



## The impact of cues of stigma and support on self-perceived sexual orientation among heterosexually identified men and women

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ We manipulate perceived stigma against and support for same-sex sexuality.
- ▶ We examine effects on self-perceived sexual orientation among heterosexuals.
- ▶ Cues of support lead to less reported same-sex sexuality than do cues of stigma.
- ▶ We conclude that social context affects beliefs about sexual orientation.

### GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



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### ABSTRACT

Sexual orientation can be thought of as encompassing both actual sexual experience (e.g., behavior, attraction, fantasy) and beliefs about those experiences. We refer to those beliefs as self-perceived sexual orientation. We report the first experimental evidence that manipulating situational cues directly impacts self-perceived sexual orientation among heterosexually identified men and women. Across three studies that used distinct manipulations (both explicit and implicit), measured different outcomes, and sampled different ages, we found that cues of support for same-sex sexuality lead to self-perceived sexual orientation containing more same-sex sexuality than did cues of stigma against same-sex sexuality. We discuss the implications for understanding the role of factors outside of actual sexual experience in the development and maintenance of sexual orientation.

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### Introduction

Though scientists and non-scientists often discuss sexual orientation as a unitary construct, sexual orientation is composed of multiple components (e.g., identity, attraction, behavior, fantasy; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2007), each of which may fluctuate across time and context (e.g., Diamond, 2008). However, sexual orientation is also composed of two basic elements: actual sexual experiences of attraction, behavior, and fantasy, and personal *beliefs* about those sexual experiences. We refer to these beliefs as self-perceived sexual orientation. A woman

might indicate on a survey that she identifies as heterosexual, is attracted to men, and yet is also somewhat attracted to women. This woman is reporting her self-perceived sexual orientation, that is, her beliefs about two aspects of her sexual orientation — her identity and attractions.

Self-perceived sexual orientation is partially tethered to actual sexual experiences — a woman may believe she is somewhat attracted to women because she experiences physiological arousal when around certain other women and has fantasies about sex with a female partner. We propose that self-perceived sexual orientation can also be influenced by factors outside of actual sexual experience. We argue that situational factors motivate people to hold self-serving perceptions of their own sexual orientation. There is correlational evidence for this hypothesis (e.g., Preciado & Peplau, 2011) and others have theorized about the

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influence of contextual factors on sexual orientation (e.g., Hammack, 2005), yet prior work has not demonstrated a causal link. Moreover, research has primarily focused on change in the self-perceived sexual orientation among individuals who identify as lesbian, gay and bisexual (e.g., Diamond, 2008). We provide the first experimental evidence supporting a causal account of the influence of motivational factors on self-perceived sexual orientation among heterosexually identified women and men.

### The influence of motivational factors on self-perceived sexual orientation

People often believe what they want to believe about themselves (e.g., Gilovich, 1991; Kunda, 1990). Generally, people wish to believe that they are attractive, intelligent, and skilled (e.g., Critcher & Dunning, 2009; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Such motivated beliefs are maintained in part because of an ability to selectively focus on evidence that supports preferred beliefs (Critcher & Dunning, 2009; Kunda, 1990).

We propose that similar motivational processes shape self-perceived sexual orientation. A desire to avoid social stigma and to embrace social support, for example, may motivate people to think about their sexual orientation in a particular way. When the negative consequences that stem from stigma against same-sex sexuality (e.g., Herek, Cogan, & Gillis, 2002; Meyer, 2003) are salient, people may eschew perceptions of their sexual orientation that indicate same-sex attraction or experiences. Conversely, perceived social support for same-sex sexuality may embolden a person to interpret ambiguous same-sex experiences in a more open manner, indicating that they do experience same-sex sexuality.

Ambiguity in the relevance of sexual experiences to one's sexual orientation can facilitate motivated cognition. When deciding whether one experiences same-sex attraction a person can selectively focus on experiences that took place at different times or in different contexts. For example, a man might give more importance to his long-term relationship with his wife than to a fleeting same-sex affair that happened years ago. Additionally, ambiguity in the meaning of a sexual experience may also contribute to motivated cognition. For instance, while some may classify a same-sex kiss shared at a party as relevant to their sexual orientation, others may discount this behavior, reasoning that it was attributable to alcohol instead of to their sexual orientation. The meaning that people assign to sexual experiences varies by the context in which the experience occurs and the nature of the experience (e.g., Randall & Byers, 2003; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). Indeed, among heterosexually identified men and women, the line between a same-sex sexual attraction and a passionate level of admiration is often sufficiently blurry that it has prompted the coinage of new phrases: "girl crush" (see Rosenbloom, 2005) and "man crush" (see McKee, 2009).

