



Who wants to sound straight? Sexual majority and minority stereotypes, beliefs and desires about auditory gaydar



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ABSTRACT

Research on the accuracy of 'gaydar' judgments has burgeoned but rarely considered targets' perspectives on cues that signal a person's sexual orientation to others. We examined sexual majority and minority speakers' (N = 241) beliefs about the extent to which their voices act as a 'gaydar' clue to others, and speakers' desire to be so disclosed. Men believed their voices were more revealing of their sexual orientation than women did. Moreover, sexual majority participants, particularly masculine-sounding heterosexual men, desired to be disclosed the most of all. Sexual majority participants perceived their voices as gender typical and sexual minority participants perceived their voices as gender atypical, and participants whose beliefs were most consistent with this pattern also believed most that their voices acted as gaydar cues. The findings suggested that group differences in beliefs about gaydar may complicate individuals' attempts to judge each other's sexual orientations from minimal cues.

1. Introduction

Gaydar has been defined as the skill of detecting others' sexual orientations (SO henceforth). Conceptualized as a process of distinguishing gay/lesbian and straight individuals (Rule, 2017), gaydar research has often assumed that every individual belongs to, and identifies with, one and only one of these two sexual orientation categories. However, research has taken less account of why such categorization might matter in everyday life, or whether people desire to be so categorized by others at all (Fasoli, Maass, & Sulpizio, 2016). Here, we tested four hypotheses about diverse people's beliefs as to whether they become targets of others' gaydar, their desire to have their SO detected by others. We focused on *auditory gaydar* as vocal cues are partially under individual control. Consequently, group differences in beliefs and desire concerning auditory gaydar both describe the target's perspective on gaydar judgments and have the potential to inform gaydar accuracy research.

1.1. Voice as a cue of sexual orientation

As in other domains, stereotypes about voices cast gay/lesbian people as gender inverts (Kite & Deaux, 1987). Gay men are assumed to lip and have soft, high-pitched voices, whilst lesbians are believed to

sound 'masculine' and have deep and low-pitched voices (Barton, 2015; Shelp, 2003). Speakers whose voices confirm this gender inversion stereotype features are most likely to be judged to be gay/lesbian by others, regardless of their actual SO (Mack & Munson, 2012; Munson, 2007; Sulpizio et al., 2015). Sexual minority individuals self-stereotype in a gender-inverted manner, and sexual majority stereotype in a gender-conforming manner (Rieger, Linsenmeier, Gygas, Garcia, & Bailey, 2010), even when judging their voices (see Kachel, Simpson, & Steffen, 2018). We first hypothesized that our sexual majority participants would also stereotype themselves and their voices in a gender-conforming manner (i.e., heterosexual men as masculine and heterosexual women as feminine) whereas sexual minority participants would self-stereotype consistent with the gender inversion stereotype (Hypothesis 1).

We next considered *who* would most likely believe that their voices were an effective cue to their SO. Auditory gaydar might be particularly salient to sexual minorities because they experience being the target of the "gay voice" stereotypes (Barton, 2015). In many social situations, individuals' heterosexuality is assumed rather than stated explicitly (Herek, 2007). In gaydar experiments, this assumption informs judgments about others' SO; more targets are categorized as straight than as gay in many of those experiments (Lick & Johnson, 2016; Sulpizio et al., 2015). Sexual majority individuals often do not need to take any

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conscious actions to signal their SO, but usually identify less strongly than sexual minorities do with their ingroup (Fasoli et al., 2018). Hypothesis 2 predicted that sexual minority participants would believe that their voices signaled their SO more than sexual majority participants did.

Our third hypothesis was informed by consistent evidence that the assumption that others are straight is reliably interrupted by traits that are in line with the gender-inversion stereotype (Freeman, Johnson, Ambady, & Rule, 2010; Lick & Johnson, 2016). Kachel et al. (2018) have shown that people's perceptions of how gender-conforming they are can affect aspects of their speech that may become SO cues. We therefore hypothesized that any group difference in the belief that one's voice cues SO would be moderated by the extent to which participants self-stereotype their voices. In particular, we expected that the more the sexual majority participants believed their voices sounded gender conforming, the more they would judge their voices as revealing their SO. In contrast, the more sexual minority participants perceived their voices as confirming the gender inversion stereotype, the more they would judge their voices as revealing their SO (Hypothesis 3).

