sexual orientation correctly based on photographs. Confidence levels in these decisions were assessed and compared to the results. Secondly, warmth toward individuals was assessed by asking participants to judge how 'close' they can imagine feeling to the individuals in the photo-

graphs presented to them. According to Jussim et al. (1995), some sort of cognitive process leads people to interpret, judge and perceive individuals from different groups differently, and applying a label to a target often influences how perceivers judge and evaluate that target. Unlike other studies, we allowed participants to apply their own label to a target, and observed how their perception of warmth varied according to the label they had applied. The effect of judging a level of warmth and identifying sexual orientation was also assessed; hence, there were two conditions: one half of subjects were asked to first judge sexual orientation and then warmth; the other half were asked to first judge warmth and then sexual orientation. We hypothesized that judgment of sexual orientation will have an effect on ratings of warmth, more specifically; that participants will assign higher warmth ratings to those individuals they identify as heterosexual and assign lower warmth ratings to those they identify as homosexual. A final goal was to investigate the relationship of our findings to demographic variables such as age, gender and political affiliation. By presenting subjects with both the opportunity to judge sexual orientation and reveal warmth they feel toward a person, we hoped to improve upon the low ecological validity that has been present in past studies of this nature, thereby gaining a more veridical understanding of subjective applications of stereotypes and possible inherent bias employed when applying labels.

Method

Participants

Thirty heterosexual men and women (sixteen men and fourteen women, median age = twenty-six years) volunteered to participate. Investigators had prior knowledge of subjects' sexual orientation. Only Caucasian participants between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five years of age were selected to participate. After reading a brief introduction that stated the study purpose

was to obtain information on social attitudes by viewing a series of photographs and answering a few brief questions, all participants signed a consent form according to University (IRB) protocol.

Materials

Twenty photos were downloaded and printed from the personal ad website <http://personals.timeoutny.com> (2004) that maintains members' anonymity. The website is organized so that lesbians and gays are separated from heterosexual members, thus securing that all selected photographs are within the advertised sexual orientation. Additionally, only those homosexuals and heterosexuals who chose the "serious relationship" or "dating" options were selected in order to separate those members who were looking for friendship among same-sex or opposite-sex individuals. Photos included ten Caucasian heterosexuals (five men and five women) and ten Caucasian homosexuals (five men and five women).

Data were collected on three separate forms: a questionnaire that required participants to guess the twenty pictured individuals' sexual orientation by circling either Homosexual or Heterosexual, a questionnaire that asked participants to rate on a four point likert-scale if they could imagine being close to each pictured individual (0 = not at all, 4 = very much), and a brief demographic questionnaire that asked age, gender, which political party the participant belonged to, which group the participant most identified with (either student or professional), how long he or she has lived in the New York City metropolitan area, overall if the participant considers him or herself good at distinguishing homosexuals from heterosexuals, and an estimate of the number of pictured individuals whose sexual orientation he or she correctly guessed (out of a possible twenty).

Design and Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental

groups. Group A (ten men and five women, median age = twenty-six) viewed each photo one at a time for ten seconds and was asked to complete the closeness scale, based on his or her first intuition. They were then showed the pictures in a shuffled order and asked to guess the pictured individuals' sexual orientation, again based on a ten second first intuition. Each participant was then instructed to complete the brief questionnaire. Group B (six men and nine women, median age = twenty-six) was asked to guess sexual orientation then rate closeness and instructed to complete the brief questionnaire. All participants were tested individually. At the completion of the test, the investigators debriefed all participants on the purpose of the study.

Results

Participants' judgment of their own abilities to guess sexual orientation was measured with a specific question asking them to estimate how many correct guesses they made regarding sexual orientation (out of a possible 20). Results were examined as to how accurate participants were in their estimated number of correct guesses as compared to their actual number of correct guesses. A scatter plot of each participant's actual correct responses versus his or her estimated number shows that overall participants significantly overestimated their ability to guess sexual orientation. 76.7% of participants overestimated their level of accuracy in identifying sexual orientation of individuals in the photographs. A one sample t-test showed that this overestimation was significant, $t(29) = 3.39$, $p < .002$. To examine whether judgment of sexual orientation was related to ratings of closeness by participants, mean closeness ratings of those individuals participants had identified as homosexual ($M = 1.33$, $SD = .67$) were compared with mean closeness ratings of those individuals participants had identified as heterosexual ($M = 1.99$, $SD = .51$). Regardless of condition, participants rated those individuals they identified as heterosexual as significantly higher on the closeness rating than

those individuals they identified as homosexual, $t(29) = -6.62$, $p < .001$

Based on the number of correct sexual orientation guesses made by each participant, it was found that 73.3% of participants incorrectly guessed the pictured individuals' orientation for at least half of the pictures. A one sample t-test showed that this overall inaccuracy was significant, $t(29) = 2.8$, $p < .008$.

A t-test was used to evaluate whether there was a significant difference between male and female participants' mean closeness ratings, regardless of the sexual orientation of the photographs. The t-test revealed that females ($M = 2.01$, $SD = .51$), on average, significantly rated higher on the closeness scale than males ($M = 1.59$, $SD = .40$), $t(28) = -2.5$, $p < .016$.

Conclusion

Similar to other characteristics that incite prejudiced attitudes, sexual orientation elicits mixed emotions and responses in society. Where one individual may embrace difference and see sexual orientation as just one facet of life, another may find intolerance and inherent disgust. It is believed by many in our society that sexual orientation can be seen, like hair color or race, in the way one chooses their clothing, styles their hair, and behaves. Yet, it would seem that we are all not equally gifted in the ability to "see" this physical distinction. Judgments, based on race, religion, and sexual orientation, remain a part of our everyday and affect decisions, particularly in the work force. That one can base a powerful decision on guessing orientation or other prejudiced characteristics is saddening and it is only with the better understanding of how and why society continues to make these decisions that we can feel free to be ourselves.

Our findings in this study indicate that the majority of heterosex-

uals in our study overestimate their ability to judge sexual orientation accurately and that they feel significantly less close to those persons they deem to be homosexual. We know that it is an intrinsic characteristic of human beings in general to overestimate their abilities, but to assume that this axiom is the only principle operating here would surely be a mistake, based on what we know in general about social attitudes and especially those toward homosexuals. Though it has been found in previous research that attitudes toward lesbians and gay men are negative (Herek, 1991, as cited in Haddock et al., 1993; McKinney & Saucier, 2003), our study, while it showed somewhat more negative evaluations in terms of closeness for homosexuals than heterosexuals, did not have enough direct evidence to support this finding. The degree to which the feeling of 'less close' is acted upon in daily social interaction and further examination of misdirection of bias inherent in misjudging a person's sexual orientation would be an interesting avenue of future research.

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