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Gender and beliefs shape homophobic attitudes

A UNIGE team shows how the interpretation of specific scientific information on sexual orientation differs according to the gender and religiosity of individuals.

Sexual orientation is believed to result from complex processes that are still widely debated. However, for several years, a large body of research has sought to identify potential biological factors. The goal is to show that sexual preferences are merely natural variations. Supporters of this science-based approach argue that it could help combat stigmatization, particularly against homosexual individuals. A research team from the University of Geneva (UNIGE) found that heterosexual individuals interpret this scientific data through the lens of their own frame of reference. This can reinforce both negative and positive attitudes toward homosexuality. These findings are published in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*.

Sexual orientation is thought to arise from complex environmental and biological processes. However, no single scientific theory has achieved consensus to date. In an effort to explain it, a significant body of research has focused on gathering biological data. This approach assumes that genetic, hormonal, or physiological information is objective and, therefore, particularly relevant in explaining our preferences and behaviors.

"This line of research aims to provide scientific 'proof' that homosexuality is a natural biological variation. It has influenced political, social, and moral debates in defence of sexual minorities. For its advocates, this approach could help foster more positive attitudes toward homosexuality," explains Juan M. Falomir-Pichastor, full professor in the Psychology Section of UNIGE's Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences.

By conducting one of the few in-depth experimental studies on the subject, the UNIGE researcher is now showing that the interpretation of this 'evidence' by heterosexual people is in fact strongly influenced by their frame of reference. This can lead to both positive and negative interpretations of homosexuality.

Two key interpretative factors

To carry out the survey, the team recruited 300 volunteers: heterosexual men and women, believers (of the Christian faith) and non-believers, with gender and religiosity recognized as important interpretative factors. They were exposed to scientific data suggesting biological differences between heterosexual and homosexual individuals.



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Juan M. Falomir-Pichastor is a full professor in the Department of Psychology in the UNIGE Faculty of Psychology and Educational sciences.

High resolution pictures

After the experiment, the team found that the positive perception—already present among non-believers—increased among the least religious men, while remaining stable among the least religious women. The negative perception—already present among believers—followed the opposite pattern for the most religious men (it increased), but remained unchanged among their female counterparts.

Positive difference vs. negative difference

“The difference in the impact of the experiment on the men and women who took part can be explained by heterosexual men’s strong need for differentiation,” explains Juan M. Falomir-Pichastor. “These people directly associate masculinity with heterosexuality. So they ‘take advantage’ of any element that reinforces this association, while distancing themselves from homosexuality.”

While this need for differentiation was generally identified among men, it did not lead to the same result among the believers as among the non-believers in the sample. The believers interpreted the scientific data as ‘proof’ of anomaly, and their negative attitude was reinforced. The non-believers interpreted the scientific data as ‘proof’ of the diversity of possible expressions of human sexuality. Their positive attitude towards homosexuality was therefore reinforced.

The Risks of Essentialist Discourse

“Our study shows the extent to which the interpretation of information, even when presented as scientific, is strongly influenced by our values and beliefs. It also demonstrates that by ‘essentializing’ a segment of the population, this type of discourse can be dangerous. It is therefore crucial to reassess arguments for minority inclusion that rely on this form of biological determinism,” concludes the researcher.

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