1.2. The desire for disclosure

Our final hypothesis concerned the extent to which people *desire* to be a target of auditory gaydar. Sexual minority people face a double-bind in regard to the communication of their identity due to the dual threats of having their sexual minority status denied on the one hand and used as a basis for discrimination on the other hand (Morton & Postmes, 2009). When sexual minority individuals anticipate and experience discrimination, their well-being is rendered precarious, creating group differences in health outcomes (Meyer, 2003). Indeed, vocal cues that lead to inferences that a person is gay or lesbian can initiate very real discriminatory effects (Fasoli, Mass, Paladino, & Sulpizio, 2017). Sexual minority people must carefully gauge the costs and benefits of revealing their SO, together with the risks of group-based discrimination (see Herek & McLemore, 2013), and qualitative research suggests variation in the extent to which gay men like to 'sound gay' to others (Mann, 2012).

In marked contrast, sexual majority people, who are a higher status group, risk no discrimination when others accurately perceive their SO. Rather, they only risk a threatening loss of status from being *misperceived* as gay/lesbian. Several lines of research suggest that this threat from identity misperception is greater among heterosexual men than heterosexual women (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Heterosexual men are more readily troubled than heterosexual women for being misperceived as gay/lesbian (Bosson, Weaver, & Prewitt-Freilino, 2012), and more likely to enact gender identity in ways that require a distinct group boundary between gay and heterosexual people (Falomir-Pichastor & Mugny, 2009). We therefore hypothesize that sexual majority people will show a greater *desire* that their voice signal their SO than sexual minority participants do, and that such preference will be strongest among those heterosexual men whose voices conform to the gender norm to be masculine-sounding (Hypothesis 4).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 149 men, who identified as heterosexual ($n = 74$), gay ($n = 67$), bisexual ($n = 8$), queer ($n = 3$) and pansexual ($n = 1$), and 89 women, who identified as heterosexual ($n = 46$), lesbian ($n = 27$), bisexual ($n = 13$), and queer ($n = 3$). Heterosexual-identified participants were categorized as *sexual majority participants* and all others as *sexual minority participants*. Participants were single ($n = 112$), in relationships ($n = 115$) or did not report their relational status ($n = 14$), and sexual majority and sexual minority participants did not differ reliably in relationship status ($\chi^2 = 2.94$, $p = .09$).

Participants were from Italy ($n = 195$) and Portugal ($n = 46$). Age ranged from 18 to 56 years ($M_{age} = 24.61$, $SD = 7.83$).

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Personality self-stereotyping

Participants described their own masculinity and femininity on two items ranging from 1 (*does not describe me at all*) to 7 (*describes me completely*). As items were negatively correlated, $r(241) = -0.81$, $p < .001$, we subtracted femininity ratings from masculinity ratings, creating an index of *masculinity* ranging from -6 (self-perceived femininity) to $+6$ (self-perceived masculinity). No group differences emerged regarding two filler items (i.e., honest, energetic) included on this scale. They were not analyzed further. Participants also described themselves in relation to their romantic partner (see Supplementary materials).

2.2.2. Voice-related beliefs

A single item ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*completely*) assessed the extent to which participants believed their voices signaled SO ("To what degree do you think your voice is revealing of your sexual orientation?"). To check that the predicted effects were specific for voice as a SO cue, participants completed similar items about the extent to which their age, social class, and geographical background was revealed by their voices. Since no group differences were found, these items were not analyzed further.

2.2.3. Disclosure desire

A single item scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*completely*) assessed the desire for SO to be cued to others ("When you encounter a person for the first time, how much do you want him/her to immediately determine your sexual orientation?"). Responses to similar items about age, social class, and geographical background did not differ by group and were not analyzed further.

2.2.4. Voice self-stereotyping

Participants judged their *vocal* cues along five dimensions using 7-point semantic differential scales; feminine/masculine, soft/loud, weak/strong, high/low pitched and unpleasant/pleasant. The choice of these dimensions was informed by previous studies of acoustic features that might vary with SO and common stereotypes about the "gay voice" (see Fasoli et al., 2016; Kachel et al., 2018). Items did not form a coherent factor and were analyzed separately.

2.2.5. Outness

Sexual minority participants also completed an adaptation of the Outness Inventory (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). Participants reported outness on scales ranging from 1 (*this person probably does not know*) to 4 (*this person knows about my sexual orientation because we have openly talked about it*) to 9 individuals/groups: mother, father, siblings, relatives, heterosexual childhood friends, current heterosexual friends, acquaintances, colleagues at work/university, and superiors at work/university. Scores were averaged to form a reliable measure ($\alpha = 0.71$). For the moderating role of outness on voice-related beliefs and disclosure desire see Supplementary materials.

2.3. Procedure

All participants were recruited through snowball sampling to take part in studies in which their voices were recorded as audio stimuli. After recording, the measures described above were completed, in Italian in Italy, and in Portuguese in Portugal. Demographic information such as gender, age, relationship status, and SO were reported last. All participants consented both prior to completing the materials and after debriefing.

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