Individual differences may also contribute to the impact of motivation on self-perceived sexual orientation. In a recent study, Preciado and Thompson (2012) found that the association between how much same-sex behavior women reported and their sexual identity was stronger among women who were more certain about and committed to their sexual orientation identity. For example, if high certainty and commitment women reported some same-sex behavior, they were more likely to identify as "mostly straight" or bisexual rather than as exclusively heterosexual. In contrast, women who were low in certainty and commitment showed no relationship between the amount of same-sex behavior they reported and the likelihood of identifying as "mostly straight" or bisexual. These results raise the possibility that some people, for instance those who are uncertain and uncommitted to their sexual identity, may be particularly susceptible to the influence of contextual factors on the interpretation of their sexual experiences' relevance to their sexual orientation.

In summary, we predict that people's self-perceived sexual orientation is directly influenced by contextual cues of stigma and support. We believe that this occurs because people are motivated to avoid

stigma and seek support, thus interpreting their sexual orientation in self-serving ways consistent with that motivation. Ambiguity in the evidentiary basis of self-perceived sexual orientation facilitates motivated interpretations. Finally, because the proposed effects are grounded in basic social cognitive mechanisms, we predict that these effects will be the same for men and women.

We tested our prediction that cues of support for same-sex sexuality impel self-perceived sexual orientation toward more same-sex sexuality than do cues of stigma against same-sex sexuality for both male and female participants in three experiments using different methods and samples. In study 3, we also tested whether individual differences in certainty and commitment about one's sexual identity affect the impact of cues of support and stigma on self-perceived sexual orientation.

### Study 1

Study 1 tested the impact of cues of stigma and support on self-perceived sexual orientation, measured using self-reports and a broad internet sample.

#### Method

Participants included 101 heterosexually identified individuals (37 men, 64 women;  $M_{Age} = 40$  years,  $SD = 13.87$ ). Participants responded online to advertisements (posted on [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com) and [www.craigslist.org](http://www.craigslist.org)) that described the study as testing opinions about a socially relevant news article. All data were collected online via survey hosting websites.

Participants were randomly assigned to read of one of three "news articles" created for the study. The articles used the same basic format but key phrases were changed in each. The Stigma article, titled "Study Reveals American Anti-Homosexual Attitudes," emphasized that Americans stigmatize same-sex sexuality. The Support article, titled "Study Reveals Americans are Comfortable with Homosexuality," indicated that Americans support same-sex sexuality. The Control article, titled "Study Reveals Older Americans Still Enjoy Sex," focused on sex, but did not mention stigma or support for same-sex sexuality and did not reference sexual orientation at all. All articles were text only and included no photographs.

After reading the article, participants completed several questions that measured their perceptions of the purpose, quality, and truthfulness of the article. Participants then completed measures of attitudes towards same-sex sexuality and other individual difference measures.

At the end of the survey, 3 dependent measures that assessed self-perceived sexual orientation were embedded in a demographics questionnaire. Participants characterized their personal experiences for each of three items, "My Sexual Behaviors," "My Sexual Attractions," and "My Sexual Fantasies," by using a continuous, unnumbered 13-point scale. The scale's endpoints and midpoint were anchored by "Exclusively Heterosexual" (1), "Equally Homosexual and Heterosexual" (7), and "Exclusively Homosexual" (13). These items were adapted from typical measures used to assess sexual orientation (e.g., Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolf, 1985). Because the effects described below were in the same direction for all three items, these three items were averaged to create one Same-Sex Sexuality Score (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .66$ ). Higher numbers on the score indicate greater self-reported same-sex sexuality than lower numbers.

Not surprisingly, given our recruitment of heterosexually identified participants, this composite score was positively skewed (Skewness = 1.26). Our data set included 3 outliers (values greater than 1.5 times the interquartile range, identified using box plots). To ensure that these outliers did not exert undue influence, we stratified our outcome variable by condition and Winsorized it at 2.5 SDs (Wilcox & Keselman, 2003). Details of the Winsorization process are included in the Supplementary Material available online. The final Same-Sex Sexuality Score variable had a mean of 1.83 ( $SD = .10$ ; range 1–5), indicating that, on

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